

The little spaceboat with its three occupants sped out of the Altair system at speeds approaching light, and when the time came to enter hyper-space, the pilot, referring to his manual, remarked, "I see that the Umber beacon is maintained by the New Korea Shipping Company."

"Maintained?" asked Destan, unfamiliar with the reference.

"There are several worlds without a beacon, usually because they're too poor or lack the scientific inclination. But sometimes an outside business concern will build and maintain one if there are trading links to justify it."

"I see. Well, in this case it must have something to do with the Umber stallion. It's apparently their only export."

He remembered Jaynes' mention of the Council beacon. Never having piloted any sort of spacecraft himself, Destan only vaguely understood the workings of the beacon system. But the Chairman's reference to the rotation of the Council fleets set up a little ripple of disturbance in his brain, hovering at connections he could not quite bring himself to make.

He asked, "Why is a beacon needed?"

The pilot, who now saw Destan in various shades of green, did his best to give him an explanation. "The beacon, Mr. Destan, saves us all a lot of time. It sends out a signal this hyper-space drive"—he patted his control panel—"can lock onto. It makes the arrival more accurate since I can bring in a ship from hyper-space within a couple of light-minutes of the beacon. Our on-board navigation by itself can't achieve the same accuracy. We'd need a longer normal-space journey when we arrive."

"How long?"

"Oh, could be up to a day or more at a couple of the outlying worlds that don't have beacons. You see, the longer the journey you want to make in a single hop the stronger the signal has to be, which is why some beacons are more powerful than others. All the liners travel their routes in short hops—from one beacon to the next—so most worlds need only a moderate signal, around two or

three megarevs. Our Council beacon uses six megarevs, because it has to cover the radius of the Concourse. When the patrols come in, they want to do it in one hop.”

“Where is the beacon located—on a mountain?”

The pilot struggled to hide his incredulity. “Uh—no, Mr. Destan. It’s in its own orbit around the planet.”

Destan might have felt some chagrin at his newly-revealed ignorance had not other thoughts intruded on his consciousness. He was still reluctant to carry his postulations on the Stellar Game to even theoretical application, but the idea now insisted on presenting itself, as wild as it might appear.

If there were any threat to the Council organization, a vulnerable point would be the Council beacon. With it damaged or destroyed, the fleets could only come home with difficulty: they would require a longer time and would arrive at Sigma uncoordinated. But a threat by Cardis and Cosmopolis—using the Stellar Game as a weapon to destroy the beacon? To what end? And even with the beacon destroyed, what would that make possible? Cosmopolis was not a military vessel. The Council patrol ships, which now numbered sixty, would still be available. Just late.

He dismissed the whole idea as crazy...

Besides, how could the satellites focus on the Council beacon?

The following day they came out of hyper-space within a two hour journey of Umber and landed at the planet’s single spaceport, near the capital. This was a town of some size occupying no special point in a vast sloping plain that lay to the west of the Great Scarp. Tall groves dotted the land, occasionally broadening into clumps of airy forest. Clear placid rivers passed on their way to the sea. Here, as elsewhere around the planet, orchards and farming communities hugged the major waterways, but for the most part, visible even from space, the treasure of Umber, her verdant grassy plains, covered the temperate and equatorial continents in a glorious unfettered carpet. The plains were Umber’s heartland, her unblemished skin, and all other forms of cultivation or habitation were aberrant growths: so said those who rode them.

Planners who had laid out the main streets of the major towns had been loath to relinquish the open spaces and so had created wide thoroughfares, usually straight as an arrow, for they followed old riding trails that had known no need to veer. Half the avenue was paved in an ancient form of concrete for the powered vehicles, half left open ground for the horses. There were men and women who rode both, for not all women of Umber took part in the rearing of the Hrabas, and some men owned animals of lesser breeds: mounts for transportation, carriage horses and dray horses. All could be seen on the main streets.

The lesser thoroughfares, the gradual accretion of several centuries, were more narrow and disordered, some paved, some cobblestoned, others boasting the virgin earth, so that the sound of a rider making her or his way through them was often an aural mosaic of clump, clatter and thud. Here were found the master-houses and workshops of those who had forsaken the plains, though they often crafted equipment and accessories for those engaged in the equine husbandry. Here were supply stores for the farmers and orchard keepers, dwellings, taverns and sundry businesses, places of entertainment and other establishments attendant upon urban living the Concourse over.

Had there been hills or high points, the sightseer could have looked out over a checkerboard of haphazard tiled roofs rising in steep gables soaked by a golden sun, sturdy glistening walls of orange brick and chimneys that smoked in the cool evenings, these merging into a more stylish skyline of newly-constructed modern buildings along the central avenue. At night, street lamps illumined the main roads and phosphorescence shone from doorways and windows, but in the more distant reaches of the town most light flickered, and some of the inhabitants even scorned electricity altogether.

Locally it was early morning when Destan took an omnibus from the spaceport to the center of town where he and his two crew members checked in at a hostel for off-world visitors. An hour later, his inquiries brought him to one end of the town's axis where the government complex occupied a kilometer-wide knoll separating the urban community from the open plains. The complex included an assembly hall where once a month the heads of the Umber clans met, all of them women, several buildings housing departments of planetary administration staffed exclusively by female officials, and the private grounds and dwellings of the master clan of Asper, whose ranks comprised six extended families.

At a foyer where applications of various sorts were made, Destan identified himself as special envoy of Allen Jaynes, Chairman of the Concourse Council, seeking an interview with Matrin Fedria Dhin-Asper. The clerk promised to forward his request immediately and suggested he await contact at the hostel.

With some surprise Destan found himself returning only two hours later. Past sprawling lawns and gardens that luxuriated in the unstinting sunlight, he was escorted to the public hall, a wing of the broad single-storied assembly building. Everything here had been fashioned of fine stone and timber, Destan noted, crude only by the standards of more cosmopolitan worlds. The complex imparted an atmosphere of vigor and robustness, ennobled by age and tradition, and no doubt was at least two centuries old.

After the flush of the Umber sun, the cool air of the public hall was refreshing, and Destan followed his escort down the length of a marble-like floor where five hundred might have congregated, its surface dulled by the shuffling of generations of Umbrians come to hear and argue with their clan councils. The walls passing on either side alternated in rough stone and jutting slabs of black deeply etched timber. Mounted high on each stood the emblem and coat of arms of one of the forty clans. None were given precedence in size or conspicuousness, though at a certain hour of each clear morning those along the west wall were synchronously spotlighted in shafts of sunlight angling down from long narrow clefts where the rising stone abutted the raftered ceiling.

At the end of the chamber, where a raised floor would elevate the eyes of a host over the heads of a crowd, waited two figures, one sitting in the sole chair in the hall, the other standing alongside. The escort approached; she made neither bow nor gesture but addressed the seated woman.

"Matrin, this is Miles Destan, envoy of Allen Jaynes."

The eyes of the Matrin of Umber had followed him since his emergence at the far end of the hall. They were dark and deep-set within a lined cinnamon-brown face, mature pools reflecting two decades of authority but rippling with undercurrents of a still spirited nature. Destan placed her at close to sixty years. She wore her age well and the etching of the firm skin seemed as much a product of sun and wind as of the toll of time. Seeing her await him with a quiet discernment and self-possession, Destan sensed that he was encountering one of the strongest women of his experience, and his planned approach went out the window. He would have to handle this with a minimum of subterfuge.

"Umber welcomes you, Miles Destan. I understand that my daughter, who has recently returned from Cosmopolis, knows you."

Destan's eyes went to the Matrin's third-eldest, now standing beside her. He had recognized Pallas as he crossed the room, but the arresting quality of the seated figure had thrown even the proud daughter into a shade. No doubt the speedy audience had been due to Pallas' recognition of his name.

"Your daughter met me through a mutual friend, Matrin." Was Glenn at this moment on Umber?

Now that the Matrin had spoken, Pallas herself was free to speak. Her color was higher than Destan remembered, her manner more relaxed now that she had escaped the confines of the ship and breathed the air of her own world.

"What I knew of him on Cosmopolis was too little, Matrin. Now he has at least identified who he represents. Glenn and I were right, Miles, when we felt there was more to you than the light revealed."

She seemed amiable, thought Destan. Apparently the annoyance she had felt on their last meeting on the ship had passed.

"And what is it Allen Jaynes wishes of me?" Below the ubiquitous swept-back hair the Matrin's face bore no trace of cosmetic preparation, but a rough jeweled circlet of some antiquity clasped her neck and gave her a certain primitive regality. She wore a loose pant suit with soft shoes, a thigh-length cape edged in leather. The outfit had a ceremonial look.

Not knowing whether Cardis was still in contact with her, Destan could not afford to be entirely candid, and so he spoke carefully. "Matrin, the Council, as you know, has a duty to protect the interests of the citizens of all worlds. In the course of that task, Allen Jaynes is alert to all sorts of activities taking place across the Concourse, and there are times when he takes the opportunity to investigate some matter, even though there may be no definite reason to suspect an illegal or malevolent intent. Umber, as it happens, now presents just such an opportunity."

Destan was standing at the edge of the raised floor, and while this placed him lower than the two women, the Matrin's seated position caused their eyes to meet almost at the same level. There was a quiet humor in those of the Matrin as she said, "Mr. Destan, you speak like a diplomat. I have had communication with Allen Jaynes only once, but I believe he would get to the point sooner."

Despite himself, Destan burst out laughing and the sound echoed around the coarse-walled chamber. "Matrin, you are the second person this week to accuse me of dillydallying. The first was Allen Jaynes himself. It seems those in positions of authority prefer action to words."

The Matrin clearly enjoyed his involuntary breach of formality and for the first time gave Destan a full smile. At the same moment that he felt an unexpected ripple of agitation in his diaphragm, Destan saw the clear resemblance between mother and daughter: it lay in the full, confident mouths and the expressions that looked upon life in an unabashed manner.

"I prefer words to serve a real purpose, Mr. Destan. Precisely what does Allen Jaynes wish me to do?"

Destan regained himself. "He would like you to allow me to examine the Stellar Game satellite while it is being assembled."

The Matrin seem surprised. "I have no objection. But it is not my satellite. If the Cosmopolis team is unwilling, I don't see that I can command it."

"Do you not have someone from Umber working with them?"

"Yes, one of our young engineers who will operate the satellite when Umber takes part in the game."

"Perhaps I could represent myself as her assistant."

The Matrin gave a chuckle which might have proceeded from any of several motives. "The engineer is a man. And you hardly resemble an Umbrian, Mr. Destan."

"I doubt that the workers would notice that. Besides, your engineer may be able to provide me with the information I want."

The Matrin asked pointedly, "What does Allen Jaynes fear from Captain Cardis?"

Destan hesitated. How much did he dare say? He told himself: as little as possible.

"Matrin, when something attains the widespread popularity and influence of the Intersect game, there is always a potential for misuse, one that even Captain Cardis himself might not be aware of. Allen Jaynes is concerned because he does not understand all the workings of the Stellar Game and finds it difficult to derive information from direct—"

Matrin Fedria interrupted. "You are being evasive again, Mr. Destan. But I will not ask you or Allen Jaynes to reveal your full thoughts. My lack of objection to your request is based on my certainty that you have nothing to fear from Captain Cardis. I am generally a good judge of men."

Over a telex machine? Destan wondered.

"Please step up to the platform."

Destan caught a flicker of surprise on Pallas' face, and hesitating only a moment he climbed the two short steps. The Matrin rose and extended her palm toward him.

Destan blinked. While Pallas equaled his own height, Matrin Fedria stood half a head taller than both of them. He pressed his palm to hers and found the pressure solid.

"How long do you plan to stay on Umber, Mr. Destan?"

"Three days. At the hostel they spoke of a coach that travels between the cities, so perhaps I will take in the countryside."

"Do you ride?"

"It is an experience I have yet to look forward to."

If she caught the ambiguity the Matrin gave no sign. "Perhaps we can accommodate you. Now I will turn you over to my daughter who will oversee your visit."

Pallas led Destan toward the residence complex. "My mother reacted well to you."

"Why do you say that?"

"She does not often ask off-world visitors, especially men, to come up on the platform. She did not want to intimidate you with her height."

"You mean she sometimes likes to intimidate others?"

"Well, usually their reactions are of no concern to her. But I think she admired your evident resourcefulness." She gave him a

telling look. "I have seen it in you, too, but to what end it is being directed, I'm not sure."

"I hope everyone doesn't see me as a well of secret purposes."

Changing the topic, Pallas became brighter. "Glenn is here. He arrived a few days ago. I've boarded him with my father in his quarters."

"And how has Glenn taken to Umber? Or Umber to him?"

Pallas recounted the reception on both sides. "He even mounted a horse, can you believe it, and yesterday we went for a ride."

Destan asked, "Do the men of Umber never ride?"

"Of course they do, though in general they prefer the vehicles. But few ride the Hrabas, and those only as part of the animals' training. We must expose them to men if only because our clientele on other worlds requires it. And there is another occasion when some of the men are allowed to mount the Hrabas, but that is special."

Destan waited for an enlargement on the remark, but none came. Later he would wish he had tried to press the point.

"How many do you export each year?"

"About sixty thousand. The trade has grown much, even in my lifetime. They are raised in small communities all over both continents. They fetch a high price."

Within the residential compound lay a score of stone and concrete lodges, each standing a single story topped by a chimney whose proportions indicated an enormous hearth. Over the wide intervening spaces grass and shrubbery grew exuberantly, and cool blue-green umbrella trees pushed their flat feathery crowns out over the dun-colored structures.

"I was pleased to find that Glenn and my father took well to one another," said Pallas. "They have much to talk about, since my father has been off-planet many times. When I was growing up he used to tell me fascinating stories about other worlds, and it was mainly he who encouraged me to go to Balkin and other places."

The door to the lodge they had reached was opened by a man several years older than Destan, with a strong, kindly face. From their greeting it was evident that Pallas had a warm feeling for her father. Glenn appeared, looking fresh and invigorated and it seemed to Destan that he had lost his predatory look.

The four strolled the grounds of the compound in weather benign, with the ever-present winds blowing mildly off the plain. After a noncommittal reference to his own purposes on Umber, Destan asked the consort, whose name was Agis, to explain his role in the Umber scheme of things.

"The consort's official position is Chief Guardian of Initiations, Mr. Destan. You see, our children undergo a formal initiation into sexual maturity at the age of sixteen, with partnering arranged between the respective families, but we have community Guardians who see that it is all conducted in a suitable manner. My post is a kind of overseer, policy advisor, if you like. Not that those initiated have been without prior sexual experiences, although this is often the case, but it provides a formal recognition by adults of their children's maturity."

"A commendable practice—one which has roots in the past, even ancient, societies," Destan commented, not adding that it was one which was always endangered as the society became more developed. He said, "I understand from Pallas that you have been off-world many times."

"Yes, Mr. Destan. That relates to my own special interest, a hobby you might call it. I have extensive gardens on the other side of the town where I raise varieties of fruit. With the help of several assistants I have done much cross-breeding to develop new and exotic flavors. We will sample them, if you like, during the evening meal which Pallas and all of you will take with me tomorrow night."

"I look forward to it, sir."

"I can tell you, Mr. Destan, that my interest in horticulture is not entirely a hobby. I believe Umber must broaden its activities. The Hrabas is of course a boon, but the plains are not only suited for riding and grazing, they are rich agricultural lands as well, and I am hoping to establish orchards to raise an unusual fruit that may one day be in as much demand as the Hrabas is."

With a consequent effect on Umber society that was not lost on the Historian.

Pallas now insisted they go to the stables. Once there, Destan could see why the government complex with its residences was on the edge of the city instead of in its midst, for beyond the stables were the plains. As his eye traveled out over the shimmering green undulation, past beckoning groves and on to a looming rugged height far in the east, Destan could hear the siren song that these boundless spaces had sung to five centuries of Umber inhabitants.

Here were the private stables of the Matrin's family, housing twenty-two horses, fifteen of them the Hrabas stallion itself. When Pallas led two of the beasts out beyond the fencing, Destan feared for her: sleek, spirited and huge they were, with an elongated neck and well-developed foreshanks. Their hind quarters were wide, according them a rock-solid appearance. On Balmorgen he could imagine them standing fearless and formidable with the vicious swordtail at bay, while the mounted hunter launched harpoon, slingbolt, or bullet, depending on his skill and thirst for exploit...

"Come on and try one, Miles," Glenn urged, only half-joking. "Once you're up there it isn't so bad." He winked. "You can't imagine what it's like having all that power between your legs."

Destan declined with as much aplomb as he could muster, and he and Agis watched as Glenn, with only modest trepidation, approached one of the stallions. This one bore a saddle and Pallas spoke to it while Glenn proceeded to mount. It was a somewhat awkward motion but when he reached an upright position he waved to the two men and started the horse forward. Pallas ran beside them for a distance, casting reminders on how to control the rein and how to impart signals through his legs. The horse built up to a trot, carrying Glenn out into the field.

Pallas called to Destan and her father. "He learns fast, though I had to spend a whole day teaching him the basics. That one is a relatively docile animal and used to men."

Loping back to the other horse she swung herself in a fluid motion onto the beast's back and with a wave left them behind, urging the animal on with a whispered word in its ear. As the two creatures sped away into the field after Glenn, Destan felt a momentary surge of exhilaration for the sheer vitality and joy of this unbridled woman, but it came mixed with a poignant regret for the restrictions of his own life that brought a moistness to his eyes.

She called out to Glenn and the two went riding over the plain, Pallas slowing her speed to match his. Glenn watched her beside him: the short sweeping hair, the supple body blending into that of the animal, the elation in the eyes open to the wind. When those eyes looked over, he knew that part of their elation was for him.

He had never known a world like this. How long would he stay? A week? Forever?

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The following afternoon Pallas arranged a visit to the satellite construction site, which lay in a converted field just beyond the spaceport. The Umber engineer was returning from town and Pallas and Destan joined him. Destan wore the clothes of an Umber trades man of some note, pantaloons gathered at the ankle, a thigh-length chemise. They had decided that representing himself as the engineer's assistant might create more problems than it solved, so this was to be a visit by the Gatrin herself accompanied by an interested confidant.

They rode out to the site in a small powered van driven by the engineer, whose name was Milo. A voluble young man who seemed not at all intimidated by the proximity of the Gatrin beside him, Milo was keen on the game and his own role in it. Once grounded in the

running of the satellite, it would be his task, aided by an assistant who was also being trained, to monitor the broadcasts from Cosmopolis during the game, to align and activate the beams when called upon.

"For the first game a Cosmopolis technician will be on hand to see that I do things right, but after that I'll be on my own."

This unexpected information gave Destan pause. Was this a standard procedure? It would seem to make sense, he decided, but for the next game, the Uंबर terminus would be guaranteed to perform to order.

As they sped along the road to the spaceport, Pallas spoke up in a voice tinged with authority. "Milo, when we have looked over the satellite, there may be something I will ask you to do for me. For my own reasons I would like to see a copy of the blueprints or building instructions for the satellite. Is there a way you can obtain them for me—let's say after the work is finished for the day—without letting any of the construction team know they're gone?"

Milo looked genuinely mystified. He went so far as to ask why the Gatrin would want such a thing.

The edge of authority increased perceptibly. "It is a matter of some consequence that does not concern you. I will remind you that your duty to the Matrín supersedes any new loyalty you may feel toward Cosmopolis. You can copy the plans at the Ministry this evening and return them before the morning work begins."

Milo was chagrined. "As you may know, Gatrin, I will be occupied tonight and was not intending to report to the site until noon."

"I—was not aware you were chosen." Pallas put on a studied expression. "But that will not be until later: you would have a few hours to accomplish the task." Then her voice took on a tone that sent a little shiver up Destan's spine, even though the import of the remark was unknown to him. "If a certain point in the circle fell to you, there could be a special expression of gratitude."

Milo gulped. "I'll do what I can, Gatrin."

Destan had no desire to query the significance of the exchange. It was sufficient that Pallas was using whatever recourse she could draw upon to obtain the material for him.

As they passed the spaceport, Milo pointed out an annex under construction at the base of the communications tower. "There you see the monitoring station, where I will receive the broadcast and control the satellite."

Destan asked himself if all satellite technicians approached their job with such childlike fascination. Under other circumstances he might have pointed out to Milo that a technician could sit at his monitor for years and never receive any direction from Cosmopolis to transmit, but he did not want to dampen the young man's

enthusiasm. Besides, in the case of the Umber satellite, he might just be proven wrong.

They arrived at the construction site. Even from the spaceport they could make out the satellite's bulk looming out of the field. It stood over four stories high, an irregularly shaped oblong with turrets and lensed openings, propulsion tube, alignment and tracking mechanisms interrupting its surface. The three climbed down from the van and passed through a group of workers tinkering with an unidentifiable component. A foreman who stood nearby watched the visitors but made no objections.

Milo pointed back toward the spaceport, at the hulking squat disc of the research vessel, somewhat like the Cosmopolis shuttle boat but smaller and far less elegant. "It will be mounted on the research ship and released in the proper orbit."

They approached the satellite. The hull was complete, a great punctured egg shell resting on a movable platform: this was the means by which the completed project would be brought to the research vessel. Some of the interior mechanisms were in place; elsewhere stood gaping hollows. Not a bolt of it meant anything to Destan.

"I assume the parts are prefabricated on Cosmopolis," Destan ventured.

"Almost all. Some of the wiring and certain standard connections we supply from our stores."

It crossed Destan's mind to wonder where on Cosmopolis the parts were constructed. Somewhere in the Service pod no doubt—although considerable space would be required. Possibly directly below the shuttle dock, so the pieces could be transferred straight to the vessel's hold. Had such a facility been built into the ship's design from the beginning?

"Where is the crystal?"

"Not installed yet," Milo answered. "There are two of them." He pointed. "They're stored over in the shed."

Destan saw the foreman watching them curiously. He smiled back.

To Milo he tried to assume the active air of a confidant of the Gatrin. "And the blueprints the Gatrin wants: where might they be kept? This time I recommend that you don't point."

Milo stared glumly at the satellite. "They're behind me, on the foreman's table. He refers to them all day long. At night they'll be placed in the shed, but I know where there's an extra key."

Pallas took the engineer's arm. "Let's take a walk around the satellite." To Destan she said, "I must have a few words with Milo."

Destan was puzzled but he could hardly argue. Pretending to inspect the construction further, he watched sidelong as the two

sauntered around the huge platform earnestly discussing something with the air of conspirators, or possibly of one conspirator trying to enlist another. They passed out of sight around the hull.

When they rejoined him Pallas said, "I've made arrangements on how Milo will get the copy to you. Yes, he knows you're the one who wants it. I'll explain later." Milo wore an odd look on his face, and Destan wondered why those arrangements could not have been made in his presence.

* * *

That evening the planned supper took place in the consort's quarters. The main course centered around broiled slices of meat from one of the Umber domesticated animals; and for dessert an assortment of fruits from Agis' gardens: melons, peaches, shingle-skinned oranges, a cross-breed of a Kiwi and a Feriss fruit, plus one of the most succulent flavors Destan had ever encountered: a many-faceted hybrid which Agis had named a Pallasant.

"Many of these are derived from fruits and seeds I picked up on other worlds and experimented with in my greenhouses."

"I assure you, Agis," said Destan, licking his lips, "that ten thousand acres of orchard will not be sufficient to produce enough of these Pallasants once the gourmets of the Concourse get a taste of them."

At that point Pallas emerged from the kitchen carrying a tray on which stood three goblets. "My father may have his fruit, but this is something special to top off a special occasion." She set down a goblet before each of the visitors; the third was for herself. "Father does not especially care for this drink."

Agis briefly gave his daughter a wry look. "Are you so sure they'll enjoy this?"

Pallas' bubbling laugh came out a trifle hurriedly. "Oh, father! I'm sure our guests would like to experience everything that Umber has to offer."

Agis made a resigned gesture and turned back to the fruit. While a tingle of puzzlement nibbled at a corner of his brain, Destan joined Glenn in taking an experimental sip of the new drink. It had a sweet, heady flavor with invigorating overtones that enticed them to another sip, then another.

"This is delicious," Glenn declared. "What is it? A wine?"

"Not exactly," Pallas answered, sipping rather perfunctorily from her own goblet. "It's made from a flower growing wild on the Scarp. We call it the nectar bud."

"It is appropriately named," Destan murmured. "This is indeed a drink fit for the gods. I wonder that you don't export it." The fluid trickled easily down the throat.

"Oh, the bud is too scarce," Pallas said.

"And too venerable," Agis added, getting to his feet. "Now you must excuse me. I am retiring to my greenhouse tonight as I want to get an early start in the morning. You will not be seeing me until tomorrow night, Glenn."

The visitors made their farewells and Agis departed the lodge.

Destan glanced at his timepiece, saw that it was less than two hours before midnight. "Now perhaps you will tell me when Milo will get here with the blueprints," he said.

Pallas looked at him ingenuously. "Oh, Milo won't be coming here. You will have to meet him."

At Destan's expression of perplexity she explained: "You see, he is attending a ceremony for the men tonight and will only have time to make the copy and get there for the start. But I know you would both find it interesting to attend the ceremony yourselves. Glenn, you must go with Miles."

Destan appeared dubious. "What does this ceremony consist of?"

"Now why should you think I know everything the men get up to? It's just a simple ritual they go through every month: I believe they reaffirm certain vows of cooperation. They would enjoy having outsiders participate. In fact, I've taken the liberty of clearing it with the organizer."

"When does it start?" asked Glenn. "Where would we have to go?"

"It takes place outdoors. Remember the pavilion near the edge of the grove—the first one out where we rode today? I pointed it out to you." Glenn nodded. "You should leave now, as a matter of fact. It will take almost half an hour to walk to it. But there's a bright full moon so you'll have no trouble."

Destan and Glenn looked at each other, shrugged.

"Milo will have the blueprints, don't worry," Pallas affirmed.

"Will I see you later?" Glenn asked.

"Oh, you'll see me later," Pallas said with a distinct note of gaiety. "We'll both come back here. And Miles can use the guest lodge, if he wants to. It will be too late to go back into town." With that she got to her feet and went out the door.

"This is all most peculiar," said Destan. "I could have waited until tomorrow to get the copy." He was trying to piece together certain items of the day, but his mind protested, and he was feeling decidedly heady.

"Come on, Miles, where's your sense of adventure? You can't leave the planet without getting a taste of the Umber plains, even if it's on foot under moonlight. Besides, I'm beginning to feel like doing something to work off the meal." He stood up.

Destan's own motion in standing produced a momentary giddiness. "The nectar must be partly alcoholic—though it didn't seem so at the time." He noticed rather curiously that Pallas' goblet stood almost full on the low table top.

They passed the stables, where there was no sound from the horses, and from there the pair struck out across the field. High in the sky floated Umber's single moon, a full shining disc casting a pearl-white glow over the near half of the planet. The light powdered the foliage tops of the distant grove toward which they were headed, glossed the myriad surfaces of grass beneath their feet.

"Does the grass never grow longer, I wonder?" Destan said. It hardly rose above his shoes, creating the sensation of a soft spongy carpet.

"Apparently not. Pallas claims that eons of evolution on Umber awaited only the coming of the settlers and the Hrabas. It's ideal riding country, although the planet as a whole is poor in mineral resources, which is why it wasn't colonized sooner."

The air still held vestiges of the day's heat, though cooler overtones drifted on the slow-moving currents. Nighttime always saw the plains wind drop to a breeze. On Umber, with its modicum of axial tilt, the seasons underwent only modest fluctuation. The temperate zones, where most habitation was centered, experienced seasons of bluster and rain, but otherwise basked in an Arcadian summer. Unneedful of coping with severe elements like those often encountered on colonized worlds, the settlers and their descendants had allowed the clement nature of the planet to lull them into a pastoral symbiosis.

The walk and the atmosphere proved invigorating, and Destan felt his head clearing of the foggier effects of the nectar, though all his senses seemed to have taken on a heightened sensitivity. The landscape, he thought, gleamed like colored crystal, the stars like precious jewels, where they were not drowned in the central pearl of the sky's setting. And such a poetic way of seeing things! Destan chided himself. Night on an unfamiliar planet can work strange effects on a person's thinking.

The soft whistle of a nightbird provided an aural homing to their destination and soon the grove loomed ahead of them. Glenn pointed toward one side. "There is the pavilion." They could make out perhaps a score of figures milling about the low open-sided structure.

"I trust the ceremony, whatever it is, will prove innocuous."

"Pallas would hardly have sent us otherwise," Glenn reassured him. "I once referred to the men of Umber as docile and she was forced to agree. I'm sure whatever customs they indulge in will reflect their character."

Destan remarked dryly, "In ritual, precisely the opposite is usually the case."

As they approached the pavilion, the low murmur of voices reached them and presently the group perceived their coming. From its midst stepped the organizer, a tall lanky man with a somewhat patrician cast, though the moonlight gave all a certain noble glow. The men wore calf-length cloaks with hoods at the moment thrown back, but with the arrival of the newcomers some of the assembly began to draw them up.

They were greeted by the organizer. "We have been expecting you. Please step into the pavilion where you will be outfitted with the proper robes."

"Where is Milo?" asked Destan, peering around at the assembled faces, though he was not sure he would recognize the engineer in this setting, so tinged with unreality, and many were obscured by the drawn hoods.

"He will be at the rendezvous point," the organizer assured him. They followed into the pavilion, a graceful octagon of wooden beams and thatched roof, open to the breezes and smelling of pungent resin. On one of the cross beams hung two cloaks, and these the organizer retrieved and handed to Glenn and Destan.

The cloaks, Destan perceived, were red and blue, whereas the organizer, as well as the rest of the assembly, wore a cloak of brown.

Glenn noticed as well. "Why the different colors?"

"These are specifically for those who have not participated in the ceremony before, so the others can distinguish you and make allowance for your lack of experience."

At his direction, Destan donned the blue robe, Glenn the red. He also outfitted them with pairs of firm, tight slippers and once clothed like the rest, even Destan began to feel a sense of participation, of comradeship, though he remained close to Glenn who exuded a more confident air. Now he was glad for their identifiable colors.

"The rendezvous point is not here?" asked Destan of the organizer.

"No." He looked up at the moon, as though gauging its progress. "Now we must enter the grove." He called softly to the assembled figures. "It is time."

To focus his thoughts, Destan counted those present as they formed into a single line headed by the organizer. Including Glenn and himself, the group numbered twenty. The two newcomers were accorded place in the middle of the file.

Accompanied by the muffled padding of forty slippers, the celebrants made their way toward the line of trees. Destan thought

that the grass seemed more trodden here, as though they were following a well-used path. Soon the men before and behind began humming a chant of archaic sound, tracing a melismatic, haunting melody which to Destan's receptive senses spoke of yearning. Plains peoples, he knew, often absorbed the mood of melancholy distances into their music.

They entered the grove. Tall white trees resembling the poplars of Destan's own world rose arrow-straight into the sky, sprinkled with thin foliage that began only high above their heads. The trees were randomly distributed, perhaps two or three meters apart, but most of the ground between was free of growth, as though a caretaker were assigned to keep the grove pruned. Where the shrubbery did remain, the effect was as a deliberate measure, creating bowers and sheltered places. Elsewhere, the ever-present carpet of green clothed the earth. Moonlight slid down the tree trunks. Destan began to imagine he had entered some land of ancient legend, an island where mythological creatures dwelled, and he watched the shadowed spaces passing on either side for a glimpse of satyrs and nymphs.

Glenn walked ahead of him. He wondered how the gambler was feeling, but he refrained from inquiring, from marring the expectant air and the men's mellifluous chant with a spoken word. How far were they going? From outside, the grove had seemed to cover a narrow limit. Would they pass all the way through?

But the front of the cloaked and hooded line had already reached their destination, as the twenty celebrants emerged into a wide glade which shone like the surface of a pool, the grass trod into a flat sheet glossed by the moon. Around the glade ran a ring of trees regularly spaced and forming a perfect circle. The only other feature of the clearing was another ring about halfway in to its center, this one of squat stones the size of a chair base, their tops smoothed and leveled.

The celebrants passed within the inner ring of stones and came to a stop at the center in an unordered group. There they milled about at random, though the milling itself seemed deliberate, and Glenn and Destan were forced to move with them. Then at a voiced signal, all made their way outward and sat upon the nearest squat stone, facing inward. The newcomers managed to grab two adjacent seats, separated by a man's height.

Destan looked around the circle of twenty stones: all were filled. If Milo and others came to the rendezvous, how would they join in? He had hardly registered the thought when a figure sitting several stones around the arc got up and approached him. From under his cloak the man drew a small leather pouch and handed it wordlessly to Destan, then resumed his place.

Destan stared at the pouch in his hands. Its contents were flexible and he knew them without examination. Milo had been in the group all along, holding the copies of the blueprints until they reached the glade. Destan would not be able to pull out now, having come this far. The deception presented a range of implications, and he remembered the conspiratorial conversation of the afternoon.

"What's that?" whispered Glenn.

"A gift from the Gatrin, I believe." He tucked the pouch into his belt.

Now the voice of the organizer intoned: "Tonight we regain our ancient prerogatives. Let us be energetic and firm, magnanimous and patient. In all things we maintain our equality."

Destan began to get an inkling. Here was the expression of the frustration against the female, the Umber sex that dominated government, administration, home life, and the only activity on the planet that merited universal regard, the raising and training of the Hrabas. But just how were these men to experience this "equality" tonight, in the middle of a dark grove? And what would he himself be expected to contribute?

The other eighteen figures turned outward to face the circle of trees, and Destan and Glenn uncertainly followed suit. Now the glade seemed to take on a hush. All but a single nightbird stopped whistling. Destan felt each of his senses hovering expectantly, taking in the narrow world around him: the composite smells of the woods, the breathing of the circle of silent men, the tall trees erect before him, soaring up like long slender phalluses to penetrate the glistening well of the sky. The headiness, always there, revealed itself again, flushing down his body that waited for something he knew not whether to fear or anticipate. One corner of his mind compared it with the experience on his father's asteroid, but that emotion had been entirely unpleasant and lacked tonight's overlay of ambivalent excitement.

Glenn did not feel as timorous. His personality did not sensitize him to dread or wonder at the unknown, at strange and evocative situations. He whispered, "Do you think they have gods?"

The question, intruding a concept that occupied familiar territory, restored some of Destan's equilibrium, and he forced himself to think on it a moment. "I've seen no sign anywhere of superstition," he whispered back.

"Well, they sure seem to be waiting for something."

At the edge of hearing, a faint sound intruded on the silence of the grove. It grew to a low, distant rumble. A storm? wondered Destan. He looked up but spied no clouds. Did Umber have earthquakes? The sound increased and seemed to envelop the grove. Had Destan known a different background, had frequented certain

entertainments in his youth, he might have recognized it. As well, the acute awareness in every part of him, hovering on the verge of irrationality, predisposed some part of his mind to conjure up supranatural images. And so he did not immediately come to the realization that Glenn did.

The sound ceased. The grove before them, still unchanged to the eye, took on a palpitation, a murmuring, a shivering of nerve-endings.

Glenn gave the faintest of laughs. "Well, I'll be damned," he breathed. "The gods have arrived."

Within the shadowed spaces between the trees, huge dark shapes took form. They moved silently in toward the soaring ring, emerged into full moonlight, stopped. Twenty glistening stallions stood in a circle just inside the glade, each mounted by a cloaked and hooded rider. There were no saddles. The cloaks lay open, edges falling to the sides, gathering over the animals' hips. Underneath, the riders' bodies were clothed in tunics and full-length breeches of a smooth, clinging fabric, and as the pearl-white light streamed down, it etched a quivering shadow beneath the fullness of each rider's chest. The stallions snorted quietly.

A thrilling electric shock coursed over every inch of Destan's body. The headiness flowed into a kind of ecstasy of power, lying not just within himself, but linked across the gap as between opposite charges, surging madly from stone to mount to stone and on around the glade. He sensed that every man in the circle was feeling the same as he.

One link with the distant outside world, now lying in another, duller universe, came to him. As he held on that last vestige of connection, he found himself saying aloud, "I don't believe they mentioned this in the Cosmopolis Library."

There was a stir at a couple of points in the outside ring. The two mounts that stood directly opposite Glenn and Destan pulled back into the trees, as did two others located a quarter of the way round. These two pairs crossed behind, and two new riders took up positions facing the off-worlders.

Destan watched the switch in utter perplexity, then frowned and looked down at his cloak. It stood out blue in the moonlight, as did Glenn's red, easily distinguishable from the brown celebrants who completed the circle. Now he realized that the mounted figure facing him was very tall.

The circle moved. Each rider urged its mount forward until the stallion's head was no more than a meter distant from the stone. The men stood up. Destan and Glenn got slowly to their feet. As one, all twenty riders dismounted, waited. The stallions exuded a faint acrid smell of sweat: elemental, heady. One by one the men

stepped forward, reached out and pulled back the hoods of the riders; then they lowered their own. Now Glenn did the same, to reveal Pallas' beaming face.

Destan stood rooted, the tall hooded figure before him waiting silently.

His mind said: I have to go through with it. His body joined the decision and carried him forward. He reached out, pulled back the hood: and looked upward into the eyes of Matrin Fedria Dhin-Asper, Matriarch of Umber.

But Destan had one more hurdle to surmount. Around him, something unusual began to happen. Each man grasped the horse's neck and pulled himself up to sit in the forward position on its back. Then each woman clambered up behind him. In a panic Destan looked over to Glenn and Pallas whose heads he could just see over the intervening animal but they were oblivious to him and presently they too mounted. He was on his own.

Matrin Fedria said, "You seem to be bereft of words on this occasion, Mr. Destan." Her voice was quiet and melodious, and it pushed the final button. Tonight, if need be, Miles Destan would mount a dragon and not look behind.

His mind was called back to the blueprints: how to ensure he would not lose them? Of equal immediate concern was the question of how he would get up on the horse.

Matrin Fedria answered it for him. "I will allow for your inexperience and deviate from accepted practice." In one continuous motion she gathered the cloak to her side, grasped the animal's neck with her other arm and swung onto its back. Destan took the opportunity to reposition the little pouch to one side and tighten his belt securely around it.

Now the Matrin assumed a sideways sitting position facing him and dispensed instructions. "Place your hand here on my leg as a lever, give me your other hand, and then swing yourself up over the croup. I'll pull you if need be."

The exhilaration induced by the nectar failed to include this proposition among those feats which Destan now felt himself capable of, but he knew if he didn't try he would be flat on his face anyway. After reviewing the sequence once in his mind, he followed instructions and in an awkward motion just short of inglorious, ended up to the rear of the horse with his head forward in the Matrin's lap. She straightened him, pivoted herself by raising one leg over the withers, and both were seated in the proper direction, though in opposite order to that of the other mounts.

The others, apparently, had been waiting. "Clasp me with your arms," the Matrin said none too soon, for at that moment, almost as one, the twenty stallions rose onto their hind legs, rock

steady, and with their forefeet pawed the air within the circle in slow, powerful strokes. Only Destan's arms around the Matrin's waist kept him from toppling backwards. But it was the sound that assailed his ears a moment later which set every nerve in his body at a shiver: a keening ululation that issued from the throats of the women, picked up in the next breath by the men and joined in glorious cacophony by the fierce braying of twenty beasts. It might have been a paean to some god of strength, except that no idol or icon stood within the circle; rather, the object of their salutation could only have been themselves.

Moments later the tumult ceased and the Hrabas became a four-footed creature once more. Quietly and in all directions the double-loaded mounts began to make their way out of the clearing. The Matrin's horse, with its unorthodox load, was the last to depart.

Legs a blur, the huge beast bearing Pallas and Glenn sped eastward over the plain. Glenn could imagine that even the stars were hurtling past them. This was the largest of the stallions he had yet ridden, and the animal seemed tireless. Though he held the rein the Hrabas was responding as much to Pallas' direction, which she imparted through leg motions and soft calls. As she sat with arms loosely around Glenn's chest, her mouth at his ear, he turned his head to speak.

"Gatrin Pallas, that was the most amazing piece of theater I have ever witnessed."

She laughed. "Yes, sometimes I think so myself, although when I was younger I took it completely seriously."

"Now I understand your father's reaction when you served that drink. Does he never take part himself?"

"Not for many years. He has called them an anachronism. And he's probably right. As more of us see more worlds we may find ourselves becoming too sophisticated for such things. Sometimes I think even the men are growing out of it, too."

"Is your clan the only one that indulges?"

"Oh, no, they take place in communities all over the planet, every month at full moon. There are various protocols for choosing those who take part. No one is sure just how it all started, it was over a hundred years ago."

Ahead of them the plain swept rolling and featureless to the dark bulk on the horizon. The ground streaked beneath the horse's hooves, leaving behind the regular clumps of grove that dotted the plain near the town.

"Where are we going?" Glenn called, eyes searching ahead.

She pointed to the horizon. "There—to the nearest crest of the Great Scarp. It will take us the better part of an hour. I have never gone that far on a night like this. That is where I want to make

love. It feels closer to the stars and there are sounds that are different from the plains...Some say there is old magic there." She hugged him closer. "It is cooler, but our cloaks are warm. We will not return until dawn."

Glenn had taunted Destan about his sense of adventure. Now he saw that his own would be put to the test.

Pallas breathed directly into his ear. "We may even find some nectar bud, if you think you will need it by then."

Glenn shot her a backward glance. "That depends on what's expected of me, Gatrín. What usually goes on on a night like this? Where do the others go?"

"To nearby groves. But they will ride a while first. The men rarely have a chance to even mount the Hrabas—and they'll be controlling it—so they will want to make the best of their opportunity."

"You make it sound like an aphrodisiac in itself. I assume this whole production induces a somewhat more...aggressive behavior in the men than you are accustomed to."

His wry tone was answered by her coy one. "Something like that. But that doesn't mean we just meekly give them the upper hand."

Glenn was beginning to understand. Suddenly it occurred to him that there could be some uncongenial aspects to the practice. "Don't you sometimes get paired with someone you don't like?"

"Sometimes, but not often. We have ways—though not all of them are as obvious as the one we used tonight."

Glenn made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a snort. "You little foxes! I might have known. The men believe that this is their night, when the women submit to the circle and the men have the controlling hand: first on the horse and holding the rein! But when it comes down to it, they're still being manipulated!"

She pouted, though he could not see. But he felt her pinch. "Does it really matter? The effect is still the same."

"Is it?" Glenn retorted. "You women don't always use saddles on the horse, but did you ever think that the ride could be even more exciting if you dropped the rein as well?"

Pallas laughed. "That might make it too unpredictable."

"Gatrín, I promise you that tonight on the Scarp I intend to be very unpredictable."

Her murmur could not be translated. She lifted her legs from the animal's flanks and for a few moments swung them forward over his. "Tonight the direction is all yours, my rebellious gambler." Glenn noticed an increased demand on the rein.

After a few minutes he asked, "By the way, what about Miles? He went out of my head completely the minute I lowered your hood."

"Oh, don't worry. A close friend of mine will take care of him."
The dark bulk ahead, etched in moonlight, drew nearer.

Destan's ride was mercifully short. He had never had to straddle a bulk like that and he feared that a longer ride would have compromised any later activity. The Matrin guided the horse into a grove, whether the same one or another he could not tell. He had lost his sense of direction in their brief jaunt under the moon, the wind sliding past his temples, the thud of hooves filling his ears, his arms clasped about the Matrin's middle. She had tempered her speed for the sake of her passenger, but still it was that ride, with all its formidable newness, which afterward became the night's most intensely memorable episode.

They dismounted in an open space among tall poplars, or so Destan thought of them. In one part, the grass sloped up onto a little mound that was shielded by a shrubbery of tiny leaves and delicate petaled flowers glinting palely in the moonlight. He drew out the pouch with the blueprints. During the ride it had slipped up awkwardly under his arm, held by the belt only to the barest degree. He had resigned himself to losing it and pressing Milo tomorrow for another copy. He tossed the pouch at the base of the nearest tree.

Matrin Fedria made no comment. Then she said, "Walk with me. I must tether the horse at a little distance."

They threaded their way through the trees, and something about the scene of a moonlit wood brought back to Destan a recollection of his youth, from a time before he had begun to shut himself off. The animal, of course, intruded on the memory; but the presence of the Matrin and all that she exuded reminded him of the unrestrained indulgence of that occasion, as well as the compromising shadow that had fallen over his later encounters and relationships until, after Jan, he had withdrawn entirely into himself. It had taken several keys even temporarily to unlock that door tonight: the nectar, the procession through the grove, the dazzling emergence of the riders into the glade—and the ride itself, with the closeness of the Matrin's body all but drowning his awareness; but he knew he wanted to recapture that long-ago experience, even if only for an unreal night on a planet that could well be simply a mirage.

Matrin Fedria did not speak until after she had tethered the horse and they were on their way back to the little clearing. "I do not often take part in these rites any more, though I enjoy them just as much when I do. But many of the men are much younger, and they become either too nervous with me because of my position or overly respectful because of my age." She smiled that smile that had first set his innards tingling in the audience hall. "I

trust that neither of these considerations will prove a deterrence to the envoy of Allen Jaynes."

And again Destan laughed in a way he had not laughed for many years. "Matrin, I don't think that Allen Jaynes could ever have envisioned his envoy in the present situation."

When they regained the mound, the Matrin turned her back to him and, shielded by the cloak, reached first under her tunic and then down into her breeches and carefully unclasped the two pieces of riding underwear which she then removed. They joined the pouch of blueprints under the tree. "I do this," she said, "not out of modesty, but because the design can make removal awkward for someone unfamiliar with it, and I do not choose to have either of us feel awkward tonight."

Whether she had intended it or not, Destan found the action intensely stimulating. When she spread her cloak on the grass and faced him in the loose outfit draping the contours of her body, he forgot Allen Jaynes, Cosmopolis and all nefarious plots against the Concourse.

By now the moon had settled closer to the horizon and a paler light slanted in at acute angles through gaps and chinks in the foliage. The wind was only a breath. In the air, warmth and coolness hung in delicate balance, no nightbirds whistled, and only an occasional neighing came from the Hrabas which the Matrin had been careful to position upwind.

As she had earlier checked the speed of the Hrabas, so now did Matrin Fedria temper her own responses as they began their lovemaking. She could perceive the gulf that separated her from the last woman he had known, perceive his only gradually returning facility. He was one of the few off-worlders she had known, but he was not like the others, brash and overconfident at the start. She murmured to him as she would to one of her charges, whether horse or daughter, and as they lay nude together upon the two cloaks, she drew him inside.

Destan realized that the nectar had not been an actual aphrodisiac. The illusion of heightened senses had simply been a product of the bud's true capacity: to dilute the neural centers of ingrained habit and inhibition. The women of Umber would be too proud to have their men experience sensations which were not entirely of their partner's making. So Destan knew that his reaction to the warmth of the long body beneath him, to the urgent intimacy enclosing his manhood, was no drug-induced intoxication.

The Matrin's eyes were open to the stars that blinked demurely above the little clearing. Her back lay to the Umber earth, and her slow, deep sighs were as the quiet passions of the soil. Destan felt poised between all the elements, belonging to none.

Some perversity made him think of Agis. He had already realized that for Umber women, at least those of the Matrin's class, marriage placed no constraints upon their activities at the rites; nor was it, in these times, a kind of freedom exclusive to Umber. As for the men who took part, he had no idea what other attachments they might have. He feared he sounded foolish, but the words came out: "I hope that the consort will not be apprised of the specific course of events tonight."

Matrin Fedria was startled; she fixed him with a glare from her deep eyes. "Mr. Destan, you pick the oddest times to turn diplomatic. You do not have to concern yourself with Agis. I am my own master. I have ridden on every plain of Umber, for there are other sights to see besides those from my own window, and my mind is capable of appreciating them all. Yet when I return, I still welcome my own fields as home. No one, not even the consort, would think to place such restrictions upon me."

Her mildness had given way to the passion of her protest, and Destan mumbled a disclaimer. An old expression came to him: When on Earth, don't tell the Earthmen what to do.

The Matrin's voice became huskily candescent. "Apparently I am not doing enough to occupy your full attention."

Her subsequent movements beneath him, the actions of her mouth on his, soon brought them both to the verge, until Destan, encircled by avid arms and hungering legs, could feel her only as woman timeless and ageless, drawing in the world, her elemental source of ecstasy. Afterward, he realized that his own orgasm, so long unfamiliar, had passed almost without notice, submerged in that of the Matrin. No spasms of his above could survive the long reverberations flowing through the foundation beneath, and when the former had passed, he could only watch the eyes, oblivious, wheel majestically like slow planets in orbit.

The grove breathed with them, harnessing the breeze to produce a sigh. Destan asked, "Are there no insects on your world?"

"Of course, but few are nocturnal. We would not be able to do this in the early evening. And yes, there are animals, but none on the plain are dangerous; and anyway, they would not approach with the horse in the vicinity."

Destan lay sideways, propped on his arm, the cloak draped along his back. The Matrin on her own cloak beside him felt no reason to cover herself. Her eyes shifted from the view overhead to the man's face close beside her.

"Will you go back tomorrow to Allen Jaynes?"

"I think perhaps I will stay one more day. But yes, there is a task I am engaged in that will not brook much delay. I must visit other worlds for more information."

With his free hand he was stroking the skin of her thighs and stomach where the muscles had relaxed into a quiet landscape. He once moved up to fondle the fluid breasts, but the landscape stirred in a way he was not yet ready for and he withdrew to his former ground. To what age, he wondered, did an Umber woman continue to ride?

She asked, "And what will you do with the blueprints for which you have gone through so much?" Naturally, Pallas had told her.

"They will be examined. Certain people have recently come to the realization that there are many things about the satellites they do not understand."

"Why don't you ask Captain Cardis? I'm sure he would explain them."

Was there some probe behind the ingenuousness, Destan wondered—or merely curiosity? He said, "When we first met, you claimed to be a good judge of men. Perhaps I don't doubt it, but how can you judge the Captain if you have never met him?"

"Oh, but I have met him."

Why hadn't she mentioned this earlier? "Then you have been to Cosmopolis?"

She laughed, though it was more of a purr. "I have never left Umber in my life, Mr. Destan. Captain Cardis came here."

Destan's hand stopped moving—though he maintained enough presence not to withdraw it.

So Cardis had come to Umber to visit the Matrin: proof that he actually left Cosmopolis occasionally. The recent contacts which Council intelligence had detected between Cardis and various Concourse rulers were all through letters and agents. No record existed during fourteen years of Cardis ever having set foot on a Concourse world once Cosmopolis had been launched. On how many other occasions had he secretly done so?

And Pallas: she could not have known about the Captain's visit to Umber or she would surely have mentioned it. Evidently Cardis had asked that it be concealed and the Matrin and cooperated—until now. He wondered if that spoke for his own persuasiveness or some overriding impulse by Matrin Fedria to defend Cardis' integrity.

Destan resumed the motion of his hand. "I presume the Captain's visit was to discuss the satellite?"

"Yes. He wanted to explain its use to me so that I would have no cause for concern. And he took the occasion to give me a certain commitment I wanted on another matter."

Destan did not have to ask what that other matter was. Salmi's mission to Cosmopolis had been doomed before it started. The replacement of Basel must have been a matter of considerable anxiety to Captain Cardis.

"But what, may I ask, did you read into the man?" Destan started at a thought. "Did he take part in one of the rites?"

This time it was a genuine laugh. "No, it was not that time of the month. And I think he would never have let that much of himself out, though he has considerable charm. But he is propelled by a drive that I would not associate with evil men."

Destan refrained from asking what she knew of evil men. In any case, he doubted her judgment could mean anything. Cardis, by now, he saw as a chameleon, presenting various faces at will to those around him.

The discussion about the Captain threatened to break the spell. It reminded him of what awaited him after he left this idyllic planet.

Matrin Fedria said: "Mr. Destan, in my youth, if a man's hand were doing the things yours is doing, he would have been mounted within a minute. But that does not mean my body is no longer moved. I think we have discussed Captain Cardis long enough."

There was that melodious voice again, accompanied by the quiet smile.

He looked around, but saw no sign of the Captain of Cosmopolis. The spell was renewed. He knew that neither the night, nor the nectar, nor the Matrin's body, were yet finished with him.

Dawn came in a dappling of yellow light upon the green. When Destan awoke, peering over the cloak which covered himself and the sleeping woman, he saw that part of the verdant surface was a light sprinkling of leaves, evidently from the trees. Was the land passing through a change of season? He had noticed no leaves on the ground the night before.

The air on his face was cool. The sun would have to generate new warmth today. Matrin Fedria stirred and opened her eyes.

Destan asked, "Why have the leaves fallen? Is it autumn?"

She looked about sleepily. "No, the jirandac trees are special. They shed like this each full moon—just a few leaves."

Destan registered amazement. The grove was giving them and all who participated in the rite its benediction. This world was indeed a fairyland. But like all children, it had already begun to grow up. Perhaps it was regrettable, if there were to be no more creatures like Matrin Fedria to roam it. How long would she haunt his memory?

They dressed a short time later and had just wrapped their cloaks about them when Destan heard the sound of one of the Hrabas approaching through the trees. At first he thought the Matrin's mount had broken free and come looking for her, but she said, "That will be Pallas and Glenn."

A few moments later, the stallion with its pair of riders came

into sight. Pallas, with Glenn behind, reined the horse to a stop and called, but when she spied Destan in his cloak, came on into the clearing. They both dismounted. Glenn looked a little ride-sore.

Pallas kissed her mother and said, "The sky was glorious on the Scarp. I wish you could have come with us."

"I can remember the experience," the Matrin replied.

* * *

By mid-morning Destan had returned with Pallas and Glenn to the consort's lodge. It was time to make his proposal, for certain preparations would have to be made and each passing day was valuable time lost.

Glenn noticed that the goblet on the table stood almost full. Pallas laughed. "That was careless of me. It's an imitation, you see. The bud is genuinely scarce and it can't be wasted." To Glenn's remark about the nature of Umber women, she retorted, "Devious? No...just resourceful."

Destan spoke up. "That was a word you applied to me when I first arrived, do you remember?"

Impulsively she squeezed his hand. The night, the ride, the Scarp, Destan noted, had given her a bloom. Could he go through with it? "Yes, Miles, I do. It is a quality I admire in men."

"Well, perhaps you will allow me to give you an illustration of it." He sat down, motioning them to do the same. "Pallas and Glenn, I am hoping that the two of you will be able to help us."

They listened in growing fascination as Destan explained why he had been on Cosmopolis; why the Council was apprehensive about Cardis' power and influence; and the great questions about the significance of the Stellar Intersect game. "May I ask you, Gatrín, what transpired between yourself and Captain Cardis the evening you spent together? In view of what I have just said, can you tell me anything that passed between you which would either confirm or alleviate our fears?"

She glanced at Glenn. "I cannot deny that I felt the Captain was attracted to me. There was no physical exchange between us, but still I felt that he would have desired it. What kept him from making an overture I don't know. Perhaps he feared I would reject him; perhaps he feared to jeopardize the terminus." She paused. "As for me...I am not sure how I would have reacted. I felt in awe of him, naturally. He has a certain magnetism—and an even greater intensity, in a bottled-up kind of way. Who can fathom what is going on in his mind?"

"What did you talk about?"

"About Umber. About the ship: many of the things that have happened on it. He talked very little about himself. When I asked

where he was born he said that much as he would like to tell me, he could not risk jeopardizing his privacy. I asked if his parents were still alive and he said no."

"He did not propose that you stay longer on Cosmopolis? Or that you return sometime?"

"No, he didn't. There was a strange element of sadness about him through the whole evening. Perhaps regret. I definitely felt that he was expecting to see me for the last time. And yet, sometimes a kind of excitement came through. Like I myself feel, when I think of leaving Umber and taking up a life somewhere else—even though I don't know whether I could do it...It all sounds confusing, doesn't it, Miles? Perhaps it was as much myself. After all, I had been through a lot of emotional experiences at that time."

Destan showed her a picture of Garra. "Did you see this man at any time while you were with the Captain that evening?" Pallas examined it, but said that she had not.

After a pregnant pause, Destan said: "Pallas, Glenn, will you help us? Would you be willing to go back to Cosmopolis?"

They looked at each other, puzzled and amazed. "Why? What can we do?"

"I trust your instinct that Cardis was attracted to you. I also suspect that there is some significance to the Umber terminus in the next game. I want to capitalize on those two things. If you are willing, we can work out the details before you leave, but I am suggesting something like this: You will present yourself to Captain Cardis and act as though you have gone back because you have been drawn to him, that the memory of him has deeply affected you. Perhaps in your great emotion you might even threaten to have the terminus withdrawn if he will not respond. You must observe his reactions; you must try to draw him out, to reveal whatever he may be hiding from the whole Concourse. You must learn his intentions, if at all possible."

Pallas cast her eyes to her lap. "You are suggesting that I seduce him, are you not? Then dupe him into revealing everything about himself to me?"

"Yes, Gattrin Pallas, that is what I am suggesting."

"It goes against my grain, Miles Destan. I prefer to deceive only an enemy."

Now Glenn spoke up. "Pallas, what Miles fears may or may not be true, but if the possibility exists, something must be done. I don't want you to refuse because of me." He gave her a knowing smile. "Remember what you told me about General Salmi, when you tried to poison him? Perhaps a seduction would not be entirely a deception. And you would do it not because Cardis is your enemy but because you believe in the necessity."

Pallas took his hand. After debating with herself for a few moments, she agreed.

"Glenn will go with you, if only to provide moral support, but he must keep out of the way. The Captain must not be aware of him. I will join you after you have been there a few days. You will have to play much of it as it comes, I'm afraid. Also, it is not easy to get on Cosmopolis on such short notice, but it can be done. Chairman Jaynes will arrange it and cover all costs. You will travel under false names, but once there, Pallas will reveal herself to the Captain."

Destan delayed his departure from Umber and spent the next two days making the necessary preparations. He contacted Jaynes and gained approval for his plan; details and schedules were worked out. In a week, Glenn and Pallas would travel to Byzant to meet the shuttle, there to pick up papers from an agent. A rendezvous time and place was arranged for Destan, similarly incognito, to meet them on Cosmopolis.

"No matter what should happen, one of you at least must keep the rendezvous and give me as much information as possible. From there, I will take charge of affairs."

Destan knew the schedule would be tight. They would not have much time before the next Stellar Game.

He also knew he was using them. He knew that Cardis could be unpredictable. Events themselves would be unpredictable. But the issue was larger than the fate of individuals, and he included himself.

Pallas became infected with a growing excitement. She would be the first woman of her world to engage in interplanetary espionage. Strangely enough, the Matrin asked no explanation for her sudden return to Cosmopolis: this third daughter had long since embarked on a path of her own. As for Glenn, his experience with the Gatrin of Umber had not yet dispossessed him of all his gambling instincts.

Merander was a world of construction yards and factories. Ruled by an oligarchy of corporate magnates, Meranderan society dedicated itself to fastidiousness and precision. The workers formed the vast majority of the population and, no matter what their rank, led lives closely circumscribed by a mass of regulations and an inculcated respect for authority. Loquacity was not one of their noted traits. Destan realized that for a building project like Cosmopolis, whose origins were evidently intended to be shrouded in secrecy, Cardis could not have made a better choice than Merander.

His plan involved the use of an assumed name and a counterfeit identity disc, the latter provided by Council intelligence. Destan registered at a major Tashkent hotel and in the early afternoon traveled by monorail out of the city, passing monolithic government buildings, industrial head offices and humorless suburbs of workers' dwellings. Five kilometers beyond lay the sprawling precincts of the Ferasco Shipbuilding Company.

From the elevated monorail coach as it approached the station Destan looked out over an endless wire fence surrounding the steel-gray facades of numerous hangars and mills. The fields between these were dotted with spidery towers tall and squat, a legion of scaffolds ringing partly completed hulls. Ferasco made everything from a two-seater pleasure boat suitable for moon hopping to full battle cruisers. Though it had its competitors, Ferasco would, under any circumstances, have been the logical organization to tackle a project like Cosmopolis.

Destan passed through three separate checkpoints before arriving at the architectural offices. These were housed in a stone building possessing a degree of elegance sufficient to set it apart from the utilitarian severity that infected the rest of the complex. After a short wait he was ushered into a cubicle comprising the domain of a certain junior executive, virtually a salesman, assigned to handle unscheduled inquiries about new contracts.

"Harmon Isbester," said Destan, identifying himself and presenting the identity disc which also noted the name of the firm

he represented: Universal Resort Establishments, with a head office on Susa.

The salesman was a young man displaying a degree of verve and affability Destan would not have associated with Ferasco or Menander. Perhaps he had immigrated from another world; perhaps he had not yet been broken in.

Mr. Isbester explained the purpose of his visit. "I'll be frank, Mr. Reese, in telling you that URE is interested in building a second Cosmopolis. It's a wonder no one else has done so in the last fourteen years, considering the phenomenal success Mr. Cardis has enjoyed. Naturally, we have no intention of developing a new game to go along with it,"—he put on a jocular grin—"even though one of our junior designers the other day did suggest a Stellar Chess game in which we might outfit 32 of the major worlds with polar rockets..." He let his voice trail off in a facetious tone and Reese laughed heartily, which Destan took as a good sign. "I'll also be frank, Mr. Reese, in admitting that there are certain engineering difficulties attendant on the project which our own architectural boys have found insurmountable. The obvious solution was to come to the people who built the original. I assume this very office, perhaps even you yourself, were involved in that incredible feat of engineering?"

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Isbester," Reese declared, "though not me personally. That was before my time."

"Yes, well, no doubt you enjoy a certain reflected glory. After all, you must come in contact every day with the very architect who helped Mr. Cardis design it." Destan's geniality lit up the drab cubicle. "You may even get to take over from him one day, I'll warrant."

Reese's smile was suitably self-effacing. "Oh, old Larv Cleavis will be retiring long before I'd be in line for a job like that. But eventually, of course—" The salesman stopped and his face passed through a series of descending stages of confidence as a particular prohibition circuit made itself felt: he had inadvertently given out a piece of information about a restricted project.

The junior executive immediately placed himself at a distance from Mr. Harmon Isbester. "It sounds to me as though your query would be best handled by my supervisor." He seemed uneasy as he added, "I would prefer if you did not mention the details of our conversation to Mr. Montague." That was fine with Destan.

Reese led him down a hallway to the somewhat larger office of a Mortimer Montague. Destan's conversation with Mr. Montague, whose face maintained as much expression as the hull of one of Ferasco's cruisers, lasted exactly four minutes.

"None of the architects who worked on the Cosmopolis project

are with the firm any longer, Mr. Isbester. And there have been no plans kept of Cosmopolis that could be used for reference—even if such a thing were ethical.” If true, an unusual practice for any manufacturer, Destan thought. “But if you would like one of our architects to consult with your firm on a suitable new design for your own ship, we would be happy to oblige.” Montague looked anything but happy.

Destan’s final words were designed to leave the impression that Mr. Isbester’s visit had really been a feeler for industrial plagiarism, and he departed without further ado.

Well, he had the name: Larv Cleevis. Montague’s declaration that all the architects who had worked on Cosmopolis had now left the company was evidently a lie. From what the salesman had said, Cleevis was elderly, no doubt due for retirement soon. That would give him an angle if he could locate the man. But it could not be on the Ferasco grounds. Cleevis would likely live in a neighboring suburb, and after consulting a Tashkent directory Destan pinpointed the most likely prospect, within a short bus route of the shipyards. By late afternoon he had arrived at the address: a simple, single-occupancy flat within a row of indistinguishable copies of itself. Cleevis lived alone.

A short time following the end of the day shift, an elderly gentleman approached the flat where Destan waited. He walked with a slight stoop, thinning white hair topping a kindly if somewhat forlorn face. When he noticed the stranger waiting at his door, he came the rest of the way wearing an expression of trepidation. Destan quelled his last pang of conscience.

Cleevis stopped. “Sir?”

The stranger adopted an official countenance. “Larv Cleevis, of Ferasco?”

“Yes?” The old man’s voice was tremulous.

“My name is Biggs. I’ve just come from the Bureau of Pensions.” He allowed time for a reaction.

“The Bureau— Oh, I hope there’s nothing wrong, sir. I’m due for retirement in six months and I hope there’s no problem with my pension. It was reviewed last year, and—”

“You are aware, of course, that certain actions on the part of any citizen can lead to the forfeiture of the right to a pension.” On Merander the government had sole jurisdiction over retirement benefits, no matter where the citizen worked.

“Of course, sir, but I’ve contravened nothing. I’ve committed no criminal act.” The perplexity in the old man’s expression turned to alarm, as he tried to recall any action since his last pension review which might have constituted some damning breach of regulation.

"Then I assume you have no intention of committing a criminal act?"

"By no means."

"I'm glad to hear that. So you have nothing to worry about, Mr. Cleevis. I suggest we go inside where I shall inform you of what is required."

The architect's home was neat and cheerless, the only colorful aspect of which lay in an assortment of elegant glass figurines shot with rich marbling. Cleevis evidently collected them with loving care from off-world sources.

Before Cleevis could offer him a seat, Destan pushed home his argument. He presented a badge bearing the personal identity mark of Allen Jaynes and a directive that the bearer should be accorded all consideration due to the Chairman himself. Cleevis, though his own life had been touched in no way by the Council, was suitably impressed, as he was by all authority.

"Mr. Cleevis, the Council is seeking information which only you can provide."

The old man's wariness was instantly triggered by the word "information." Destan delivered the coup de grace. "Of course, you are aware that on all worlds, failure to supply legal information to a representative of the Council constitutes a criminal act?"

Cleevis assumed a dazed expression. It was obvious that he had known no such thing. He fretted, "Just what is it that you want to know?"

Destan smiled amiably. "Let's sit down, Mr. Cleevis. Now—all that Allen Jaynes, the Chairman of the Concourse Council, would like to know is a little information about Cosmopolis, which I believe you worked on during construction."

The full extent of his dilemma struck the senior architect. "But sir! That information is absolutely restricted! If I gave you anything on the subject, I would be fired immediately. And then I would lose my pension!"

Destan granted him a reassuring gesture. "Mr. Cleevis, the Council's authority overrides any local regulations. But to avoid any possible misunderstanding, I will see to it that what passes between us will never reach your superiors." Nevertheless, it took another few minutes of pressuring before Cleevis, in an attitude of resignation, allowed Destan to ask his first question about Cosmopolis.

"Who designed the ship?"

"Captain Cardis brought us the plans when he approached the Company. I always assumed that he had drawn them up himself, but I and an assistant architect had to make certain modifications for construction purposes." The ship had taken two years to build.

"Did Cardis come alone?"

"No, he was with another man." From the architect's description Destan surmised that this was Kyle, the ship's first officer. Destan showed Cleevis a picture of the Captain. "Yes, that was him, though he was younger then." As an afterthought, Destan showed him the picture of Garra and asked if he had ever seen the man during the building of Cosmopolis.

Cleevis peered at it and hesitated. "No, but he bears a certain resemblance to a man who took a job with the Company around the same time. Just a resemblance."

"Where is this man now?"

Cleevis' words were emerging a little more slowly and thickly, as though an internal prohibition were working to impede their flow. "He's still with the Company—though shortly after the ship was built he moved into my own section."

"What does he do?"

"He's in charge of security. He's an occasional friend of mine as well, we drink together the odd time." Something about this recollection seemed to invest the old man's face with a certain hazy uncertainty, but it quickly evaporated when he turned back to his visitor's stern countenance.

Beneath it, Destan was thinking: a man resembling Garra had insinuated himself into a security post at Ferasco around the time Cosmopolis was built? He set the point aside for later cogitation.

He asked about the Intersect Gallery and the Stellar Game. Cleevis revealed that there had been no Gallery on the ship when Cosmopolis was constructed. "What occupied that central area on the main deck of the Captain's pod?"

"Part of the Captain's offices and quarters," replied Cleevis. "They covered the central areas of both decks."

With the prefabricated satellites in mind, Destan asked if there had been any area of the ship, probably in the Service pod, which might have been used as a construction area: large enough to assemble complex machinery, do some testing. "How about directly below the shuttle dock?"

Cleevis considered, while his anxious expression deepened. He remembered that the area had been a sub-docking facility for the supply ship, but that it would have been big enough for conversion to such a use as his visitor was suggesting. No other location came to mind.

All indications were, Destan concluded, that the Stellar Game had been conceived between the launching of the ship and six years later. What did this indicate about the role the game might be playing in any scheme by Cardis? That it had been a later addition to serve a new purpose: something the Captain had not had in mind at the beginning?

And he had given up part of his quarters to make way for the Intersect Gallery. Evidently a switch to more simple tastes.

Destan realized he was giving Cleevis too much time for reflection. He resumed his questioning. "Did the Captain have anything he called his own spaceboat?" Cleevis searched his memory: the shuttle, a research vessel, a supply ship, and yes, a spaceboat which the Captain had referred to as his own.

"I assume Cosmopolis has a beacon—which all these vessels use?"

"Yes, although the shuttle doesn't need it."

"What strength was it?"

The anxiety was affecting Cleevis' memory. "I—I think it was fifteen megarevs."

Destan started. "Fifteen? That strong?" The Council beacon, so the pilot had told him, was only six megarevs. "Are you sure? Why did it have to be so strong?"

Cleevis' voice became shrill. "Sir, Cosmopolis travels all over the Concourse. The supply ship, the research vessel, the spaceboat, they have to find their way home no matter where they are. The Captain wanted a wide safety factor." He ran an agitated hand through his thinning hair. "Why does the Council want to know all these things? And why have you come to me instead of going to management?"

Destan's voice was firm. "Mr. Cleevis, the Council is an inter-world authoritative body and has a right to exercise that authority through whatever channels it thinks best. Now, I have only one or two more questions."

Cleevis could not last much longer. Destan knew the old man was contravening sacrosanct regulations. But there had to be more.

"Mr. Cleevis, was there any weaponry installed anywhere on the ship?"

The senior architect blanched. "Mr. Biggs! Not that I was aware of! Cosmopolis is a resort ship!"

"All right. But think carefully—and this is my last question." It was a stab in the dark. "Was there any area on the ship which was left empty, where the Captain might have said he intended to install something later; perhaps where wiring and lighting and other facilities were put in, but no equipment? Anything at all like that?"

Cleevis' expression was one of fatalism. He had always looked upon the secrecy surrounding Cosmopolis as little more than his company's standard policy, but the questions this gentleman was asking conjured up images of far greater significance. The seriousness of his breach of that secrecy scarcely bore thinking about.

He said dully, "In an outer segment of the Service pod there was a series of corridors and rooms, one of them very long. They

ran behind some shallow food processing chambers and had a limited access. All sorts of wiring and ducts went in but they were left empty. When I asked about them the Captain said they were being set aside as extra quarters if future operations required a larger staff. I had no reason to doubt him. He seemed sincere in everything he said."

"This long room: what were its dimensions?"

"I don't recall exactly. Maybe a hundred meters by thirty."

Destan raised his eyebrows. "That's more than a room! The arrangement of wiring and things would give you no clue as to what use could be made of it—if you thought about it now?"

But Cleevis was clearly in no condition to do any thinking. "I just can't say, Mr. Biggs," he mumbled. "At the time I wondered, because there seemed to be repeated facilities along each wall. Perhaps it was intended as some kind of laboratory."

Destan stood up. "Mr. Cleevis, you've been a great help. What you have told me, and the fact that you've told me, will be kept in strict confidence."

The old man registered a faint relief. Now Destan dropped the bombshell.

"By the way, was there ever any mention of Captain Cardis' home world?" Cleevis shook his head. "Would there be any kind of source reference in the company records? For instance how was Cosmopolis paid for? Surely through bank drafts." He looked at Cleevis pointedly. "There must be a record of the financial institution somewhere in your offices."

All the color drained from Cleevis' face. "Sir, I dare not get that information for you. I would be discharged at once—maybe worse. No, for that you will have to claim your Chairman's rights from someone else."

Destan assumed his most unscrupulous expression, then played his trump card by destroying the deck. "Mr. Cleevis, Allen Jaynes has no authority whatever on Merander. You have given me this classified information of your own free will—or so I shall inform your superiors if you do not obtain this last item for me. I want the name and location of the institution through which Captain Cardis paid for Cosmopolis. How you do it is your affair."

Cleevis looked hollowly at the floor. After long moments he spoke in a small voice, "I have a nephew in the accounting department who can probably manage to look it up."

"What is this nephew's name?"

"Martin Bales."

Destan jotted a note. "Here is my hotel visicom number. I will await your call tomorrow with the information." He left the dismal tenement and returned to Tashkent, feeling more than a little sick.

The Historian passed an uneasy night, his brain teeming with new data, new possibilities, new innuendoes. The next day he kept to his hotel room until at mid-afternoon he received Clevis' call. The image screens were left blank.

"Mr. Biggs, I cannot give you the information you requested. I dare not. I have just received a serious threat for having spoken to you yesterday." Destan was dumbfounded: how had they known? "I lied and said I told you nothing."

"Who would threaten you, Mr. Clevis? Surely your company cannot be so fanatical about confidential information."

"Apparently a certain friend of mine is—or at least one who I thought was a friend. I can do nothing about your threats. Please take pity on an old man. Goodbye." Clevis broke the connection.

A "friend" had threatened him? The man he sometimes "had a drink with," the one who resembled Garra? A man who had been with the company for fourteen years—since the launching of the ship? Why was the entire company being so secretive? Had everyone been threatened? Had they all been bought?

Might they be fanatical enough to come after him?

Destan contacted his crew to be ready at the spaceport and immediately checked out of the hotel. But he decided to try one last ploy. In the lobby he placed a voice call to the accounting department of Ferasco and asked to speak to Martin Bales. This might or might not work, he told himself. It depended on Clevis having gotten the information from Bales already, and Bales being unaware that the old man had been discovered.

"Mr. Bales? You don't know me, but I know that today you broke company regulations and looked up a certain bit of information for Larv Clevis. I want to verify that information. If you do not repeat the name of the financial institution to me now, I will call back to your superiors and inform them of your indiscretion. If you do, I promise you I will be off the planet within thirty minutes and no one will know you have spoken to me."

There was no response, but Destan could detect his party's distress. Had he hit hard enough? Perhaps someone was standing within earshot.

Bales spoke hurriedly. "The High Bank of Neutrolis, on the planet Belvedere." The connection went dead.

True or false, Destan had only one way of finding out. He hurried to the spaceport, and with the boat aloft in not much more than the promised thirty minutes, directed the pilot to make for Belvedere, less than half a day's hop away.

Was it merely a coincidence that Belvedere lay just inside the Bayan cluster?

* * *

The manager of the High Bank fixed an unyielding eye on the man who sat across his desk, as the fingers of one hand tapped upon a closed file before him. "Neither Chairman Jaynes nor anyone else has the right to demand information from a secured account. I was not in this branch at the time in question but the summary sheet clearly states that the particulars contained in it are permanently confidential."

"At whose request?" Destan asked.

"It doesn't say—but that is immaterial. No doubt it was a request by the original depositors."

"You mean the account is no longer extant?"

"That is correct," the manager scowled, grudging even this grain of information. "But we respect the wishes of all clients, past or present."

"Can you tell me in what currency the deposits were made?"

"Mr. Biggs, I can tell you nothing."

The closed file sat tantalizingly close under the manager's palm. No doubt he would never be this near to the information again.

"Mr. Arkleman, there is a government official here on your world who would back up Allen Jaynes' claim for the release of this information. Would you be willing to contact him now?" He made a gesture to the communicator that stood at arm's length to one side of the manager's chair. "I can give you his code number." Destan took a piece of paper from his pocket.

The manager looked skeptical. "Who is this official?"

"Someone you will recognize if you are willing to call him. He doesn't want his name given out unnecessarily."

Destan knew nothing of Belvederean politics, but apparently this sufficiently intrigued the bank manager to cause him a moment of reflection. Looking at the piece of paper, Destan recited the first six digits that came into his mind.

The manager turned uncertainly toward the communicator. "Well, perhaps I should look into what this is all about..." His chair pivoted, the hand that had been resting on the file moved over and punched out the first digits.

Destan stood up, reached over the desk, deftly picked up the file. He flipped back the cover and took in the summary sheet with a glance, trying to imprint its image on his brain.

The manager's head jerked around—

DATE: August 4, 1046

"Here—what—?"

PRINCIPAL DEPOSITOR: Philip Cardis

CO-DEPOSITOR: Eldon Kyle

The manager stood up. "Mr. Biggs—!"

DEPOSITOR'S ADDRESS: waived

The manager started around the desk—

AMOUNT DEPOSITED: nickel, cadmium, platinum
ingots to current exchange value of 500 million—

The file was snatched from his grasp. He looked up into a face white with fury. "I can have you arrested for that!" the manager shouted. "You can't barge in here and seize confidential files!" He stalked back to the communicator as though he were indeed intent on summoning some authority.

"Mr. Arkleman, is it not a requirement under your banking regulations that all depositors must clearly identify themselves?" It was so on his own world, though he had no idea if it applied on Belvedere. The manager hesitated over the buttons. "Perhaps the authorities would like to know why Philip Cardis' identification was waived. Could it have been a bribe? The deposit was a huge one—and unorthodox."

This took enough steam out of the manager to cause him to abandon the communicator and sit down. Destan had no wish to press his luck. "I'm sure you would not desire to see your institution under investigation for bribery and accepting a very questionable deposit. I have seen what I wanted, so the matter may rest as far as I'm concerned."

Destan turned on his heel and left the office.

Two of the secretaries in the outer room, having heard the manager's shout, were looking toward the door in some alarm as Destan passed through. He nodded to them and proceeded past the counter and across the rotunda. He approached the outer door, reached out his hand—

Through the glass he glimpsed a man about to enter the bank. It was Garra.

Destan wheeled and took two steps to a customer console against the wall. Behind him the man entered and strode across the rotunda toward the manager's office. The skin on Destan's back began to crawl. He moved quietly to the door and continued on out without looking behind.

The street was crowded with skimmers and the occasional wheeled vehicle. Dodging traffic, he crossed to the other side, took up a position behind a kiosk and waited, his eye on the great ornate door of the High Bank.

Destan decided that he had been mistaken about the man's identity. But the resemblance had been there, and he knew with virtual certainty that this was Cleevis' "friend" from Ferasco. How

was this possible? The time difference indicated an answer: the security man must have had a tap on Bales' call line, and Destan's quick departure from Merander had gained him an hour's head start.

So Philip Cardis had turned over a wealth of precious metals to the High Bank, concealing his home world. Why on Belvedere? Why not? Probably because it wasn't Merander. To split things up. To cover tracks as best he could. Where had he acquired such a wealth of metals? He and Kyle? Was Garra included as well? Garra, who looked like an Earthman, or a pirate? Who looked like a man who had worked for fourteen years at Ferasco—since the time Cosmopolis was built—and who threatened Larv Clevis, the senior architect, merely for talking to someone enquiring about the Cosmopolis designs? Who frantically tracked a stranger to another planet for fear he might learn something from the old account records?

And why precious metals? Because they were untraceable? And why indeed on Belvedere, in a cluster that had a history of disorder? Because whoever they were knew the area? Because it was their home cluster?

The door of the High Bank opened. The Ferasco security man emerged, looked around. After a few seconds' indecision he hailed a skimmer cab and sped off in the direction of the spaceport.

Destan decided there was something he wanted to look into. He located a Geological Survey outfit based in the city and there spoke to one of the senior Geologists, one familiar with conditions on most worlds of the Bayan cluster.

"On what world would one find abundant supplies of nickel, cadmium and platinum?"

The Geologist registered surprise. "All three? Those are the three most valuable minerals in the Concourse, Mr. Destan. Some of us may be fortunate enough to have a good supply of one or two, but rarely all. Cadmium is pretty scarce on all the worlds hereabouts."

Destan tried for a longshot. "What about the Montagos of Hadalgo? What kind of precious metals do they have access to?"

The Geologist snorted. "Thankfully, not much of any. Though they seem to have enough resources suitable for making weapons."

"Have they ever been known to go to war to gain precious metals?"

"Not specifically. The Montagos would go to war for anything."

Destan thought of another longshot, though this one seemed too far in the past. "Did the people of the planet Olivar ever mine valuable metals either before the famous disaster or since?"

The Geologist shook her head.

"Could the population have discovered something and mined it secretly?"

"Hardly. Olivar was a poor planet. Still is. Was reputed to be a haven for pirates." Those damned pirates again.

"You mean the whole population was supposed to be pirates?"

"That's not what I said, Mr. Destan. But the locals couldn't do much about it. And the other worlds were too busy with their wars."

Destan felt a keen frustration. There was nothing he could get a hold on!

"All right, I guess you've told me all that you can. By the way, whatever did cause that disaster on Olivar? Has anyone found out more about it since it occurred?"

"Not much. Some kind of conflagration over a very wide area. Seems the population was destroyed entirely."

"Could it have been natural causes?"

"Some say. Myself, I doubt it."

Destan returned by skimmer cab to the spaceport. As he entered the terminal he scanned the lobby for any sign of the security man from Ferasco. Would the bank manager have told him of his visitor's blatant act, or would fear or pride have concealed it?

As he reached the attendant stationed at the access door to the docking bays, Destan realized that the man, if he had left the planet, would have passed here less than an hour ago. After showing his docking authorization, he took out the picture of Garra.

"Did this man or someone resembling him pass through within the last hour?" he asked.

"I believe so, sir. But he didn't look in quite as ill a mood." The attendant grinned.

"I see. Well, I guess I've missed him, then." Destan turned to go. The attendant said, "Maybe not, sir. Perhaps it was your vessel he was looking or."

"Looking for?"

"Did you come in on the Daska 6D? I directed him to C-wing."

Destan's face took on a mix of puzzlement and annoyance. "Are you in the habit of directing someone to other vessels without authorization?"

The demand seemed to throw the attendant into some confusion. "Uh—no, sir. Not usually. But he showed me some credentials which...which seemed to make it all right." The attendant hesitated, as though uncertain of exactly what he had been shown.

"Was he carrying anything?" The man had had a small satchel at the bank.

"I believe he had a handbag of some sort, sir."

"And he has not passed back this way?"

"No, sir."

Destan moved warily down the long track of C-wing, past yachts, official craft, private boats waiting in the standby bays that housed all ships in port for less than one day. His crew of two had remained in the spaceboat so as to be on hand for immediate departure.

How had the security man known the identity of his boat? By a check at the Merander spaceport, he realized: they could have told him who had left within the previous hour.

The boat came into sight, but he could see no one in the vicinity. He called from outside the open lock and the pilot emerged. "What's the trouble, Mr. Destan? Are you coming aboard?"

Destan mounted the little ramp. "Let's be off. You've had no visitors in the last hour?"

"None who knocked on the door." The ramp retracted, the lock closed. Destan and the two crewmen took their places. The pilot called the tower for clearance. The boat moved out of the bay, down the track, rolled toward C-pad.

The boat's Council markings had evidently dissuaded the security man from approaching, as did the obvious presence of the crew on board. Yet what might have been in his mind?

An insistent tingling of unconscious receptors made itself felt. Destan loosed the restraining straps of his seat.

"Stop the boat!" he called to the pilot. "Stop the boat!"

The baffled pilot complied.

"Radio the tower we're making an emergency hull inspection," Destan ordered. "When you've done that, join me outside."

They found it attached to the rear of the far side, adjacent one of the stabilization strips. The pilot, pale of face, detached the little device, removed a sliding cylinder. "Don't worry, it's safe enough here. It's vacuum triggered with a slight delay. We would have been well out before it punched a hole right through both walls of the boat."

"You're familiar with this little toy?"

"It's a standard sabotage device. I handled them in military training. It's defused now."

"Bring it aboard. Tell the tower everything checked out all right. I think we should get back to Sigma without further delay."

From the Beta pod cabin of one Anna Menter to the Alpha pod cabin of one Arthur Hatch, a visicom connection was made.

"Pallas! I've been worried. I figured you must have reached your cabin an hour ago."

She told him that on arriving she had immediately called the Captain's number and left her real name with the operator. Thirty minutes later, Cardis had returned the call. "He seemed very distressed to see me. He asked why I had returned to Cosmopolis. He even asked 'how'—which means he must go over the visitors' list, as Miles expected. I'll have to use the explanation Miles came up with, though I doubt he'll believe it. Anyway, I didn't answer any of his questions and just said I had to see him. He is busy all afternoon so we arranged that I would come to his quarters this evening."

Her agitation increased. "Glenn I'm beginning to wonder if I can go through with it, after all. He looked at me so intently and I felt the blood rush to my face. Do you think I can pull it off? I don't feel at all the same coolness I did with Salmi."

"Salmi you understood, Pallas. Cardis is too much of an uncertainty. But you'll do all right when the time comes. Besides, if you show nervousness, he'll just interpret it as part of what you're feeling for him."

"That's true. I wonder if any other women have ever done this to him."

"It might be a natural question to ask."

"Yes, you're right. I wish you were going to be there, Glenn—to prompt me."

"No, Pallas, I don't think I would want to be...should we meet this afternoon?"

"No. I don't want to take a chance on anyone seeing the two of us together. But don't worry if I don't call you afterwards. It's always possible I will spend the night in his quarters."

They arranged a system by which she would contact him the next day, either at his cabin or in the casino.

Alone, Pallas spent one of the longest afternoons of her life. She kept to the cabin, tried to distract herself in a book, went over things to say and then abandoned it, fearing to impair her spontaneity. What should she wear? Something obviously seductive? No. Perhaps the same simple but stylish outfit she had worn on the previous evening they had spent together.

Miles Destan, what have you gotten me into? Why was I so ready to leave Umber again?

The appointed hour saw her at the Captain's pod. She was escorted to the upper deck; past the foyer leading to the reception chamber, past the door to the games room, to the study, to the office. A little beyond that, the aide knocked at the next door. It was opened by Captain Cardis himself.

His attire was informal. He bore a subtle sense of grooming, about his dark hair, his smooth skin, as he had on the previous occasion. The aide departed, leaving Pallas facing the Captain standing in the doorway. Her eyes were wide, her mouth was dry, her skin tingled, her heart pounded. Glenn had been right: she need not have worried about acting a part.

Cardis spoke quietly. "Gatrin Pallas. You are a woman full of surprises." He did not seem angry, but there was a hint of a very precarious lid being kept in place. "Come in."

She passed before him into the same sitting room where they had spent the last evening together. Only one other door led from it. That was the bedroom, she knew, where they had not gone the time before.

He invited her to sit. But instead of going to the serving bar as on that previous occasion, he took a chair opposite her. Relaxing into it, he looked directly at her. "Now tell me why you had to see me. Why you had to come all the way back from Umber so soon... without letting me know in advance." He did not bring up any question about false identity.

"I—" She faltered a moment and he waited. But then she found herself saying words she had not intended; had not even thought of in her conscious mind before this moment. The pretense slid away and a different truth came spilling out.

"I could not stop thinking of why you did not want to make love to me. It is not that I must make love to every man I meet, or even every man who attracts me. It is not that my pride is hurt when a man doesn't take the opportunity. But during that evening I was drawn to you. Not because you had championed my cause with Salmi; in fact, you had thwarted me in my intention—you interfered and I usually do not appreciate that. And not because you are the master of a famous ship and everybody in the Concourse idolizes you. After all, what did I know of Cosmopolis? My life has been in

the open, with sun and wind and grass. Do you think I like these closed spaces, this—this labyrinth you have built for yourself? I had no reason to idolize you or your ship.”

She realized that she was perched on the edge of the chair. She tried to relax a little.

“But I could not deny I was drawn to you. But even that was unclear. I couldn’t decipher you. You are a strange mixture. I sensed both confidence and apprehension. Your sexual definition was blurred: would you try to dominate me, or I you? You would not understand, but such questions are part of the Umber woman’s mentality—at least the normal Umber woman—and they determine attitudes and responses toward the man.” She knew she was rambling, but she wanted to get it all out before he interrupted. “You did not send me clear signals, so despite my attraction my responses were also unclear.”

He watched her with an unfathomable expression.

“I was drawn to you for a different reason. You are Captain of a great ship, the most famous figure in the Concourse. But you are alone. Your loneliness came across to me in a hundred ways: your look, your words; when I sat across from you, like this, or at the table while we ate. It made me want to go to you and bring you to life, to make you forget everything else and feel a new joy in me.”

Captain Cardis had closed his eyes, his hands resting on the arms of the chair. They seemed to hold the faintest tremble. Pallas asked herself: Am I making a fool of myself? Did I really feel all this?

She finished simply. “You must have felt it. Why did you not respond?”

His eyes remained closed. After a time Cardis spoke in a voice that seemed to come from a great distance. “A man in my position leads a false life. Where does the myth end and the real man begin? Others expect important things of me and I must not disappoint them.”

Pallas made a little sound of exasperation. “That is too subtle for me. You are whatever you are. You are Captain of the ship. You are your own man. And here, in your private quarters, you can surely be yourself.”

“Yes, here at least I have privacy. I have seen to that. But as to being myself...”

“Why does that cause you so much apprehension? It is what kept you at a distance that night. Why?”

Again there was a long pause. Now his eyes opened and he looked at her. “Gatrin Pallas, because of my circumstances, I have not known many women in my life. The women I have chosen have been attractive, I have had my pick of the Concourse. But they

have not been perceptive, and deliberately so. You are otherwise, in spite of all your naiveté; that much I sensed. I was drawn to you, especially at this time, but had I given in, it could have been... dangerous."

"But why?"

"I cannot tell you that."

"Then don't. But I want you to have me." Glenn had been right. She wanted to share herself with this strange man. But it was beyond physical attraction. There was a special human quality she was trying to get in touch with, to impart to him, and it would only come when their bodies were together.

As for her assignment, she would attend to that as well. The questions would be asked, and she would try to learn what she could. But she also believed that the two were not incompatible.

Philip Cardis extended his hand toward Pallas Dhin-Asper. "Perhaps it is too late to be dangerous. Come."

He made love to her silently and hungrily. His lithe body seemed buoyant, filled with the strength and passion he drew from her. At the moment of their orgasm she became the all-giving mother: the security of her presence, the enjoyment of her body, even her own pleasure. For those few seconds he clung to her like a child, as if he would compress a lifetime of need into that brief instant. But the instant passed. Some greater force than she kept that need from spilling out, and the loneliness descended once again.

She would never get in touch with him, and the knowledge sobered her. She would not torment herself trying. Now there was only her assignment left.

Relaxed in their physical release, they lay for a long time on the bed. Then she turned and placed a hand upon his chest. "You did want me the other time, didn't you? I was not mistaken?" Her fingers stroked the now cool skin, tracing the lightly muscled lines of his upper body.

"No, Pallas, you were not mistaken."

"Yet I still felt, just now, that you were holding back. Will you always hold back?"

"Does every man who makes love to you pour out his soul?"

"I don't always want a man's soul."

He was staring light-years beyond the ceiling. "You said that I was a strange mixture....There used to be an ancient philosophy, long before space travel, which said that the soul was a separate thing and existed independently of the body. When I discovered the existence of my own soul, I was surprised. Things have not been the same....But I can never share my soul with anyone. Not until the proper time....There are those who will not want to see it."

She could not fathom his meaning. Perhaps he had gotten lost in his own strange philosophies, and she doubted their importance to what she was trying to learn.

"Are you a mixture because of your parents? Were they very different? My own parents are different, and yet I feel a great unity inside myself."

"Did you grow up with them?"

"Yes, although I saw much less of my father than I did of my mother." She was getting sidetracked. "Umber is a soothing world. Everything is a rich grass, softly rolling plains. Nothing is hidden. I feel secure on it....What was your world like?"

"Like nothing you could imagine."

She looked at the eyes staring upward and she realized that she would learn nothing from this man. Her voice became agitated. "Will you be content with being alone for the rest of your life? Why did you build this fabulous ship? What is the use of attracting all the people of the Concourse to it if you are going to be the loneliest man of them all?" She raised herself to look into his eyes. "Don't you want anything from life?"

He did not answer.

She rolled off the bed and began to pace the room, her feet cool on the rugless floor. The anger and the frustration rose. Miles Destan be damned!

"This isn't life! You are a hermit! You hide yourself! All those pleasures, all those diversions out there—the ones you built with your own hand. Do you ever take part in them? Do you ever enjoy them? Why don't you go out and mingle with your visitors? Give them a part of yourself. It would increase their joy! They come here as much to see you as the ship. To visit the most famous man of the Concourse! The builder of Cosmopolis! The creator of the Stellar Intersect game! Captain Philip Cardis....They have made you into a god!"

She calmed. "Instead they find a rumor, a mystery. A faceless recluse. Most of them don't even get to shake your hand."

She had stopped at the foot of the bed. Suddenly she felt naked, standing there before a man who refused to give her anything of himself.

Cardis looked down at her. At the spirited face, the breasts so full of warmth. The body she had mastered and had used to master. The openness of her heart and mind.

"I want only one pleasure. It will make up for all the others."

He swung himself off the bed. "I don't want you to stay on Cosmopolis. You will go back to Umber on the next shuttle."

"Why? Why don't you want me to stay?"

"Because it would trouble me. And why should you want to

stay? Do you not prefer the security of the Umber plains? You have gotten what you want from me, have you not?" He was not angry, but he had moved himself back to the old distance. "Take your pleasure of the ship for the next two days. I will see you two evenings from now—briefly. Then you will leave the next morning. Our next stop is a day earlier than usual."

Pallas said nothing and they started to dress.

"By the way, what is your cabin number?" He had to know she was using a false name, but he did not refer to it. She gave him the number.

There was nothing more to be said. Pallas got ready to leave while the Captain signaled for an escort. At the door he asked her, "You agree to leave Cosmopolis on the next shuttle?"

How could she, since that was when Miles Destan was due to arrive? But she could say nothing else at this time: "If you wish."

The escort arrived. "I will see you in two days, Gatrin Pallas."

Back down the corridors, along the slideway. They approached the elevator to the main deck. A door to one side had been standing ajar and now it opened wide. A man emerged. As Pallas and the attendant stepped off the slideway, the man moved in front of them and they stopped. He peered into Pallas' face.

"You are the Umber woman."

Pallas was taken aback. She did not like his expression. But there was something familiar about him—yes, surely this was the man whose picture Miles had shown her.

"I understood that you left the ship a while ago. Why did the Captain ask you to come back?"

"I came back on my own." At first she felt indignation at being so bluntly accosted, then a vague uneasiness, for the man seemed to emanate a subtle malevolence. "I—I did not have an opportunity to see all of the ship when I was here last."

The leaden eyes bore into her own. "Well, no doubt he finds you attractive." He stepped out of their way and they proceeded to the elevator. Pallas' spine tingled. When they reached the main deck she asked her escort, "Who was that?"

"His name's Garra, miss. I don't know much about him. He and a couple of associates do some kind of work in the Service pod. He comes up occasionally to see the Captain."

She wondered why Miles had a picture of him. He was the first person she had met on Cosmopolis whom she definitely did not like.

When Pallas reached her cabin it was late in her own day, and she had to sleep; her mind and body were fatigued. She would have called Glenn to let him know she had returned, but he would ask questions, and her head was too befuddled to give clear answers. It would keep until morning.

Then she considered: it might be wise not to use the visicom at all. Who knew whether it might not be monitored now? Better to meet Glenn the other way.

She dropped into bed and passed a troubled night.

The next morning Pallas and Glenn met in the casino. At a table in one corner she told him of the previous evening.

"He has an impenetrable wall around him. The things he said were very cryptic. Perhaps Miles can glean some significance out of them. He rambled on about his soul and how it was separate from his body, but I confess I couldn't follow it."

"So we can tell Miles nothing when he gets here."

"Only vague impressions. Something about Captain Cardis makes me want to believe he is a good man. But behind everything he said there seemed to be a veiled threat. Something ominous."

"And this other man? The one Miles showed you a picture of?"

"Yes, I've been thinking about him. The attendant said he and some associates—whatever that means—work in the Service pod. If we've reached a dead end with Captain Cardis, maybe we can find out something else. Perhaps we can do our own investigation."

"Miles authorized nothing else, Pallas. We wouldn't know what we were getting into."

Pallas chided him. "Now that doesn't sound like a gambler, Mr. Berenson. I'm not suggesting we start breaking down doors. But we could at least take the tour of the Service pod. Then we could report to Miles if we find out where this man Garra is working and maybe what he does."

Glenn considered. "I guess there can't be much harm in that. Do you still think we should avoid being seen together?"

"Maybe not now, although we don't have to publicize it. He doesn't know who you are, and why should he track me for the next two days?" She sobered. "But that's going to be a problem, and I haven't thought it through yet. I can't leave before Miles gets here. I may have to go into hiding. If nothing is going on, he'll hardly do anything to me. If there is, I won't be any worse off."

Her eye sparkled. "Besides, I'm beginning to find it all very intriguing. Maybe I should leave Umber for good and become a Concourse investigator."

Neutron Daly stood at the committee room table poring over the blueprint copies spread out before him. Destan and Allen Jaynes stood to either side.

"Naturally, these show only broad outlines since they're just assembly plans." He pointed. "Here's the gyros for homing in on the second satellite. They'd respond to this imprint bank which must contain an information program on all of space surrounding the satellite. Here's a receptor lens to align things with the actual image—though it would need a time lapse correcting factor."

"Cardis could hardly have done all this by himself," Jaynes protested.

"He has a sizeable research staff. No doubt he drew on them for a lot of it," said Destan. "Newt, what about the particle beams: anything unusual there?"

Newt scanned several sheets, pointing out the energy intake mechanisms and the converter block. "The converter's not broken down here, so I can't tell what the charge-inducing process is."

"Can you see anything to indicate whether someone could control things from a different point than the monitor station on-planet? Sending an instruction signal from halfway across the Con-course, let's say."

Newt rubbed a hand along his jaw. "A signal would be a signal I should think, no matter where it came from." He traced through several circuits. "I don't see anything unusual in the signal receptors—but again, we don't have a schematic."

Now Destan stuck his head into the sybot's mouth. "That imprint bank: I suppose it could register information about stars that don't have a terminus? I mean, the satellite doesn't have to know that it's got another satellite at the end of the carrier beam before it could transmit a particle beam along its own carrier—which I assume it could do?"

Newt looked quizzical. Jaynes frowned and peered sidelong at the Historian.

"Let's handle those one at a time, Mr. Destan. Of course the

satellite could send a particle beam right after the carrier—just as the normal closed communication system does; but that’s not the way the game works, as I’m sure you’re aware. As for your first question: why not? Any information could be included in the imprint bank.”

Jaynes growled, “Miles, have you been holding something back from me?”

Destan gave a rueful smile. “Newt, Chairman Jaynes and I are going off for a little discussion. Keep looking and see if you can find anything at all unusual about the way the satellite works.”

As the Chairman and the Historian withdrew to adjacent quarters, there was a glare on the old man’s face. When they returned twenty minutes later, the glare had changed to a look of intense excitement. Destan’s nightmares were now exposed to the light of day. “I’m ready to act, Miles, and I’m sure I can get the rest of the group to go along with me.”

The Physicist too was excited. “Look at this, Mr. Destan. When I first saw that there were two power crystals, I thought maybe one was a spare. But from their alignment it strikes me that maybe the second one is designed to act as some kind of intensifier. I’ve heard of recent experiments along such lines. It might explain the ability of the unusually wide carrier cone to survive the width of the Concourse—maybe even give the particle beams extra capacities, if needed.”

“So it would seem Cardis has had access to some innovative use of the crystal,” Destan mused. He gestured at the envelope containing Newt’s list of universities and laboratories specializing in communication sciences. “We may need to supplement that.”

Jaynes’ voice rasped like an eager sergeant-major. “Any more delay seems too risky to me.”

Destan sighed. “You may be right, Mr. Chairman. Well, let’s see what your colleagues have to say.”

The Council’s most secret committee was a cadre of seven delegates headed by the Chairman; its task was to formulate policy governing the undercover activities of certain Council agencies. Regularly the Hierarchs accused it of existence and regularly the Chairman’s office issued categorical denials. Now they had been summoned on short notice and today dotted the near rows of the assembly auditorium as Miles Destan recounted the details of his investigation into Philip Cardis and Cosmopolis. Throughout, all seven remained silent; only Jaynes periodically injected a leading question.

Finally, Imbros Pelleg made the first comment. From the flicker of annoyance crossing Jaynes’ face, Destan could see that the group was not always of one mind in its deliberations.

"I still think we should consider the most likely explanation before we go tilting at fanciful ideas about plots and conspiracies. I've said it before and I still say it."

Jaynes kept his voice neutral. "Perhaps you would restate that explanation for us, Delegate Pelleg."

"Well, it has always seemed to me that the most logical reason for all this secrecy is that Cardis has something in his past which he doesn't want known. Something that would reflect badly on his image and hurt Cosmopolis."

Alicia Faulk seconded: "Such as a criminal background."

"That would be a logical explanation," Destan agreed, "if it were just the secrecy surrounding the man himself. But the fanatic confidentiality around the building of the ship, the manner of its payment, and the fact that a man—apparently of the same background as one of the ship's senior crew members—was kept as a plant at the shipbuilder's for fourteen years: all this seems to go deeper than a mere protection of Cardis." He left unmentioned the fact that those measures had included an attempt to kill him.

"Not at all, Mr. Destan," Faulk insisted. "If the funds for the building of Cosmopolis were acquired in a criminal manner, then that too would have to be concealed. And this seems quite possible from the precious metals deposit."

Pelleg pressed his point. "And if he does in fact have a shady past, it is not our responsibility to bring the man to justice simply for that reason."

The Chairman left his seat and joined Destan in front of the podium. "But what about our own intelligence? It has detected a definite increase in contacts by Cardis with certain Hierarchs—and the most intractable ones at that."

"And yet it hardly suggests some sinister cooperation between them when Cardis forced Salmi of Balkin to accede to the wishes of Umber." This was from Carlotta Viotti.

"But Miles has a theory about that," Jaynes prompted.

Destan hesitated. He had not yet outlined the question of the workings of the Stellar Game itself, and with the assembled group around him the significance he had sensed about the Umber terminus somehow seemed absurdly tenuous. He knew that few would attach any more import to Cardis' concern for Umber than the obvious. The same would apply to the Captain's fear of losing Balkin as a terminus world if Salmi had died. For now he said simply, "Cardis wanted to replace a lost terminus world with another in a position where it could fill the same role."

Jaynes looked a little disappointed. He gave Destan a gentle prod. "I think, Miles, that it's time to give the delegates a little fuller understanding of the Stellar Game."

Reluctantly, Destan complied, but for the moment he left out one hypothetical ingredient. He knew the old man would notice.

"I don't like the sound of that discharge at the intersect," commented Serge Rachman. "Especially when so many of them are located near Sigma."

Aron Sevarei scoffed. "A few light-years is hardly 'near,' Delegate Rachman. That part of it is too far-fetched for me."

"How close to Sigma has an intersect taken place, Miles?" Jaynes asked.

"About one and a half light-years...a few times. It's one of the more common intersect points."

"I never felt anything," Pelleg remarked dryly.

Sevarei resumed his argument. "But surely that's a far cry from saying it could pose any danger to Sigma itself. How great an area does this discharge cover? I don't think I've ever heard about it before." He was echoed by a few similar comments. "I agree I'm disturbed by the pressure Cardis applied on Salmi: the game might well turn out to be a club over the head of each world. But as a real weapon?" He shook his head.

Pelleg stood up and he too took the floor before the podium. "So the man creates some kind of explosion in space, as part of a game. What use could he put it to? Let's assume he could destroy the Council beacon—along with Sigma itself, if you like, as fantastic a scenario as that might be. The fleets would still be able to come in, the commanders are not dependent on us for orders. Granted it would take them longer to respond and they would be hampered in coordinating their efforts. But against what threat? And with what subversive object? Cosmopolis would be defenseless against any fleet."

"Don't forget the fleets of the Hierarchs," Faulk pointed out. "The idea of a conspiracy among them has been raised."

"But a similar objection applies to them. They don't need some fantastic weapon like the Stellar Intersect game to act against the Council, if that's what they're planning. They could blow up the beacon themselves without too much trouble."

"He's right," said Sevarei. "And why are we assuming that any subversive intent has to be against the Council? We know our political force is growing, but a plot covering more than a decade merely to eliminate the seat of the Council—without harming its fleet? It doesn't make sense."

Farnsworth Carter spoke up. "That length of time is puzzling. If there is a plot, why wait until now? Cosmopolis has been around for fourteen years, the game for eight: every year the Council has grown more influential, the fleet larger. Why would they have waited so long?"

"They could be feeling overly cautious," Viotti volunteered. "Perhaps we appear stronger than we really are."

Jaynes gave one of his trademarked snorts. "The Hierarchs know the Council's strength down to the last slingshot. If they haven't put us where we are, they've at least done their best to keep us there."

The Chairman swept the group with his gaze and Destan, noticing a crafty glint in the old eye, waited for him to drop the missing shoe. Instead, Jaynes stunned them all by saying, "Fellow delegates, I am going to propose that we act immediately. I am proposing that we dispatch the nearest patrol fleet and seize Cosmopolis."

The little assembly went into an uproar. Objections flew that such a step would be far too precipitous. It would provoke an angry clamor around the Concourse. At one stroke the Council would be discredited.

Jaynes seemed unperturbed as he turned to Destan. "What do you think, Miles? How urgent is the situation, as you see it?"

All eyes shifted to the Historian, and Destan wondered what the old man was up to. He paused for a long moment, carefully considering his reply.

"My sense of urgency centered around the Captain's negotiation to make Umber a terminus world. But I may have been caught up in my idea of the game as a potential weapon and in my calculations on the intersect point and the part Umber could play in it. Cardis definitely wants that terminus. And I have a gut feeling that there's more to it than merely the playing of the game. But just because it's going to be ready for the next game doesn't mean that the next game is the critical one. It may come some time after that. I have nothing definite to indicate one way or the other, although I'm convinced it's soon. Also, the timing bothers me. If we assume that the Intersect game is in fact some kind of weapon—actual or otherwise—and that the next game is when something is supposed to take place which involves the Umber terminus, then Cardis has managed to gain it only by the skin of his teeth. To schedule some grand plan for a time when a supposedly key element might or might not be finalized would be risky, to say the least."

"Perhaps the plan was flexible," suggested Faulk. "To be put into operation as soon as everything was in place."

Jackson Mills objected: "But you haven't shown us that the game could actually be used as a weapon, Mr. Destan. What is it that the intersect could strike?"

Destan glanced at Jaynes and saw that the Chairman's line was being gathered in just as he wanted. He turned back to Mills. "It's true that, if the satellites are limited to behaving the way they

do in a regular game, Cardis can't just create intersects wherever he wants. Nor could he have set up specific termini to focus deliberately on a particular target, since the players have long calculated where every intersect point is located. It would be hard for one to have escaped their notice. Sigma may be relatively close, but it does not lie at one of the points. I tried to take UMBER as a new terminus into account, but I couldn't see it opening up any fresh possibilities, let alone any dangerous ones. Cardis seems to have wanted it simply to replace one that was recently lost."

He paused, and Mills jumped in. "You gave us an 'if' in there, Mr. Destan."

"There is always the possibility that the satellites could be instructed to point in any direction, not just at each other. Consequently, they might even be able to focus a number of beams on a common location. I don't know for certain that they could be so directed, but I can't rule it out."

There was an eerie hush in the assembly auditorium. Destan could almost hear the old man's smile crack.

"However—" He broke the spell himself, and his voice sounded suddenly loud as it echoed from the distant walls. "Cardis would have to be able to control the satellites himself."

Now the dam burst.

"He built them—why not assume he included some way to control them?"..."Is such complex remote control across so great a distance possible?"..."Maybe he can't control them from Cosmopolis, but suppose he plotted with those who do—"..."Yes, what if the Hierarchs take over the monitor stations and use the satellites at Cardis' direction—to destroy the beacon, or the Council, or—"

"—so they could use their own fleets to attack the patrols!" Faulk's voice pierced the babble and she jumped up wearing an expression of triumph.

Jaynes wheeled on Destan. The look on the old man's face said that for him, this theory made everything fall into place. Destan tried to orient his own thoughts: might it indeed all finally fit together?

But Pelleg had mounted the podium and was bellowing at the assembly, his own voice echoing back to second him. "Please! Please, all of you! I know we've talked about conspiracies, but this is paranoia out of all proportion! Cosmic weapons and plots covering the Concourse! We haven't one piece of concrete evidence to support it, to say nothing of any theory for its motivation!"

Eventually the turmoil subsided and Jackson Mills proposed a compromise: immediately to assign one Council patrol to track Cosmopolis at a discreet distance. "The ship will be stopping for the game. The commander of the patrol will monitor the broadcast. If

any subversive move is made by Captain Cardis, he will move on Cosmopolis at once. Other patrols can be dispatched accordingly."

Jaynes saw his well-laid advantage evaporate, as everyone supported Mills' proposal. Reluctantly, the Chairman was obliged to give it his own approval.

As for Miles Destan, it was agreed that he should return to Cosmopolis for the next game. Through coded messages he could communicate to an agent on Byzant, relaying any of certain predetermined recommendations. If no message were sent to override Mills' proposal, all would proceed as planned.

The group debated one final precaution: should they evacuate Sigma?

"We cannot evacuate the entire planet's population," Pelleg scoffed. "Aside from it being impossible and ludicrously alarmist, we'd look like a bunch of damn fools if nothing happened."

"Which will certainly be the case," Sevarei declared. "I just can't believe that such a thing would be envisioned by any group of plotters. I for one am willing to stay on the planet for the next week."

Again a compromise was reached. Since the Council was not currently sitting, only they of all the delegates were now on Sigma. The Council flagship with its coordinating facilities would be brought home immediately and Jaynes along with three others would board the vessel, withdrawing to a few light-years' distance. From that position the Chairman would keep in touch with the patrol tracking Cosmopolis and with the agent on Byzant to receive any messages from Miles Destan.

The meeting broke up.

It was a glum Allen Jaynes who led Destan back to his office. "I did not think that when the chips were down all of them would prove so weak-kneed. Of course, they fear for their own positions and the reactions of their appointers."

"I'm sure they have the interests of the Council at heart, as well."

"Yes," Jaynes agreed grudgingly. "I'll accord them that. Maybe Pelleg was right. No matter what you and I feel about our own assumptions, the truth of the matter is that we have no concrete evidence for any of it."

The Chairman sighed. "Now that it comes down to it, I hope we have indeed been mistaken about Cardis and Cosmopolis. I'd like nothing better than to learn he is totally harmless—whatever his past. Trouble is, my instincts are kicking me from a posterior direction and telling me otherwise. It's too bad I can't do the same for my colleagues."

"Sir, there is always the possibility that something may come

of Pallas Dhin-Asper's mission. What she tells me when I get to Cosmopolis may alter the whole picture."

The Chairman nodded. They had reached his office and Jaynes drew him inside. "But now, Miles, we have the problem of getting you onto Cosmopolis again at such short notice. As you know, I used my second fictitious advance booking for your friend Glenn Berenson. We were just lucky with the Umber woman. But I had an agent dig up a man due to arrive the day you wanted and he's agreed to let us use his booking and identity. However, part of the problem still remains—you know that, don't you?"

Destan knew what was coming. He had deliberated over it himself.

"It's my feeling," said Jaynes, "that security is going to be awfully tight on Cosmopolis at this point. You can't take any chance on being recognized." The Chairman assumed a studied expression and peered over the Historian's face. "Did you ever consider getting that nose straightened?"

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