
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

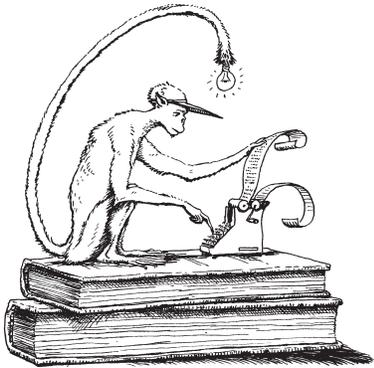
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Contents

Dragonchaser
Chapters 1-3
by Tim Stretton
Page 2



Coralia
Chapters 22-26
by Till Noever
Page 17



Editorial

Gentle Readers:

Hail to Tim Stretton, who has just saved the *CLS* from the abyss! With several instalments of a new novel looming, we now have ample reason to continue publishing for the rest of 2003, and maybe beyond that.

In this issue you'll also find the final chapters of *Coralia*. This concludes my obligatory attempt at a space opera. I don't know what to do next, but there's plenty of material lurking on my disk. The question now is which of that is 'suitable' for a Vancean publication, and how much does it qualify for the 'Vancean Influence' label. I'll have to work on that one.

Till Noever



Dragonchaser

by *Tim Stretton*

Chapter 1

The Waterside Tavern, down near the docks of Paladria Old Town, was not by and large the haunt of exclusive society. Its clientele consisted largely of dockhands and seamen awaiting their next excursion; gender balance was maintained by a fleet of portside doxies, mostly past the first flush of youth. However, the wine was cheap, if somewhat vinegary; victuals were in the main wholesome, especially if weevils and like insects were treated as nutritious protein rather than infestation. Meat was occasionally available, and few felt compelled to observe that rat or dog were seldom served at the best tables.

It was not the environment that Mirko Ascalon, once a captain in the Garganet navy, would have chosen to occupy his leisure hours had circumstances permitted otherwise. However, funds were short and there were many worse establishments; additionally he had an arrangement with several of the doxies whereby he prevented molestation from the more boisterous visitors, in return for a small retainer. Those guests of the establishment who created difficulty when the time came to settle their score might also make Mirko's acquaintance.

He caught the eye of Panduletta, the widow who owned the tavern, with a rueful smile. The years had been kind to Panduletta—excepting only her teeth—and Mirko was grateful for the employment, although he did not envisage a lasting career at the Waterside. It kept his muscles in trim and allowed an outlet for any belligerence he might feel; but it was hard to conceive of significant personal growth in these surroundings.

The circumstances of Mirko's departure from Garganet still rankled, and he left with resentments and frustrations which were not easily resolved. In the meantime, he was content to fill his purse where he could, so long as he remained near the sea. The Waterside was exemplary in this respect; and he frequently walked east along the beach, out towards the dockyard of the City Fleet, or less often east towards that part of

the town where the Electors' residences were perched in the lee of the hills.

It was on one such day that Mirko, taking his customary stroll towards the docks, found his attention captured by an unusual scene before him. Two fishermen, unusually smart in tabards of red with a gold dragon at the chest, were hauling an object in a net up the shingle away from their craft beached at the water's edge. Stepping back out of sight with an instinctive caution, he saw that the 'object' was in fact a mermaid. Such sights were rare in Garganet—where indeed mermaids had a reputation for duplicity—but less so in Paladria, where a colony lodged on the rocks at the base of the Morvellos lighthouse at the edge of the bay. 'Never trust a mermaid', the saying went in Garganet. By popular belief they lured mariners to destruction on hidden rocks. In this case, though, the circumstances seemed somewhat different: the mermaid was clearly at the mercy of the two fishermen.

Mirko surveyed the fishermen with disfavour. They appeared to be preparing to molest the mermaid, at the very least. He had noticed a lack of refinement among the Paladrians before now; but even by their usual standards, this conduct appeared indecorous.

He turned away. This really was none of his affair, and he had seen injustices enough without needing to become involved in this one. *Help me!* sounded a voice in his head, and more insistently, *Please! Help me!* Was it the mermaid or his conscience? With a sigh he dropped his hand to his sword-hilt and stepped forward.

"Enough!" he called. "Let her go."

One of the fishermen turned around to face Mirko, while the other pinioned the mermaid to the shingle.

"What's it to you?" demanded the first, truculent and bristling.

"Let the mermaid go," said Mirko calmly. "I can't let you assault her."

The fisherman sneered. "And are you going to stop me?"

Mirko pulled his rapier from his sheath. "It looks very much like it."

Neither fisherman was armed, and they exchanged looks which suggested they recognised the futility of resistance.

"Why shouldn't we have her?" demanded the second. "She was caught in our nets, fair and square. It's the law of the sea."

Mirko, whose naval experience was by its nature extensive, knew of no custom which allowed casual rape of woman or mermaid. He took a step forward and pressed his sword-point against the man's throat. His companion, seeking to catch Mirko by surprise, lunged forward at Mirko's flank. The strategy, which would have been obvious to a child, ended in embarrassing failure as Mirko, with a scarcely discernible twitch, spitted the man in the side—a wound likely to prove uncomfortable but by no means fatal. He sank to the ground, red seeping through the hand pressed against the wound.

The second man stood and circled warily. Mirko casually feinted with his sword. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the mermaid edging her way down the beach with a kind of dragging crawl; she was not made for the land. Mirko kept his sword pointed at the fisherman until the mermaid had safely re-entered the water. Swimming out twenty or so feet, she seemed content to watch the proceedings from a safe distance.

The fisherman eyed Mirko steadily. "Are you going to use that?"

Mirko shook his head. "Take your friend. You've had a day every bit as memorable as you'd hoped. Be off with the pair of you."

The fisherman said nothing. He helped his comrade to his feet, slipped an arm around his waist, and together they made their way back off up the shore, bereft of both mermaid and any legitimate catch they might have made.

Mirko walked down towards the waves gently lapping at the beach. It was still early morning and a fog obscured the lighthouse which must be home to the mermaid. The mermaid stared wordlessly back at him, only her head and shoulders above the waterline.

"Are you all right?" called Mirko. "Do you need anything?"

But the mermaid made no response. She plunged beneath the surface, and Mirko could see only the wake of her tail as she swam back out to sea. *Thank you* said a voice in his head. Maybe the mermaids really could communicate in this way. A thought ran through his head: *mermaids always repay their debts*. He was not sure whether the mermaid herself had thought this, or whether it was another piece of Garganet folk-wisdom he had recalled. Since he was scarcely in a position to deliver an account to 'The Mermaids, c/o Morvellos

Lighthouse', the question was not one of more than academic relevance.

Mirko did not find himself in the mood for meaningful activity for the remainder of the day, and the evening found him nursing another mug of small beer at a quiet bench in the Waterside. It was in these surroundings that Mirko, whose social circle was somewhat limited, was sought by an unexpected visitor. Even in the dim light of the tavern, the man's attire clearly fitted him for a higher place in society. A cloak was a rarity in the Waterside; the silk blouse which it only partly covered was even more remarkable. Add in leather boots fitted to mid-calf and long rapier with jewelled hilt, and the impression was complete.

Mirko's surprise was complete when the man approached him with a crisp bow. "Captain Ascalon? I am the Noble Vavar Cascais, and I represent an important principal—the Elector Bartazan of Bartazan House, with whom you are no doubt familiar."

Mirko gestured negligently to a nearby vacant chair. "The term 'captain' is not strictly appropriate. It pertains to my previous employment in the Garganet navy and is not portable."

Cascais acknowledged the point with an indifferent wave. "The Elector is familiar with the details of your career. He would like to employ you to undertake some technical advice on galley management. Present yourself at the Arba Dock tomorrow at sunrise, before the vessel *Sapphire Light*. Funds will be provided."

Mirko raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Will you take a glass of ale, my friend?" He was conscious that his words were a touch slurred, a circumstance which would be unlikely to increase his stature with the patrician Cascais.

"My compliments to you, sir, but no thank you," replied Cascais. "Important affairs compel me; you need only follow your instructions."

Mirko felt no emotion stronger than a kind of puzzled indifference. But the word 'funds' had an undeniable allure to one in his circumstances, and perhaps the Elector Bartazan would commission important or stimulating work.

The next morning Mirko arrived at the rendezvous in good time, and looked over the galley *Sapphire Light*, clearly designed for ornament rather than warfare. Closer inspection revealed a 32-oar craft, of light but

seemingly durable construction—beyond a doubt, a racing galley. Mirko remembered that galley racing was a popular pastime in Paladria. Rich men—usually Electors—owned the galleys, and the populace cheered its favourites. Plenty of money changed hands.

Sapphire Light appeared a well-constructed vessel; Mirko's practised eye detected none of the immediate signs of neglect or shoddy workmanship. With a good crew and crisp handling, she would race with vigour and enterprise. The broad blue lateen sail appeared new and of decent quality. In its centre was a representation of a sapphire, the emblem of the House of Bartazan.

Mirko was so engrossed in his examination of the vessel that he did not notice the two men approaching him. Turning at the sound of footsteps he saw Vavar Cascais, and another, even more richly attired figure. This, he surmised, was Bartazan of Bartazan House, and he bowed with measured courtesy. Cascais laughed.

"This is Overseer Fenneker," he said quickly. "He controls the slaves, and will be glad to see the respect you give him."

Fenneker, a young man, handsome and dynamic, favoured Mirko with a smirk without returning his bow. "The famous Captain Ascalon. So you're the man to lick *Sapphire Light* into shape. This I must see."

Mirko nodded absently. Slaves? Of course—in Paladria free men would not lower themselves to row the galleys. The power for the racing galleys came from slaves—thirty-two on each ship, with a helmsman and an overseer to steer and maintain discipline, and one further slave to beat the drum which maintained the rowers' rhythm.

"My duties are not yet determined," he said. "I imagine they may extend to oversight of the overseer."

Fenneker laughed. "I think not. The overseer is the most important man on the galley. Your role will, I suspect, be rather more peripheral."

He broke off to bow low to a new arrival, dressed in workaday clothes—a loose white blouse and navy trousers. To exact such obeisance from Fenneker, this must be Bartazan of Bartazan House. Mirko engaged in a rapid scrutiny. The Elector was a powerful figure, robust and well-nourished and something above average height. His hair, receding at the temples, was black streaked with silver. He was an imposing figure—not a man to be taken lightly; nor, Mirko suspected, one to be trusted.

"Bartazan of Bartazan," said the new arrival, extending a hand with bluff vigour. "You must be Ascalon."

Mirko bowed and touched his sword hilt. "At your service, my lord."

"Jump aboard!" said Bartazan. "I saw you looking *Sapphire* over—as good a racing galley as we have on the ocean. We'll take her out this morning and I'll explain my requirements. And here are the crew."

Mirko looked back down the road to the dock, where a shambling group of thirty or so, generally lackadaisical and dressed only culottes and sandals, made its way to the dock under the largely unheeded encouragement from Vavar Cascais. They stepped spiritlessly across the gangplank and took up familiar stations at the oars. One of the slaves, smaller and sparer than the rest, carried a large drum and he set up towards the galley's stern.

Fenneker sat next to the man, while Vavar Cascais stepped aboard and took the helm. Bartazan motioned to Mirko and the pair stood on an observation platform some six feet above the deck.

Fenneker motioned to the drummer, who struck up a slow loud beat. The rowers began to move in time with the beat and *Sapphire Light* moved steadily away from the dock and onto the open water. The low sun dappled the calm sea, and Mirko felt again the satisfaction which came with being on the waves. Bartazan clapped him on the shoulder.

"This is the life, eh, captain? Nothing like a the pull of the oars and the smell of the brine."

"It's not quite what I'm used to," said Mirko. "*Sapphire Light* is a racing galley, much smaller than the Garganet vessels I was in. And I'm still not sure exactly why you've brought me here. Or how much you're going to pay me."

Bartazan laughed with a false heartiness. "I admire directness—up to a point at least. I have two ambitions; one is relevant to our business and the other is not. Have you heard of—"

Bartazan was interrupted by a grinding of oars; a lack of synchronisation between two rowers at the back of the boat had caused them to become entangled. Fenneker roared in outrage, whipped an unpleasant cudgel from his belt, and stepped forward to belabour the miscreants, seasoning the punishment with his curses.

Bartazan called out: "Fenneker, what are you at? The overseer is meant to oversee the crew. Why do they make such basic mistakes?"

"They are lazy and incompetent," called back Fenneker. "They just don't want to row. I'll show 'em the *snib!*"—this latter point illustrated by waving the cudgel, a stout stick with leather thongs.

Bartazan scowled. "Useless. Idle overfed lumps. They should be working at the smelter. As I was saying—are you familiar with the Margariad?"

"It's a galley-race, isn't it?"

"Rather say, *the* galley-race. In Paladria we love our races—and the Margariad is the biggest of all. The man who wins it nets a fortune; and he's never forgotten. I've never won the Margariad. Twelve times I've entered. Once I was second; one I was third. But I've never won."

The grinding of oars—again followed by strokes of the *snib*—punctuated the conversation once more. Mirko wondered what the other crews must be like to finish behind *Sapphire Light*.

Bartazan caught some of Mirko's thought. "This is the worst crew I've ever had. Fenneker's a good overseer, not too soft, and Cascais helms well enough. But the crew just doesn't have it. They all have sea experience—that's why I bought them—and a couple are even Garganet. But as a crew they're worse than useless. *Sapphire Light* is a marvellous boat—I've always used her in the Margariad. But I can't get close to *Dragonchaser*—that's Drallenkoop's galley. He's won it the past three years, and he helms himself."

"Do I see where this is going?" asked Mirko.

Bartazan gripped Mirko's arm. "I want to win the Margariad! And it must be this year. I don't have the time to lick this crew into shape myself—the life of an Elector is hard. But you could do it."

Mirko thought for a second. "I'm sure I could suggest some improvements to technique and training. But I don't know how far behind *Dragonchaser* you are. No guarantees—but pay me enough and I'll have a go."

Bartazan's eyes narrowed. "Certain things should be clear. I am Bartazan of Bartazan House—Elector today and who knows, Peremptor tomorrow. I don't haggle with a cashiered skipper and pimp."

"Fine," said Mirko. "I didn't ask for the job and I don't especially want it. I'm sure you can pick up any number of Garganet officers at the click of your fingers—although why you didn't do so originally is beyond me."

Bartazan scratched his chin. "Avarice is an unappealing characteristic. It's convenient to use you but not

essential. If you'll take 4,000 valut as a retainer and another 4,000 for winning the Margariad, the job's yours. I only negotiate with my peers; take it or leave it."

Mirko considered. It would take a lot of work—and many arguments—to make this crew viable. 4,000 valut was a decent sum but probably not commensurate with the necessary effort; and while 8,000 clearly was more attractive, the extra 4,000 would scarcely discommode Bartazan once he had the prize money for winning the race. Still, his current circumstances, while not destitute, fell well short of affluence, and he really had nothing better to do.

"I'll tell you when we're back ashore," he said. "For now I just want to watch the crew and the sea."

An hour and a half later the Arba Dock came back in to view. Mirko had enjoyed the quiet rhythm of the sea, although Fenneker's frequent blows and curses had upset his concentration, and Cascais' helmsmanship been erratic at times.

"Well," said Bartazan. "Certain rustiness aside, and apathy among the slaves, I felt a degree of encouragement in today's display. What is your own assessment?"

"May I speak candidly?"

Bartazan of Bartazan House frowned. "Candour is by no means the virtue the common mind believes it."

"I am unlikely to be able to recommend the improvements you require without a forthright assessment of current shortcomings," observed Mirko.

"Very well," said Bartazan with poor grace. "A brief overview of inefficiencies can do little harm."

"I would start by noting that the level of punishment used by Fenneker is both morally and practically deficient. No crew, free or slave, will respond favourably to such treatment. When we consider that the crew is clearly malnourished, denied sufficient rest—"

"Enough!" cried Bartazan. "Your comments go well beyond candour into the realm of personal abuse! In excoriating my overseer there is a clear implication that the judgement of his employer is likewise questionable."

Mirko shrugged. "You employ me to recommend improvements. In truth there are many apparent to the most casual inspection, and many more necessary if *Sapphire Light* is to rival *Dragonchaser*."

"That may be," said Bartazan of Bartazan House with significant emphasis, "but they are of no concern

to you; you may consider yourself discharged with immediate effect.”

“I doubt we could have established a productive relationship in any event,” said Mirko. “Your insensitivity to constructive criticism is equally likely to bar you from high political office.”

“You—”

“I may well take up my original option to act as overseer aboard *Dragonchaser*, where conditions are more liberal and the bow-waves more impressive.”

Sapphire Light returned to the dock in silence. At an adjacent jetty another racing galley was already docked, painted a striking scarlet and gold. The sail was dyed a deep red with a golden dragon at its centre, and the prow was carved into the head of a dragon. This, then, was *Dragonchaser*. Mirko vaulted from *Sapphire Light* and wandered across to scrutinise the vessel in more detail, his back ostentatiously to Bartazan of Bartazan House.

Down the gangplank of *Dragonchaser* came two men in earnest conversation. The younger, stripped to the waist in the hot midday sun, called over to Bartazan.

“Good morning, my lord! How goes it?”

Bartazan bowed infinitesimally. “Well, thank you, my lord Drallenkoop. Calm seas and strong strokes.”

Mirko uttered a caw of laughter ignored by both men. Drallenkoop appeared to take Bartazan’s claim at face value, but evinced no real interest in *Sapphire Light*’s performance. He returned to his conversation with the older man, whom Mirko took to be *Dragonchaser*’s overseer.

Mirko continued his examination of *Dragonchaser* while Fenneker disembarked the slaves in generally poor array. Bartazan and Cascais boarded a waiting open carriage drawn by two fine striders, which smartly made off towards Paladria New Town. Fenneker mounted a strider of his own and took the slaves off in another direction. None spared Mirko any attention.

Dragonchaser’s slaves, meanwhile, were disembarking in rather more disciplined order. While there was no levity, they appeared in high morale and well-nourished. Drallenkoop, noting Mirko’s presence, made his way over. Mirko noticed a man of early maturity, with short fair hair, a trim and tanned torso, and an air of negligent confidence. His clear blue eyes, delicate nose and crooked smile suggested a natural leader, flexible and resolute. Mirko imagined him to be a formidable commander of a racing galley.

“Well, fellow,” he called. “How do you like *Dragonchaser*? A bit of an improvement on *Sapphire Light*, eh?”

Mirko smiled. “The boat itself looks little different,” he said. “Your slaves are better disciplined and better nourished. Given a decent overseer and three months I imagine *Sapphire Light* might be a match for you.”

Drallenkoop laughed. “Maybe you’re right; maybe you’re not. But I know Fenneker—the worst overseer in the city. Maybe you’re his replacement?”

“I have no association with *Sapphire Light*. The Elector asked me aboard from some informal observations, which I made. I can’t imagine any further involvement.”

Drallenkoop laughed again—a sense of humour, or at least of irony, seemed a wellspring of his character. “I know who you are now! They said Bartazan was going to recruit some Garganet renegade, and now I’ve placed your accent. I take it Bartazan’s conditions didn’t suit.”

Mirko flushed. “‘Renegade’ is not a term I recognise in that context. I used to be with the Garganet navy; now I’m not.”

Drallenkoop made a mollificatory gesture. “My apologies, sir. Garganets are known for their mettlesome spirits. I like you already, since you seem to have commoded Bartazan. My father detests him above all men. Bartazan is set on becoming Peremptor in the summer—and that means ruin for my family if he makes it. All the more reason to beat him in the Margariad.”

“Paladrian politics are not something I follow closely.”

Drallenkoop took a long pull of water from a hide bottle, and passed it across to Mirko, who realised he was thirsty.

“It’s surprisingly simple,” said Drallenkoop as Mirko drank. “The Peremptor is the ruler of Paladria. His powers are virtually unlimited, and every five years the Electors meet to choose one of their number to fill the post. Bartazan of Bartazan House naturally aspires to this high estate. Twice already he’s allowed his name to go forward; twice he’s been rejected. Once more and he’s not allowed to stand again. Bartazan thinks, with good reason, that if he wins the Margariad his popularity will be so high among the people that the Electors won’t dare to oppose him. There’s a long rivalry between our families; my father, Koopendrall, is an Elector but commands little support. If Bartazan wins, he’ll destroy Koopendrall.”

“Not an attractive character.”

Drallenkoop laughed again. “He needs to win the Margariad first. You saw them out there this morning. I may not win this year; but *Sapphire Light* won’t beat me.”



Chapter 2

A week later Mirko made his way up a steep and winding path leading to a cliff above the Bay of Paladria. It was the morning of the Morvellos, the first race of spring. All of the main contenders for the Margariad would be in action, and Mirko was interested to see them in action from a high vantage point. Generally the population chose to watch their races from the dockside, and the cliff-top was almost deserted.

Mirko had become interested in the racing calendar and recognised several of the galleys jostling around the start line. Most conspicuous was *Dragonchaser*, her red and gold paint making her highly visible. *Sapphire Light*, chequered in dark and light blue, was some distance off: other notable craft were *Fanar’s Glory*, green and white; *Morvellos Devil*, twice second in the Margariad; and *Excelsior*, proud in silver and purple, and tipped to make a strong impact.

The sound of a powerful horn indicated the start of the race, and Mirko pulled out an eyeglass. *Dragonchaser* was baulked by *Morvellos Devil* at the start, and it was *Excelsior* who moved away most smartly, rather surprisingly followed by *Sapphire Light*. For ten minutes or so the two lead galleys duelled at the head of the field. *Dragonchaser* finally shook off the attentions of *Morvellos Devil*, but remained well behind the leaders, tucked in fourth place. *Sapphire Light* appeared to increase her speed in an attempt to pull around *Excelsior*. Just as she seemed to be on the verge of pulling ahead, two oars became entangled. The helm, presumably Cascais, attempted to steer clear of *Excelsior* to allow *Sapphire Light* to recover; but instead she swung wildly towards the lead boat. *Sapphire Light’s* port bank of oars enmeshed *Excelsior’s*, and both boats lost momentum. *Fanar’s Glory* and *Dragonchaser*, with much stronger momentum, bore down; *Dragonchaser* in particular made ground with astonishing vigour.

By the time *Excelsior* and *Sapphire Light* had disengaged, *Dragonchaser* had streaked past. Visibly demoti-

vated, *Sapphire Light* slipped back through the field. *Excelsior* made a game effort to catch *Dragonchaser*, but it was futile. *Dragonchaser* won by half a minute, with *Fanar’s Glory* well back in third. *Sapphire Light* trailed in seventh of the eight boats.

Mirko watched the race to its end, shaking his head ruefully at *Sapphire Light’s* ineptitude. While the money would have been useful, he doubted that the kind of improvements Bartazan had required would have been readily forthcoming. He would just have to carry on with his casual activities at the Waterside; indeed, it was probably for the best that he had no more to do with the galleys. The contrast with his former estate was too marked.

His mood of gloom continued into the evening. It was a quiet night at the Waterside. The doxies were out on the waterfront soliciting trade from the revellers enjoying the race festivities. The stale odour of the tavern offended him more than usual, and he took himself outside for some sea air. To his surprise he saw advancing towards him none other than Vavar Cascais.

Cascais was as richly dressed as ever, but his spirits seemed heavily subdued. Mirko remembered with the start of a smile that Cascais had been *Sapphire Light’s* helm that afternoon, and had not to his eye performed with any particular credit. His turn around the Morvellos Lighthouse at the halfway mark had been particularly inept.

“Ascalon,” he said. “The Elector would like to see you. Tomorrow evening. At Formello.”

“Formello?”

“His Lordship’s estate in the hills. I am not favoured with his confidence: however it seems unlikely he has any desire to be acquainted with you socially; therefore you may surmise he desires to discuss a business arrangement with you.”

“I hear he’s looking for a new helm for *Sapphire Light*.”

Cascais’s eyes flashed. “You are nobody, captain. Nobody.”

“I don’t recall claiming otherwise. But I can tell left from right, a useful quality in a helmsman.”

“I’ll collect you at six bars tomorrow. Be ready, and be presentable. There are likely to be persons of quality present.”

So it was in the evening of the next day that Mirko found himself accompanying Cascais aboard the rattlejack pulled by two galumphers along a well-

maintained road up into the hills above Paladria. Mirko, by no means awash with funds, had selected a simple outfit of black coat, shirt and breeches, a silver stock and belt. The garments, while by no means discreditable, were unlikely to commend him to the best society.

Cascais, in a rather better humour tonight, was somewhat more gaudily bedizened. His coat, with tails of impractically extravagant length, was canary yellow, creating a brave contrast with his orange blouse and deep green pantaloons. His shoes carried an affected curl at the toes which Mirko could not help but find amusing.

Looked at objectively, this was an important evening for Mirko. Bartazan clearly intended to reopen negotiations with him to take *Sapphire Light* in hand. Mirko found himself oddly indifferent. If Bartazan was willing to meet his price, well and good; if not he was no worse off. So resolving, he settled himself back in the rattlejack to enjoy the scenery. Cascais seemed to consider conversation beneath his dignity, and Mirko breathed deeply of the clean woodland air, crisp and sharp at this altitude above the city.

Eventually a looming castle came into view. The structure radiated no great warmth of spirit, but evinced an undeniable austere grandeur. Cascais became alert.

"This," he said loftily, "is Formello, the Elector's private estate. Tonight he holds a grand soirée, at which several other Electors and their families will be present. There will also be a number of important persons from the racing world. I cannot imagine the Elector will favour you greatly with his notice."

"You paint an impressive picture. Naturally I wonder how I come to have earned an invitation—and indeed it seems you must be a person of greater distinction than your popinjay manner would suggest."

Cascais chose not to respond, unless silence could itself be considered a response. Mirko was free to concentrate on the approach to Formello, an undoubtedly magnificent castle. Seemingly it had been designed originally with defence in mind, with great crenellated walls rising above a denuded approach. Anyone wishing to assault Formello would not do so by surprise.

The rattlejack came to a halt and the driver gave his hand to Cascais who climbed down gingerly, his freedom of movement somewhat hampered by the tightness of his garments and the impracticality of his footwear. Mirko vaulted to the ground rather than submit to such

indignity. A pair of footmen, faintly ludicrous in powdered wigs, issued from Formello and bowed low to Cascais and Mirko.

Cascais leaned forward and spoke quietly to Mirko: "Remember—this is Formello, where events may go with more punctilio than you expect. Do not obtrude yourself on the notice of the Electors, and you may acquit yourself without obvious buffoonery. Wait patiently until the Elector chooses to transact his business with you. Do not drink to excess in the interim; you will embarrass yourself—which may not be a rare event—but more importantly the Elector, and even in an indirect sense myself.

"You will see many women, the majority of whom will be rather comelier than you are accustomed to. Be assured that your attire would be sufficient to repel the lowliest of them, even before your uncouth manner. In this context any lewdness, familiarity or flirtation would be not merely unwelcome, but unutterably jejune."

"You suggest, then, that I should stand quietly in the corner, trying to avoid the notice of all society, until the Elector remembers why he invited me?"

"In essence, yes."

"I am puzzled as to how the Elector will be able to find such an invisible person among his guests under these circumstances."

"Pah! There is no helping some folk. Drink, belch, fart and rut as the mood takes you. It is all one to me."

The footmen silently escorted Mirko and Cascais across a long courtyard to the entrance into the main hall. From the inside came a sound of music, sober and dignified. Stepping inside, Mirko saw a large hall furnished in some luxury: the stone walls were covered with rich hangings and tapestries; divans and couches were arrayed liberally around the hall. A waiter in the Bartazan livery of dark and light blue—the Azure—handed Mirko a silver goblet filled with a sensuous red wine. With a wink at Cascais, he quaffed a handsome measure. The rich warmth soothed his throat; this was rather better than the Waterside could offer.

Somewhat to his surprise, Bartazan of Bartazan House appeared almost immediately. He wore a gold coat, silver breeches and a starched white shirt and soft white stock. To Mirko the effect seemed somewhat overdone, but he inwardly acknowledged that he was by no means an expert in these areas.

Bartazan of Bartazan House bowed to a fractional extent, making one gesture encompass both Mirko and Cascais. "Captain Ascalon! Welcome to Formello, which I hope pleases you."

"It is undoubtedly imposing. In truth it is not an honour I had been expecting."

Bartazan laughed. "Never let us be too certain. Hasty words were spoken when last we met. There are subjects I would explore with you later; for now I have guests to attend to. My fellow Electors will not be neglected. Allow me for now to introduce you to certain persons I hope you will find engaging. Cascais, perhaps you will attend to Captain Ascalon's comfort."

Cascais bowed without enthusiasm. With a hand on Mirko's elbow, Bartazan steered him to a less crowded corner of the hall, where conviviality already seemed to have full rein. Cascais appeared displeased, but Mirko, who had no desire to hobnob with the Electors, found the turn of events more satisfactory.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Bartazan urbanely, "allow me to introduce Mirko Ascalon, formerly of the Garganet navy. This is his first visit to Formello and I am sure you will make him welcome."

Mirko bowed to the company.

"Firstly," said Bartazan, "I am pleased to introduce Carnazan, my nephew. I am sure you will have much to discuss, as Carnazan has many interesting theories and ingenuities."

Carnazan smiled. He was slightly taller than the average, with red hair cut with no particular attention. His clothes were of good quality, but worn with a negligent disarray that suggested either fantastic vanity or its utter absence; Mirko suspected the latter.

"My uncle is too generous," said Carnazan deprecatingly. "I have an idea—some might say a mania—which I cannot persuade others to give serious consideration. No doubt I will bore you with it during the evening."

Mirko sensed a pleasing irony about Carnazan, whom he immediately liked. A very different man from his uncle . . .

"These," continued Bartazan, "are the famous brothers Raidis and Haidis. Raidis helms *Excelsior*, while Haidis is her overseer."

Mirko bowed. "I saw you in the Morvellos—I thought you very unlucky. You might easily have beaten *Dragonchaser*."

Raidis, tall and saturnine, shrugged. "If you saw the incident, you will appreciate there is little I can say, since both the owner and the helm of *Sapphire Light* are present. It would be undiplomatic to apportion blame for the collision while I am a guest at Formello."

Mirko laughed. "You need not do so, since I had already formed my own opinion. Cascais, what do you say?"

Cascais sniffed. "Collisions are a part of racing. Raidis need only to have kept his boat clear to have forged ahead. It is futile to blame *Sapphire Light*."

Haidis, almost identical to his brother but with an almost impenetrable gravity, merely looked at Cascais, who could not hold his gaze. Haidis would make a strange overseer, thought Mirko; not a flogger like Fenneker, but at least as intimidating. He doubted that *Excelsior's* fine performance had been a fluke.

"Now allow me to introduce my niece, Larien," said Bartazan, as a startlingly attractive young woman sauntered across. She closely resembled Carnazan, but in a rather different feminine guise. Her copper hair was artlessly gathered at the nape of her neck, and her dark blue dress, tight to the waist and flaring below, set off her complexion and figure to remarkable advantage. She held out her hand.

"I am charmed to meet you, sir," she said. "I adore the races, and I would very much like to hear your views of the Morvellos later."

Mirko bowed, although he could not remember if he had already done so. Larien was the kind of woman who had such an effect. "I would be honoured to do so, madam."

"Excellent!" she exclaimed. "You need not concern yourself with flattering the prospects of *Sapphire Light*. She may be my uncle's galley but her chances of any success this season are minimal."

Bartazan did not appear favourably impressed with Larien's artlessness—which Mirko suspected to be anything but. Quickly Bartazan steered Mirko away.

"Finally, may I present my wife Lady Inuela, who has of course lent her patronage to that noble galley traded by my niece."

Lady Inuela smiled and nodded her head to Mirko. She was a small, slight woman, somewhat younger than her husband, although her fair hair had some streaks of grey. She gave Mirko the impression of a merry disposition somewhat occluded by events. Her eyes were of such a dark brown as to be almost black. Apart from

Larien she would undoubtedly have shone to greater advantage; a sensible rather than a beautiful woman.

"Captain Ascalon will find much to discuss with you," said Bartazan. "Captain, my wife is an abolitionist, a position I believe you also espouse."

With that Bartazan was gone, leaving Mirko to clarify his position on slave-holding to the wife of a slaveholder; hardly a hospitable act.

Inuela looked up at Mirko questioningly. "Are you really an abolitionist?"

Mirko smiled. "No indeed. I made a remark to your husband that the condition of the slaves was a factor in the galley's poor performance in sea trials."

"I understand," she said, "that in Garganet galleys are crewed by free men."

"That's true," said Mirko. "In Paladria there seems to be a feeling that a free man is debased by pulling in oar; in Garganet he's ennobled by it. But we use our galleys to fight, not to race; and we still have our slaves—just not quite so many."

Inuela said: "I consider slavery a debasement of man's condition; but my views carry little weight in Formello."

"Or anywhere else, for that matter," interjected Larien with a smile at Mirko. "Certain ideas are simply too—recherché—to gain serious consideration."

Inuela flushed at her niece's outspokenness. For a fact, Mirko thought, her views bordered on the ridiculous: how could any society function without slaves? Who would do the work? Nonetheless, Larien showed little respect for her aunt. Inuela did not appear defenceless, however.

"Larien, my dear, there is something in what you say. Perhaps it also applies to your brother's monomania?"

Larien bridled, spots of colour rising to her cheek. "The situations are not comparable. Carnazan has conceived an idea of genius, which all those who should by family duty support, instead mock to his face."

Mirko, who enjoyed a catfight under normal circumstances, felt that this was not one of those occasions.

"My lord Carnazan," he said, "I hear so many oblique references to your 'idea'. Perhaps you might care to outline it?"

Both Inuela and Larien smiled, and looked at each other. No doubt they had been here before.

"I would welcome the opportunity to expand my theories!" said Carnazan. "Best of all, I will illustrate them! Aunt, Larien, do join us by the lake!"

Inuela made a polite demurral. "Other guests require my attention—and your idea is by no means novel to me."

Larien cried: "Yes! Let us show our seafaring friend the merits of your approach."

Carnazan bounded from the hall, and seeing Larien and Mirko proceed at a more sedate pace, rounded back on himself like a giant puppy.

"Let me ask you this, sir: have you ever felt the urge to soar high in the sky, like a kestrel or hawk?"

"Indeed, who has not yearned for such freedom?"

Carnazan had now led the party outside, and they were making for a small ornamental lake, presently deserted.

"If birds," he asked, "which are patently heavier than air, can fly, why cannot a man? In principle anything can be made to fly."

"I am not sure how such an outcome might be effected."

"Aha!" cried Carnazan. "Like all great ideas, the answer is simplicity itself. I have a brazier here burning throughout the day, giving off a splendid amount of hot air, all of which rises to the sky. We need only harness this air to enjoy a similar effect."

Mirko paused and rubbed his chin. "There may be some theoretical basis to your observation. However, how might the hot air in fact be 'harnessed'? How would the resultant construction be steered?"

Carnazan smiled, and with a grand gesture pointed to a small basket, to which was attached a kind of hood of sailcloth.

"This is only a prototype," he said proudly, smiling at Larien, who beamed back. "It is not yet large enough to bear the weight of a person; but put simply, the hot air from the brazier is captured in the sailcloth, and then carries the basket aloft as it rises."

Mirko thought for a moment. This was sheer buffoonery; Carnazan might not be actively mad, but at the very least his ideas lacked any kind of practicality. What kind of person would entrust their safety to such a mechanism. Common courtesy required a more encouraging response; but neither did he want to feed Carnazan's monomania.

"Your concept is nothing if not ingenious," he said. "Under ideal conditions it might perform as you suggest; but candidly I remain to be convinced of its practical applications."

Carnazan, evidently long accustomed to scepticism, did not appear especially perturbed. He picked up the basket—a tiny nameplate bearing the legend *Bartazan House Blue* was affixed to it—and held it carefully above the brazier. A gentle breeze was blowing and as luck would have it, and Mirko watched as the hot air slowly inflated the canopy. Slowly the prototype began to drift up into the air, watched by Carnazan, Larien and Mirko in silence, until it reached the limit of a rope Carnazan had attached. Gently he pulled *Bartazan House Blue* back to earth. He bowed to Mirko.

“You will see, sir,” he said, “that I applied no impetus of my own to the model. The heat of the air alone was sufficient to impel her. What do you say now?”

Larien looked expectantly at Mirko. “At the very least,” he said, “the theoretical basis of your concept appears to have been validated. I take it you now intend to construct a full-scale simulation.”

“Yes I do,” he said, “and I will tell my uncle of your endorsement this minute, since I require him to furnish the necessary funds.”

And without a backward glance he sprang off, leaving Larien and Mirko alone; a situation Mirko found he rather enjoyed. Larien sat gracefully on a bench by the lakeside and motioned to Mirko to join her.

“My brother is prey to enthusiasms,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “Some are foolish, some profound. In this instance I believe he has alighted on an idea with potential merit, certainly more practical than wind-powered rattlejacks or alchemical converters, both of which have occupied him in the past. The alchemical converter, in particular, smacked more strongly of the Old Craft than was prudent.”

“You appear very strongly attached to him,” said Mirko.

“My attachments are few,” said Larien. “But where I care, I care deeply.”

Mirko could think of nothing to say; consequently he held his counsel. After a short silence, Larien said:

“I understand my uncle wants to offer you a job. Make sure you milk him for everything; better still, go your way in peace. Few men emerge from their dealings with Bartazan of Bartazan House with profit.”

“He has not formally offered my any position yet.”

“He will, he will. He is desperate to win the Margariad; it would make his reputation overnight.”

“Maybe he will win—with or without me.”

Larien looked up sharply. “Never! Have you not seen *Dragonchaser*? The swiftest galley every built, and the best helm in Drallenkoop! He is an Elector’s son and he helms his own galley! What other man in his position would be so careless of his status? No-one will beat *Dragonchaser* this year; *Excelsior* is a good boat, but not in *Dragonchaser*’s class; while *Sapphire Light* will do well to avoid last place. My aunt will be mortified, and no more than she deserves.”

With that she sprang to her feet with something of Carnazan’s mercurial energy, and dashed away. Mirko shook his head and slowly followed.

The next morning, Mirko rose early in the guest chamber on an upper floor of Formello where he had passed a generally restful night. By and large Cascais would have been satisfied with his conduct: he had neither eaten nor drunk to excess, had engaged in a mild flirtation only with Lady Larien, and none at all with Lady Inuela. Taking advantage of quill and parchment, he set himself to write a letter, using a cipher known only to himself and one other person.

‘N’

You will be gratified to learn that the recent oversights which have affected your cause have largely been remedied. Last night I was a guest of Bartazan of Bartazan House at Formello where, as you predicted, he renewed his offer of employment. In accordance with your instructions I held out for what I considered to be appropriate terms: a 6,000 valut retainer, half payable in advance, with a further 12,000 valut payable upon victory in the Margariad. Needless to say, I do not expect to collect this latter sum; pursuant to our agreement, therefore, I will submit an account for this amount in the event that *Sapphire Light* does *not* win the Margariad.

I agreed to begin sea trials immediately, although Bartazan has not yet acceded to any of my proposals. With his existing crew, helm and overseer he can have no hope of winning the Margariad; even at her best, her level of performance is well below *Excelsior*, *Morvellos Devil*, *Fanar’s Glory*, and of course *Dragonchaser*.

I was unable to implement your further instructions. While a number of Electors were present—most notably Chiess-Vervario, Mompesson, Vilago and Solirat—I was not introduced to this section of the company and am unable to form an impression as to their voting intentions in any election this summer.

Since I am writing from Formello itself I will not tarry longer; please send the money to the usual address and I will respond in the normal way in due course.

My respects to your Ladyship,
'G'

Mirko sealed and addressed the envelope with satisfaction; soon he would expect to feel the chink of gold in his pocket, and obtained with minimal effort.



Chapter 3

A little less than a week later Mirko sat with Bartazan of Bartazan House, inconspicuous in dock labourer's garb, in a tavern of reasonable quality. Mirko, who had been afloat with *Sapphire Light* for three hours in the morning, drank deeply of his beer in between mouthfuls of hot pickled shellfish. Bartazan waited patiently for Mirko to finish the shellfish before beginning his questioning.

"You have had almost a week to assess the situation. What is your appraisal?"

Mirko paused for a moment. Candour had not been successful previously; for various reasons he could not afford to be discharged again. On the other hand, there were few positive conclusions that could be drawn from *Sapphire Light's* performance to date.

"My inclination would be stress the improvements which might be made, rather than to dwell on deficiencies encountered to date. I might easily set out a programme of reforms which would generate a significant improvement."

"Continue."

"The major problem concerns the condition of the crew. Frankly their diet is inadequate to the efforts they are required to undertake. Their performance would be further improved by sufficient rest in appropriate surroundings. My programme would therefore encompass the following: food of the standard you provide for your militia; no more than two hours' sea time per day, plus a further half hour's weight training; and a transfer away from Formello to a location more local to the docks."

"This appears a significant package of reforms!"

"It by no means constitutes the sum of my recommendations. I would further add—"

Bartazan set his tankard down with a thump. "That is sufficient—more than sufficient—for an initial programme. I must think long and hard about the advisability of such steps. Remember, I am a man of consequence in Paladria. What would become of my reputation if it became known that I was pampering my slaves?"

"My fairly innocuous suggestions would do no more than bring their condition into line with those owned by Drallenkoop; his reputation appears augmented by the success enjoyed by *Dragonchaser*."

Bartazan frowned. "Drallenkoop does not aspire to high political office. He need not concern himself with the opinions of the Electors."

"The choice is yours, my lord. Without, at the very minimum, the improvements I suggest, there quite simply no chance at all that *Sapphire Light* can perform creditably, let alone beat *Dragonchaser*. My retainer will be payable regardless, but I am keen also to secure my victory bonus."

Bartazan shook his head quickly. "Very well. I will instruct Fenneker to make the necessary arrangements."

Once Bartazan left, Mirko felt fairly well satisfied. Both Fenneker and Cascais lacked the skills and temperaments necessary for their positions; but if the slaves were better fed and rested their morale would improve, and with it their performances. Conceivably in such an environment overseer and helm might also acquit themselves more creditably.

While he reflected over another mug of beer at the rough wooden bench, Mirko felt a presence sit quietly beside him. Looking across, he saw 'N', a dark grey cloak covering a brown 'slave-girl' style blouse and black boots and breeches—typically eccentric garb. Mirko had never known what to make of her; her address was undoubtedly that of a gentlewoman; she was handsome without striking beauty, and probably several years past the bloom of youth. They had met perhaps four or five times, and Mirko was no nearer knowing who she was or who she represented. Her slight stature gave her an air of vulnerability which Mirko suspected was by no means accurate.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Long enough," smiled 'N'. "I thought it best not to interrupt your conversation with the Elector."

"You are very considerate," said Mirko. "I wonder too if my lord might have recognised you."

'N' smoothed a hair back from her forehead. "Wonder is your entitlement, although there's no money in it: whereas if you follow my instructions, you could find yourself yet more enriched."

"Go on," said Mirko, taking another pull at his beer.

At 'N's instructions they repaired to an ill-lit corner booth. Strands of 'N's fair hair caught in the weak light, but half of her face was occluded by shadow. Not for the first time, Mirko suspected she enjoyed these intrigues for their own sake.

"Now," she said. "You have one mildly hazardous engagement, and one potentially enjoyable one. And you're getting paid. I can't see a great deal for you to complain about."

"What's the job?"

"Firstly, I need you to go back to Formello." She slipped a folded paper across to him. "That's a map of the castle." She unfolded the paper and pointed out several locations. "In this room Bartazan keeps his 'special' correspondence. There is one letter in which he and Chiess-Vervario discuss methods for suppressing a certain person. Both Bartazan and Chiess-Vervario would be discommoded were this information to become public knowledge—to the corresponding enjoyment of those who would relish their discomfiture."

"How do you know all this?"

"I just do," said 'N' with a disarming smile. "It's my job to know things. In this case it's yours to find them out. More detailed instructions are encrypted here," and she passed a small envelope across.

"You mentioned another assignment."

"Ah, yes!" said 'N', and permitted herself a light laugh. "How did you like Larien?"

Mirko paused for thought. "Very beautiful. Seemingly intelligent. All in all, she created a favourable impression."

"I'm sure she did. What if I told you that she was keen to make your further acquaintance?"

"In truth, I appeared to make little impact on her. She seemed to enjoy discussing the Morvellos, and her brother, with me, but I detected no signs of overt interest—and believe me, I looked."

"Not hard enough, it seems. Take it from me: I know (don't ask how) that she would be delighted to see you, and not simply because you were polite about Carnazan's ideas."

Mirko shook his head. "You are a strange woman, 'N'. You talk large, and in the main your observations prove to be accurate; but how you find out these things . . ."

'N' pursed her lips with something of the asperity she employed when Mirko fished too obviously for information. "I have many informants. I work for a powerful man. Finding things out really is very easy; you simply ask someone who knows the answer to the question you're interested in. You should try it."

"So if asked you how you knew Larien wanted to see more of me?"

"I wouldn't tell you, of course. You have to be a little more subtle sometimes. You'd have to ask something else; I'd evade answering that question, but give away the answer to what you're really interested in. Candidly, men rarely have that kind of finesse, and you appear no different."

Mirko merely raised his eyebrows.

"Now, you have your instructions: get me that correspondence, and pay a little call on Larien. You may even save yourself rattlejack fare if you combine the two errands."

Stepping briskly from the booth, 'N' was gone, leaving Mirko as confused as normal after their meetings.

The next morning Mirko made his way to Formello to supervise the transport of the slaves to Urmalest, the town barracks employed by Bartazan. Satisfied that Fenneker appeared to have the task in hand, he decided that he had a suitable occasion to pay a social call on Larien, much as he doubted the advisability of 'N's advice. Hailing a rattlejack from the waterfront, he used the journey to compose himself for the tasks ahead.

To his surprise Larien appeared almost immediately he had presented himself to Kanspiris, Bartazan's factotum. Attired today in a light brown dress which nicely set off her hair and complexion, she greeted Mirko with every appearance of cordiality.

"Captain Ascalon! How good of you to leave your administrations to call upon me. Please, refresh yourself!" she said, handing over a goblet of a pale liquid which Mirko found heady but not unpleasant.

"I enjoyed our conversation on my last visit to Formello," he said as the pair walked down a shady path towards the back of the estate. "I thought I might chance to call upon you."

Larien smiled to reveal charming dimples. "My brother will have been sorry to miss you. He was highly gratified by your support for his concept."

"My support was purely on the theoretical level," he said. "I still misdoubt the practicability of his plans."

"Well," said Larien, "on the basis of your observations, Carnazan has secured funds from my uncle to enable a small prototype to be built. I am sure he will invite you to its first trial—and of course I should be delighted if you could come."

Mirko was surprised at the level of cordiality Larien showed throughout their conversation. Perhaps she really did entertain a partiality for him; one she must have confided to someone else, for 'N' to have come by her information. Mirko saw no harm in responding warmly.

"My lady," he said. "My previous experience of Formello was all too fleeting. I would be honoured if a trusted servant, or even Kanspiris, could give me a tour of the building."

"Kanspiris!" she exclaimed in a high clear voice. "I will show you myself! Let us begin immediately."

For the next hour or so Larien conducted Mirko around the cool splendour of Formello. Mirko was quickly able to orient himself to 'N's map, and tried to formulate a plan to gain access to Bartazan's private apartments. High in the castle, and away from the guest areas, it seemed unlikely that there would be extensive security.

"Are your own apartments nearby?" asked Mirko, hoping to avoid the leer which sometimes marred his countenance in these circumstances.

"Why yes they are!" laughed Larien. "All of the 'family' live in this wing. Let me show you!"

Larien was undeniably an attractive woman, thought Mirko. Her pale blue eyes sparkled with barely suppressed vitality. Mirko's experience of the secret agents' trade was limited; but he had rarely imagined it to be so easy or so pleasurable. While to a certain extent it was possible to attribute his success to date to strong mental powers and innate charm, Mirko felt that events were moving with a suspicious facility. He really would need to question 'N' a little more closely the next time they met.

Larien's apartments were furnished with a largely understated good taste, the furniture well-designed and constructed, and wall-hangings of quiet distinction blending into the background. One intricate tapestry

depicted a galley race; the profile and colouring of *Dragonchaser* were discernible, but most of the other craft were indistinguishable.

"A present from Koopendrall to my uncle," laughed Larien. "Drallenkoop had just won the Margariad for the first time and Koopendrall commissioned a series of these tapestries, showing *Dragonchaser* trouncing all comers. They were all presented to vanquished rivals. I don't know what happened to the others; this one I rescued from the dung-heap."

"Was not your uncle vexed at your conduct?"

"Why, yes he was, since you ask. Since this was the main point of the episode from my point of view, I was well satisfied. In time I came also to like the tapestry, which is exquisite. Look at the detail with which the artist has rendered *Dragonchaser's* slaves! It was an expensive act of bravado from Koopendrall."

Mirko nodded. At this moment Kanspiris appeared with a pregnant cough.

"Excuse me, my lady. Vavar Cascais presents his compliments and begs to remind you of your appointment."

Larien's mouth drooped in clear displeasure. "I confess to overlooking my obligation. Kanspiris, please convey my apologies to Cascais and tell him I will join him directly in my uncle's parlour."

Kanspiris bowed and went his way. Larien smiled apologetically. "I am sorry—I had asked Cascais to call on me to discuss some clothing, and I had forgotten. If you care to wait here, I will be no longer than an hour; feel free to refresh yourself, or sample my collection of books."

Mirko bowed. "Please do not let me detain you! I am happy to relax in such congenial surroundings."

Larien gave a grateful smile, and hurried from the room.

Engaging as Larien's company had been, Mirko felt that her absence represented an excellent opportunity to satisfy his other objective. 'N's instructions had guaranteed that Bartazan would be from home, and Mirko stepped briskly down the corridor and through the arras into Bartazan's private quarters.

Mirko was surprised by the comparative austerity with which the apartment was furnished. For Bartazan, this was clearly a place of work rather than relaxation. One chair, sturdy but by no means luxurious, faced a solid unpretentious wooden desk. Two walls were lined with unimposing wooden cabinets which Mirko sur-

mised to be the location of Bartazan's compromising papers. Mirko knew that the item he required would be filed under 'C' for 'Chiess-Vervario', and so it proved. He extracted an item and swiftly scanned it to ensure it was the right document:

Under the Grand Seal of Bartazan
At Formello
The 14th Day of May, Second Peremptorate of Medina,
Fourth Year

My Lord Chiess-Vervario,

I am pleased to report that the person who has so vexed you has been apprehended and now finds himself immured in the Lower Dungeon at Formello. I perform this favour as a token of the great esteem in which I hold the House and Electorate of Chiess-Vervario, and no reward is necessary.

Naturally I appreciate that any whisper of this deed, or the release of a certain person into society, would cause considerable embarrassment to me, and of course to yourself. In retaining his custody I thereby insure us both against censure. I am sure you will be conscious of this minor sacrifice at the appropriate time.

I remain your steadfast friend,
Of Bartazan House, Bartazan

This was clearly the right document: while it hardly meant ruin for Bartazan, his standing with the Electors would not be enhanced by the illegal incarceration of prisoners in his dungeons. Mirko wondered who the 'certain person' was; presumably a person of consequence, since no-one would be concerned at the detention of a nonentity. Regardless, 'N' would be well pleased.

Mirko heard a sound behind him; immediately he dived into the nearest room within the suite, which as luck would have it, proved to be a bed chamber. Crouching behind Bartazan's couch with a distinct lack of dignity, he saw two sets of male ankles move past and into a reception chamber. From here Mirko could hear all that occurred but see nothing.

"So," said a voice Mirko recognised as Bartazan's, "what do you have to report?"

"The Fanarites continue to search with vigour," said the second voice, cool and relaxed. "They suspect Chiess-Vervario of complicity in the deed. Soon, I think, they will conclude that Chiess-Vervario has had

him killed. At no stage has the potential involvement of the House of Bartazan been mooted."

"Good, very good," said Bartazan. "You have done very well, and as long as we hold such a powerful counter, Chiess-Vervario's vote is secure. What of the other Electors?"

"Medina remains assured of seventeen votes from his adherents, such as Sarindorp, and those implacably opposed to yourself, such as Koopendrall. Those naturally of your party amount perhaps to twelve, and if we add in Chiess-Vervario and Vilago we arrive at fourteen. I cannot imagine Mompesson seriously supporting Medina under the circumstances, which brings us to fifteen. That makes thirty-two votes essentially decided, with sixteen remaining. Of those we require ten. It's still in the balance."

"Is it not? Is it not?" asked Bartazan softly. "If we win the Margariad, the waverers will have to back me; they will not stand against the people. If not, we may have to unearth a few secrets . . . Tell me, how does Ascalon shape up?"

"He will win no prizes for harmony. Fenneker loathes him, Cascais thinks him a buffoon. I see no discernible improvement in the sea trial performance. The Hanspar Regatta is tomorrow and we will learn more then."

"I tell you," said Bartazan, "Ascalon may yet surprise you. He was an exceptional commander in Garganet."

"Maybe," said the second voice. "But if I were you I'd try to get those votes before the Margariad."

"Thank you again for your efforts. Kanspiris will have something for you on your way out."

The second man left the room, leaving Bartazan alone. Mirko hoped he would soon move, since he was becoming uncomfortably cramped. Unfortunately, Bartazan stepped across, pulled a bell-cord, and came into the bed chamber itself. Mirko, wedged into a corner, could see only a ceiling painted with martial scenes.

Mirko recognised the voice of Kanspiris, who presumably had been on hand nearby to give Bartazan's informant his *douceur*.

"My lord?"

"Ah, Kanspiris! Do you have the Menstrual Register to hand?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Ansifer, Culyrama, Locapeste: which of these is currently clean?"

"Both Ansifer and Locapeste are available for your requirements, my lord."

"Good, good! Send up Ansifer, no wait—send up both! I find myself in the mood for diversion tonight."

Mirko, who might also have welcomed diversion, did not find the notion of being an unwilling voyeur to Bartazan's orgy an appealing one. Nonetheless, he doubted that he possessed the sang-froid simply to emerge from his concealment, and saunter from the chamber. Bartazan, after all, was his employer, and was unlikely to take a positive view of Mirko's espionage. 'N's instructions had been insufficiently precise in dealing with such situations. No doubt she would enjoin him to fall back on his natural resource.

Bartazan settled himself back on his couch to await the arrival of Ansifer and Locapeste. Mirko eased himself by inches under the couch, so that he would no longer be visible to anyone walking around the room. Shortly two sets of ankles appeared in his vision, both trim and evidently female; Mirko hoped that they would make short work of easing Bartazan's lusts.

The period that followed remained in Mirko's memory as an ineradicable nightmare of infamy. The pounding of the couch immediately above him, the shrieks of ecstasy, the groans of satiation, all forced themselves into his consciousness with a grotesque vigour. Just when all seemed completed, Bartazan rose from his couch and chased Ansifer and Locapeste around the room with renewed energy. Mirko hoped that neither would think to feign concealment under the couch; he doubted that he could find an emollient conversational gambit adequate to the situation.

Fortunately Bartazan was able to subdue his playmates without need for under-couch frolics. After his late flourish, Bartazan dismissed Ansifer and Locapeste, and soon, to Mirko's relief, fell into a deep and audible sleep. Mirko admired his stamina, and felt that such rest was well earned. Moving slowly and quietly he left the apartments, and made his way back to Larien's.

Mirko was by no means surprised to find that Larien had returned during his absence. "My apologies, my lady," he said. "I became restive in your absence and explored a little."

"Well," said Larien, "I forgive you this time. Would you like to stay awhile?"

Mirko had his own ideas as to what 'stay awhile' meant in this context. Normally he would have been happy to explore the possibilities, but his recent expe-

rience under Bartazan's couch had somewhat dampened his ardour. With a polite excuse and fulsome thanks for Larien's hospitality, he made his down to the main gate and, desperate for exercise, walked down the long hill to Paladria Old Town.



Coralia

by *Till Noever*

Chapter 22

Will Corwin had accepted the assignment to Coralia with a thrill of anticipation; especially since his wife, Clara, was a native Coralian and suffered recurring bouts of an acute kind of home-sickness which occasionally made her life on Earth quite difficult.

Gart Finisterre was assigned to the same post. Will Corwin welcomed the pairing. They had been friends for many years and had similar research interests, which, so Will Corwin guessed, was the reason why they were assigned to Coralia. The office of ‘scientific liaison’ was the title given to a cautious collaborative agreement between GenSpac and the Coralians—meaning the Squire—whose stated purpose was to shed further light on the nature of the mystery of the gnarls and the whole issue of A-space navigation. The ultimate aim—or so the agreement said—was to increase the scientific knowledge about the process which made nav-zombies act as living compass-needles in the chaotic swirls of A-space.

A laudable goal, promising only good things—if one were to believe the official propaganda. Will Corwin and Gart Finisterre, though they had been around for long enough to appreciate the nature of hidden agendas, nonetheless nourished the hope that they might contribute significantly to an understanding of one of the great scientific mysteries of current times. A staff of twenty research scientists would be at their disposal: ten Coralians and ten supplied by GenSpac. There would also be a Coralian scientific officer and a ‘liaison’ person, whose main purpose it would be to ‘facilitate’ the interactions between the outsiders—meaning the Earthlings—and the Coralians.

Upon arrival on Coralia the men quickly found that the touted collaborative effort was a sham. ‘Collaboration’ did not seem to cover the covert obstructionism of the Coralians.

Of course, superficially everything appeared as if it were as it should be. The laboratories were housed in a sophisticated facility just outside Tyre, which provided

state-of-the-art equipment and support. It was the the site where, almost a hundred standard years before, the old labs had been completely destroyed in a major conflagration, causing extensive loss of life.

Despite the modern facilities it soon became clear to Will Corwin and Gart Finisterre that the Coralian scientists not only had no interest in making new discoveries, but that their main function was to either impede the efforts of the Earthlings or to ensure that whatever was discovered would instantly be reported back to the Squire.

When reporting on the state of affairs back to GenSpac, however, Will and Gart were told to behave as if unaware of the situation. Fuming at the brush-off, they got together and decided to institute their own lines of research and run them in parallel to and separate from what they did officially. Not an easy task, given the spying that was going on, but they tried anyway.

“I’m not going to sit here for years and years,” Gart Finisterre declared, “and do nothing.”

“But we’ve got to *pretend* to do nothing,” Will pointed out. “Or they’re going to throw us out. That’s the last thing we want. We’ve got an incredible opportunity here. Let’s not waste it by being careless.”

Will Corwin and Gart Finisterre were a good team: the kind where ideas spark fireworks and great things are done. Playing themselves off against each other—the idea-generating Finisterre against the inspired experimentalist Corwin—they soon eliminated from their considerations a whole host of red herrings pursued by generations of scientists before them.

It was Finisterre who laid the foundation for solving the riddle of gnarl juice.

“Look at this!”

Will Corwin studied the map on the display.

“What have we got here?”

“Something I reconstructed from the pathetic database they provide us with.”

Gart Finisterre traced the coastline of Coralia Isle, lying off the Hunge* coast, and the sole place on the planet—and probably in the universe—where gnarls grew.

“Here is the distribution of gnarl trees. And here,” he caused another set of patterns to be overlaid on the map in semi-transparency, “the distribution of gnarl

* Coralia’s largest continent, containing almost all human habitation.

size—which also happens to be proportional to yield per unit mass. What do you see?”

Will Corwin shrugged. “A definite peak on the eastern side of the isle?”

“Exactly.”

“So?”

“Why’s there a peak?”

“The soil?”

“Would you expect soil conditions to vary this continuously?”

Will Corwin considered the map. “Hmmff . . . The winds are mostly from the east.”

“Interesting,” Gart Finisterre agreed,

Some days later the Corwin’s and the Finisterres went off on an excursion along the Hunge coast. They stopped at Twisted Tree Point, a craggy, narrow outcrop, the remnant of a lava flow from an aberrant volcanic event in the distant past, which jutted boldly almost a kilometer into the ocean from the otherwise smoothly-sculpted Hungarian coastline. At the end of the access track an area had been cleared for the purposes of relaxation and picnicking. Here stood a group of four roughly-hewn, weather-beaten wooden tables with attached benches, placed there by an unknown agency—conceivably the CTB*—arranged in a haphazard pattern on an area of ground cleared of major debris and the scattered rocks that ringed it. Access to the area for visitors using ground-vehicles† was by a twisted spur of narrow gravel road, branching off the main coast road, which, if the truth be told, wasn’t wider either.

Beyond the tables a short path led to the outer point. Here, leaning against the fragment of a fence, the visitor could stare down into a dizzying cleft hollowed out over the eons by the waves thundering into the grotto they were still in the process of carving out. Geysers of spray shot high in the air from several vents carved by incessant erosion. Every now and then a particularly well-timed wave crashed into the grotto with such force that the ground shook. Off to one side, surrounded by an irregular ring of eight blow holes, stood

a lone Saptak tree. Its spiral trunk, bent into a westerly slant by the constant easterlies, emerged from a multi-fingered root system which had firmly anchored itself in the soft pumice rock, and was crowned by a sparse system of branches with their hairlike cover of short needle-leaves.

Twisted Tree Point, despite its indisputably picturesque aspects, provided little that couldn’t be found on other planets as well. As a consequence, tourist visitations were few and far between. Earth had uncounted beautiful spots like this, and people didn’t come to Coralia to see things they could enjoy elsewhere, but to circumnavigate Squire’s Isle and to ogle, be it from afar, the outlines of the gnarl plantations. There was a morbid element in this voyeurism. It was common knowledge that the Squire—in a bid to squash any thought of a takeover by governments and certain interest groups alike—had mined every single gnarl on the island, and could blow the whole plantation to smithereens at a moment’s notice. The knowledge that mankind’s position as a space-faring species depended critically on this one little island and the lumpy, twisted, gnarls trees covering it from end to end, exerted a certain somber fascination. The idea that, given the right circumstances, within a few short fateful seconds mankind’s walk among the stars could be reduced to a crippled and uncertain crawl, just like it had been at the outset, only enhanced the allure of the place. Tour guides gleefully exploited these elements to their fullest and whipped the visitors into paroxysms of a delicious kind of existential *angst*.

Gart Finisterre alluded to this as he and Will Corwin stood at the edge of the chasm and watched the waves pound into the grotto below them.

Will Corwin looked thoughtful and said nothing. Behind them, the blow-holes erupted, sending multiple plumes of spray into the air. Will Corwin followed the path of the dispersing mist as it was driven inland by a brief gust of wind.

“I wonder,” he muttered pensively.

Gart Finisterre had turned to look back at their wives and children. The women were strolling around the area, chatting, while Jack and Claury sat at one of the tables, on the same bench, and making no secret of their very obvious closeness by leaving no free space between them. Indeed, as Gart watched, Claury leaned her head on Jack’s shoulder in a brief gesture of affection. Will’s son glanced at her sideways, smiling and

* ‘CTB’: Coralia Tourist Bureau; an agency whose purpose was a curious combination of tourist promotion and surveillance.

† Ground-vehicles were in extensive use on Coralia, despite the associated economic and logistic overheads. Only the security agencies were allowed use of flitzers, and even for their operatives the areas of access were strictly circumscribed.

saying something the men couldn't hear because of the roar of the sea. Whatever it was, she liked it, because she slid even closer, and Jack put an arm around her shoulder.

Gart Finisterre nudged Will Corwin. "What do you think?"

"Eh?" Will Corwin took a moment to readjust his focus.

"Claury and Jack."

Will glanced at the two youngsters. "No doubt about it." He looked at his friend. "That's all right with you and Thea, I hope?"

"Of course! Even if it weren't, do you really think we could stop them?"

"I doubt it."

Both laughed.

Another breaker crashed into the grotto and moments later the blow-holes erupted with prodigious fountains of spume.

Will Corwin directed his friend's attention to the display. "Here's at least one difference: the eastern side of the Isle will be blanketed with spray. Sometimes it's like a fog sitting in the bays on that side. Of course, the concentration will fall off further toward the center."

Gart Finisterre squinted at the geysers. "A continuous decline . . ."

"Yeah."

Later, back at the lab they inspected the map again.

"We should run some models of spray distribution."

"Excellent idea."

Less than an hour later Will looked up from his interface terminal. "You'll love this," he told Gart.

"The model for airborne spray deposition matches the growth pattern exactly."

Gart Finisterre nodded slowly. "This may be it."

"Not a word to anybody!" Will warned.

"I just look stupid," he friend told him.

Their attention shifted to the ocean. Not officially, of course. This was a clandestine part of their research, and they made sure that any outputs from their simulations were immediately wiped from the institute's computers. They transferred encrypted versions into memory tabs, which they managed to smuggle out of the institute precinct and hide in various places, usually on other outings across the Hunge countryside. The whole affair had a melodramatic air about it, but both had a hunch that they had discovered something

that not even Coralians knew about—and that there would be some serious stone-walling of the researchers' efforts if they found out.

"They don't *want* to know," Gart Finisterre asserted. "I know it sounds stupid, but it's the truth."

"Why not?" his wife asked him.

"Because knowledge is dangerous. Because the more we know, the more it's likely that someone somehow is going to find out what makes gnarl juice so special, and that'll be the beginning of the end for the Squire's monopoly."

"But if only the Coralians knew . . ."

Gart Finisterre shook his head. "Knowledge—and that's one thing I suspect the Squire appreciates—is something which ultimately cannot be contained. You can keep it locked up for a while, but sooner or later there'll be a crack in the safe. And then all hell breaks loose.

"No—the main aim of these people is to make sure that we discover nothing worthy of consideration."

"But then why this whole sham of cooperation between GenSpac and the Squire?"

Gart Finisterre shrugged. "Window dressing; a pacifying exercise; political shenanigans; obfuscation."

The Corwins and the Finisterres rented a ten-meter motor cruiser and, with due permission, went for a day's pleasure cruise along the coast. They gave the Isle a wide berth in order not to attract attention, but to someone tracing their course it would have become apparent that there was a pattern in the boat's progress and that its path systematically covered a broad band of water to the east of the Hungian coastline. They returned with a wealth of surface and depth flow patterns and a mass of chemical data from a small home-built sensor array, which they had trailed at different depths behind the boat. From these data Gart Finisterre reconstructed a dynamic and chemical image of the ocean outside their door.

The day after their outing it became clear that someone had taken notice of their progress. Their Coralian 'liaison', a certain Tril Wumford, who had taken pains to become personally acquainted with both families even outside the laboratory, commented on their trip.

"A long day, cruising forth and back out there. Did you find what you were looking for?"

Will Corwin looked at him quizzically. "It was a lovely day. We all got ourselves thoroughly cooked, ate

and drank a lot, and enjoyed the novel sensation of having absolutely nothing to do.”

Tril Wumford, a large man who carried his excess weight with remarkable grace, wagged his head. “Hard to believe you’d enjoy that kind of thing.”

Will Corwin laughed. “It was the kids’ idea and just for once I’m glad we listened to them. We should be doing much more of this.”

There the matter had rested—or so it appeared. Will Corwin and Gart Finisterre, wary of their guardians, had proceeded with the analysis of the samples and the physical ocean data. Some weeks and considerable—and clandestine—effort later they faced an astonishing result. The ocean current sweeping up the coast from the south formed a large, lazy whirlpool just east of the Isle. The same current, a narrow strip of flow only about two kilometers wide, also brought with it a substance which was not present in any of the samples of water taken well outside the limits of the current.

“We have to map the gradient in more detail,” Will Corwin insisted. “And we need an actual water sample.”

Gart Finisterre agreed. “We have to go for another cruise. This time down the coast.”

“So soon? The Coralians! They’ll suspect *something*.”

“We could send the kids. They’ll jump at the occasion for a day on their own.”

Will laughed. “They already spend more time with each other than your average bonded couple.”

“We’ll have to tell them *something* about what we’re doing.”

“It’ll add some extra spice to the trip.”

“They won’t need it!”

Gart raised an eyebrow. “You think . . .”

“Do you mind?”

“How could I?”

“Pause playback,” Jack said.

He and Claury looked at each other. “So that’s what they were doing,” she said thoughtfully.

Jack chuckled. “What a pair of rascals,” he said affectionately. “Using their own kids to deceive the Coralians.”

Claury smiled. “It was a lovely day,” she said dreamily.

Jack gave her an affectionate squeeze. “It was. I remember it well.”

“I certainly hope so!” she said laughingly.

Jack looked at Will Corwin’s frozen features on the UnIfac’s display.

“Continue playback.”

Jack and Claury, full of their own importance and determined to be responsible and not do anything foolish—except to make best use of the autopilot and the open-deck recliners—had cruised ten kilometers up the coast and then back down again. The data from the trailing sensors not only confirmed their fathers’ suspicions but served to locate the source of the mysterious chemical. Its concentration increased steadily as the boat progressed—until, about eight kilometers up the coast, all traces of it suddenly vanished.

“There it is,” Gart Finisterre said triumphantly. “Now they’re upstream from it.”

Will Corwin felt a surge of excitement. “Want to know what I think?”

“What?”

“Just a hunch, but I think the source of the gnarl effect lies in the ocean.” Will held up a vial with a water sample. “I want to look at this stuff under a scanner. Something in here turns people into living compasses—and I want to know what it is.”

“Using the scanner *will* attract attention.”

“I know. Well, we’ll have to finagle something. . .”

They thought they got away with it, but they didn’t. Nothing was said, of course, but there were certain disquieting signs; suggesting that attention was being paid to their actions.

“From there on,” Will Corwin’s image said, “things started going downhill—and not just with the Coralians. GenSpac were sending out signals both Gart and I find disturbing. When we sent an outline of our findings to our coordinator on Earth, we thought they’d be thrilled. This knowledge would place GenSpac in a very advantageous position. The dependency on nav-zombies and gnarl juice will probably come to an end. Even Pilots may become a thing of the past. Coralia crystals. . .”

Will Corwin made a quick gesture. “I’m getting ahead of myself. . .”

“We analyzed the water. We finally isolated the agent that gave us the strange readings. It is a crystalline substance, composed mostly of silicon and carbon,

plus a variety of trace elements such as zinc, selenium, and iron.

"We've called them 'Coralia Crystals'. The elements comprising them have never been found in this particular molecular configuration anywhere else. There's only one known source—and that's a unique hunk of rock at the bottom of the sea just off the Hungian coast. As far as we have been able to reconstruct, the crystals are washed off by the ocean and blow with the spray across the Isle. The gnarls absorb them—probably from the air.

"However, in gnarl juice, however, there is no trace of Coralia Crystals—not of stable ones. But there are localized molecular configurations which give rise to structures that look like—and indeed may be—Coralia Crystals. These just fade into and out of existence. Gart and I have concluded that the crystals are absorbed into the intracellular fluid of the gnarls, which provides them with an environment allowing them to exist in this strange state of half-existence.

"The same thing happens when Coralia Crystals are dissolved in human cerebrospinal fluid, which is chemically related to gnarl juice.

"Coralia Crystals are fragile entities. They retain their integrity only in a limited range of temperatures and media—like the cellular fluids of gnarls, CSF, and maybe others. Their half-life in other environments is usually of the order of hours or days. Long enough to get washed into the whirlpool on the eastern shore of the Isle, and into the surf and the spray—to be finally absorbed by a gnarl.

"We think that the crystals are responsible for the 'human compass' effect. If a suspension of them is left alone and undisturbed, they tend concentrate on the side of the container facing the location of the rock which is their source.

"This effect is not restricted to normal space. The attraction of Coralia Crystals to their place of origin reaches through A-space and obeys the laws applying there—meaning that it propagates without measurable delay, like quantum correlations, and that it does not attenuate with distance.

"There's no theory to account for that kind of effect. We may be looking at a whole new area of biophysics.

"Given the chemical composition of these crystals, it should be possible to incorporate them into organomolecular computing devices. All we have to find is a suitable chemical environment. Gart's started some

simulations to investigate this further. If there are any results soon you'll find them on this tab."

Will Corwin leaned forward, his face animated, eyes gleaming. "Do you understand what that would mean? No more nav-zombies. No more Pilots. Not just a few hundred individuals on whom we must rely to guide us. Not just a handful of ships cruising between the stars—but thousands and tens of thousands. Smaller ships; not just the expensive giants produced by GenSpac and Allied Engineering."

Will Corwin paused, his gaze faraway. "Maybe that's why GenSpac are so lukewarm about our findings. Some people up in the hierarchy may fear that it'll spell the end to their monopoly."

Jack's father gazed at the pickup lens again. "Gart and I are worried about what's going to happen—especially to us and our families. We have this uneasy feeling that neither side—meaning the Coralians and our employer—like us much these days: the Coralians because they suspect us of snooping around where we shouldn't have—which is quite correct, because that's what we did—and GenSpac because they just might not be all that enamored with their future prospects if this gets out.

"I had a long talk to Tril Wumford yesterday—about nothing important really: technicalities and stuff—but he said some things that could be taken as warnings.

"Sometimes I wonder about Tril. There's no doubt that he's a member of the Squire's Corps. But he's also become a friend of sorts, if that's at all possible. I wonder if he has conflicts of loyalty. Is such a thing possible in a member of the Squire's Corps?"

Will Corwin looked around himself; then back at the recording device. "Things are going to change around here, that's for sure," he said pensively.

"Anyway. . . I leave this information in your care, Jack. Hopefully you'll never need it. But if you do, it means that something unpleasant has happened to me. In that case, Jack, I'll have to leave it in your hands; and now it's you who will have to decide how to use this."

His face softened. "Jack, wherever you may be, whatever you may be doing now, remember that we love you. And look after Claury. Everybody can see that she's crazy about you. I hope you'll stay together. There aren't many people in this world who were made for each other the way you two are."

Will Corwin made a small gesture with his hands.

"Goodbye, Jack. . ."

The image collapsed into a point and vanished.

Jack stared at the blank screen. The voice from the grave was silent, but the pain he had thought safely hidden away now flared anew.

Claury nudged him. "You all right?"

He shook himself. "No, not really." He sighed. "Well, now we know," he said tonelessly.

"You think that's why they were killed?"

Jack nodded. "I'm sure of it. The Coralians would have been scared out of their wits. And I can't see GenSpac overly enthused at the idea of losing their monopoly. The only reason for its existence is that you need their resources to build the grotesque ships we've got right now. There's no point in building smaller ones, because there just aren't enough Pilots and Zombies.

"Imagine what would happen if you could build self-contained navcomps!"

He grimaced. "Dad's right. GenSpac had every reason to fear the truth."

Claury stood up, took a few nervous steps around the room, and stopped in front of Jack. He looked up at her.

"What're we going to do?" she asked.

"Prove dad right," he said.

"How?"

"Remember what he said about knowledge not being containable? Well, here it is. It slipped out through a crack. Took a while—but in the end it did. Of course it's not quite into the open yet—but it will be soon enough."

Claury dropped her gaze to the UnIfac in his hand and wrinkled her nose. She looked dubious.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"We'd have to be very careful."

"Damn right! And the first thing to do, quite ironically, is not to tell anybody about it. But I'm going to spread it anyway."

"How?"

"Lila Sanders gave me computer time, remember? I'm going to dump this whole tab into an encrypted file somewhere in the system. The first step to securing our survival."

Claury hunkered down in front of Jack and looked up into his face. "Did you hear what he said about us?"

Jack smiled. "Yeah—well, it took a while."

Claury stood up and laughed. "You know, it's just as well you're getting out of this job of yours. Looks like you're going to do your best to make yourself obsolete."

"The little ironies of life."

"Your fellow Pilots aren't exactly going to love you either!"

"The nav-zombies even less," he declared. "Pilots at least require a high level of training. Nav-zombies can be morons for all it matters. All they need a curious and rare brain structure and chemistry. Most of them will have a hell of a hard time finding anything to do."

"It's all yours." Lila Sanders motioned at a comterm in her ready room. "You've got about an hour. I have a meeting with my officers after that—so you'll better be gone, or there'll be a lot of explaining to do."

"Thanks, Lila. I really appreciate this," Jack told her.

She nodded. Her gaze lingered on him thoughtfully for an extra second. "Don't do anything I'll regret," she said soberly.

Jack shook his head. "I won't," he said, truthfully; though he thought that it was really a matter of interpretation. Certainly it would be true that someone in Lila's position was not likely to be much affected by the ultimate outcome of what he was starting here.

She nodded and exited through the door which led to the bridge. Jack made himself comfortable behind the comterm and placed the UnIfac beside it. A few instants later the contents of Will Corwin's memory tab had been transferred into the *Lister Diamond's* network. Jack had packed the data into a single file, encrypted it, made it hidden and erase-protected, and left it there. For good measure he transferred a copy to Lila's backup matrix, which resided in another sub-section of the network.

Jack sat back and contemplated his handiwork. If someone found this file—likely only if someone deliberately scanned the captain's file structure—it would take them some considerable time to decrypt it. Weeks at least; possibly months. It all depended on how much computing power was allocated to the task. With the right password, which in this instance was a small sentence, it would take microseconds.

Satisfied with what he'd done, Jack now commenced to do what he'd ostensibly come here for, a job which had now become redundant.

Or had it?

"Hypothetical problem," he said to the computer. "Consider the following set of contingencies . . ."

By the time an alarm message warned him just over half an hour later that he'd have to leave, the machine had come up with some rather interesting analyses and probability evaluations. Some of these, so his intuition told him, were actually virtual certainties—and it would be wise in their future actions to take them into account. He transferred the results to his UnIfac and made a timely exit from the ready-room.



Chapter 23

The *Lister Diamond* drew into orbit around the turquoise jewel that was Coralia and, with the aid of half a dozen tugs, positioned itself correctly and presently docked with Coralia IV, the largest of the orbiting service stations. A flexible proboscis extended and attached itself to the airlock. The pressure was equalized. Antibacterial and antiviral agents were injected into the atmosphere. The passengers were subjected to unusually rigorous formalities and inspections.

Jack and Claury fought down their anxiety. A hundred things could go wrong. Uncountable contingencies could arise—some of which they had thought of, and most of which they probably hadn't.

Nothing did go wrong. Several hours later they found themselves on a shuttle which took them down to the surface. The familiar Hungarian coastline came into view. Not far off the coast The Isle; a tear-drop shaped, brown-and-green geological afterthought of about eighty square kilometers. All of this immersed in the blue-green ocean which covered more than ninety percent of Coralia's surface.

The shuttle touched down. The passengers filed through a tunnel into a terminal. Another inspection and checking of 'cards. Another moment of apprehension, of waiting for something to go wrong. Then, relief, as the barrier opened and they were granted the freedom—if that's what it could be called—of Coralia.

In the crowd they discerned Teara Huil. She glanced at them, her mouth curving into a tiny smile. But they had agreed to keep at a distance: it was safer that way. It would not do to attract the attention of those who greeted her—and even less of those who were not vis-

ible. Besides, Teara would contact them once she had accomplished what they'd asked her to do. Until then it was a matter of waiting and pretending that they were just ordinary tourists. Which might not be that simple.

What came after that was an entirely different question. The *Lister Diamond* was staying here for four days before heading on to its next destination. They had booked their passage right through to Herrykairn; if for no other reason but to present a consistent picture to the Coralians. Herrykairnean tourists returning to their home: how much more logical could you get? It certainly shouldn't raise any warning flags in the Coralian immigration computers.

Four days, Jack thought, *to solve a mystery twenty years old*. Of course, four Coralian days were almost seven standard ones, but somehow that still seemed pathetically inadequate.

He looked around the terminal. There had been some changes since he'd left the place. Not many, but some. The wing had been extended to accommodate an increased flow of traffic. A larger shopping area had been added. And there were probably considerably more surveillance cameras.

"Let's get out of here," he muttered to Claury. They collected their baggage and left the terminal. A ground-cab conveyed them to the *Hotel Avneir*, one of the most luxurious establishments, right in the center of Tyre, the Coralian capital. The hotel complex was set on an elevation which, to those in the top levels of the hotel, provided a breathtaking view over the city, the surrounding countryside, and the Southern Ocean alike.

Jack and Claury dumped their bags on the bed and walked to the window which defined the eastern wall of their room. Twenty years, they discovered, had wrought a few changes in the capital as well. A tall spire, Huil Tower, had appeared about a kilometer north of the hotel, rearing over everything in the city. A dazzling construction consisting of five tapering columns which converged almost two hundred meters above the ground to support a giant sphere that shone golden in the morning light. The city had spread out horizontally as well. Suburban fingers had crept up the gentle slopes of the hills to the north, insinuating themselves into the native flora.

Otherwise it was all pretty much as they remembered it.

"I wonder who lives in our houses now," Claury said wistfully. The Corwins and the Finisterres had lived in

two large mansions owned by GenSpac, only a few minutes' walk from each other. Both were surrounded by several hectares of parkland, forested with imported trees. Both fronted onto the ocean. A life in luxury.

Jack chuckled derisively. "Someone else they're trying to hoodwink?"

Claury sighed and put an arm around him. "I wish we didn't have to leave again," she said softly.

He knew what she meant. It came from deep inside; this feeling that refused to be pushed aside. An enveloping presence of . . . what?

No—it could not be. They must not surrender to this. That way lay madness and despair.

Again Jack was struck by the potency of the feeling of sheer *belonging*. An effect of the Coralia Crystals in his body? Was it something they had absorbed through constant low-level exposure over almost eight years—every time they took a breath—especially since they lived close by the sea? Every time they went for a swim: could the crystals be absorbed through the skin? How much of this stuff did the average Coralian absorb during the course of a lifetime? And what had the Coralians' apparent natural longevity to do with it all?

"It's better that we leave," he said. "Every moment we spend in this place makes us more dependent on it."

"But it's so beautiful . . ."

Jack shook his head and indicated the scenario outside. "Beauty? I don't know. There's a lot of that out there but it's no more beautiful than a hundred other places I've seen. It's all in our beholding, Claury. Our emotional baggage—and those crystals inside our bodies and our brains."

"It's no less real," she argued.

Jack tightened his grip on her. "I know," he said softly.

Four days . . .

They had given Teara two days to do what they had agreed upon. If she managed to do it quicker—well, that was all right, too. But it might not be that easy—not even for a niece—to see the Squire at such short notice. In private.

Two days, during which Jack and Claury would have to play tourists, whether they liked it or not. Do the things tourists do: go on chartered outings; or maybe hire a ground-vehicle and meander along the scenic routes up and down the Hungian coastline.

They chose the latter. It was resonant with their mood and would give them the privacy they needed. Moments to reflect on their past. Their future. A melancholy voyage into something precious lost a long time ago.

Inevitably they visited Twisted Tree Point, a place loaded with memories, some sweet, some now laced with pain and nostalgia. They followed the narrow, windy gravel road along the ridge until they came to a small turning area. Beyond that still stood the weather-beaten picnic tables.

Jack looked out over the ocean to see a flitzer-bus with the CTB logo circle over the ocean, before it headed off north and out of sight.

"What a joke," Jack said to Claury. "Just think: there they go, the tourists, peering at the gnarls through their high-power scopes and barely able to make them out, when the real reason for it all lies right"—he made a sweeping gesture, indicating the ocean—"underneath there."

Because that's what Will Corwin's map had told them. Right in front of them, less than a kilometer away, somewhere under those swells, lay the true wonder of Coralia.

As he had done before, Jack wondered if the volcanic event which gave rise to Twisted Tree Point had also produced the strange subaquatic mineral lode. How much of it was there? How far did it reach underground—or even into the very rock they were standing on?

Claury braced herself against the wind swirling around them. She peered over the fence and into the foaming waters below.

"It could be right down there as well," Jack said.

Claury looked up and into the distance. A huge wave thundered into the grotto below. Several blow-holes erupted with plumes of spray. The wind blew it into their faces. Claury giggled and rubbed her hands first over her own and then over Jack's face. Jack laughed. He reached for her. Claury squealed. A short wrestling match ensued which ended with them both breathless and wondering how they could make love standing up in a gusty easterly. They looked around, saw nobody—but, before they could decide to be utterly reckless and shameless, the wind decided to pick up and tug at them with increasingly sharp gusts. They looked at each other and, giggling like teenagers, decided that they had to give up.

"How about the car?" Claury suggested.

Jack looked back at the place where they had parked their vehicle.

Claury pulled his face to hers and kissed him. "How about it?" she breathed when she let him go.

Jack gazed into her eyes with their wide-open pupils and he sensed that the dreamy expression in her face was a reflection of his own. He kissed her and swung her around. The ground beneath them shook. The blow-holes around the twisted Saptak tree delivered another round of spray.

"Sounds good to me . . ."

Somewhat later, as she straddled him in the back-seat, breathless and giddy, he pulled her down and laid his head against her chest to listen to her heart; and she put her arms around him and held him there.

For this moment at least they had indeed come home.



Chapter 24

Back at the hotel a message from Teara awaited them.

"She's a quick operator, that one," Jack mused as he read the lines on the display.

"I bet her uncle wet himself when he saw the clips," Claury chuckled. "I don't think it would have been that hard to convince him to see us as soon as possible."

"I guess not," he agreed. He looked at the display again. "Tonight at 2100h. She'll pick us up."

Claury took a deep breath. "I suppose from then on our anonymity will be non-existent."

Jack shrugged. "I'd say it's already compromised. I mean, we'll be the first people they'd look for. By now someone will have re-checked the entry logs and matched up our faces." He shook his head. "No—they know who we are."

Claury sat down on the bed beside him. "I'm scared, Jack," she said suddenly.

"So am I.

"Well, we've done what we can. We're out in the open now. Let's hope that this thing is solid enough to protect us." He looked at his timepiece. Just over five hours.

Half an hour before the appointed time Teara bounced into their room, grinning from ear to ear. She

opened her mouth to say something but Jack made a quick gesture. She nodded.

"I know," her lips formed. "How are you two?" she said aloud. "Ready to go?"

"As ready as we'll ever be," Claury told her.

Teara hugged them both.

"Any deviations from the plan?" she whispered into Jack's ear.

"None for us," he whispered back. "How about you?"

"No problems," she said and separated from him.

"Good," Jack said aloud and took Claury's hand.

Outside the hotel a flitzer awaited them. Beside it stood two stoic-faced individuals in corps uniforms. Teara shrugged resignedly. "Nothing I could do about that."

Jack and Claury hesitated before entering the flitzer. The very act of entering the Squire's vehicle carried a heavily symbolic overtone. It was a gesture of resignation to fate, at the same time as it was an affirmation of their faith in their carefully laid schemes. With a sigh Jack bent down and climbed inside the cabin. Claury and Teara followed. The two men occupied the front seat. Turbines hummed. The flitzer rose and whisked off toward the ocean and Coralia Isle. Five minutes later it set down on the front lawn of the Squire's opulent mansion in the center of the Isle: a three-leveled pastel-yellow structure, built in the style of the great Mercurio, with a haphazard arrangement of angles and protrusions and the sweeping arc of a roofed balcony ringing the entire second storey.

The trio disembarked and were led by Teara up a few shallow steps to the broad entrance. There was another scan to check before they were allowed to enter. They weren't supposed to notice because it was all so delicate and decorous, but, though his UnIfac was turned off Jack sensed it was there. Nothing with an active weapon would be able to enter this building.

"He's expecting you," Teara told them as they walked through the entrance hall with its vaulted ceiling and carefully arranged wall decorations. Jack, though he was preoccupied with the immediate future, still had time to notice the paintings on the walls. A Degas; a Picasso; a Van Holt; others which he didn't recognize. Originals, no doubt: millions of EUs' worth of art treasures in these few paintings alone. Displayed with a casual ostentation; setting the tone and making it clear to everybody who had occasion to pass through here just who it was they were about to face.

Jack got the message. Thing was, he didn't care.

A major-domo in an immaculate black-and-white suit materialized at their side; somewhat embarrassed, Jack thought, possibly for not having known that they were coming. It seemed that security inside this building was at a low level; possibly because it was considered unnecessary.

Jack shook his head. Unlikely, and much more probable that it was all so hidden and discreet that one would never know. Still, if there was a security system it excluded live guards inside the house.

An elevator conveyed them to the third level where Teara dismissed the major-domo. He obeyed with evident reluctance, but Teara was firm. A short walk through a broad, bright hallway ended in front of a door with an old-fashioned handle. Teara knocked and, without awaiting a response opened it.

"Good luck," she whispered to them. "I'll take you back when you're done." She stood aside to let them pass by her and closed the door behind them.

The room was a study and library. Much of the cold functionality one might expect in such a place had been concealed with skill of an excellent interior designer and the resources of one for whom money was no object. There was a large desk with an in-built projection-matrix, as well as coffee-table with two settees arranged around it. Much of the wall area was covered with bookcases which reached all the way up to the ceiling. A tall cabinet with a transparent front exhibited a number of weapons: rifles, handguns, swords, from a range of eras. Again there were numerous works of art, some of which Jack recognized; the value of any of which would exceed his salary accumulated over years.

Behind the desk stood a medium-sized individual; unremarkable but for the air of power and wealth adhering to him like a clingy halo. He was into his third century, but the use of expensive gerotards and other conservative methods made it appear as if he were barely above Jack's age. He was dressed in a plain, gray-and-blue, casual, one-piece outfit. His thick black hair was parted in a precise shade in the middle of his head. Bright blue eyes under thin but long eyebrows that almost met in the middle, looked at them from a pale face with a featureless, thin-lipped mouth.

The Squire.

Quite unremarkable, really. And yet . . .

The man came around the table. He stood in front of them for a moment; silent, studying them. Jack, who hadn't let go of Claury's hand ever since they entered the house, felt her squeeze his. He responded with a slight tightening of his own grip. If the Squire noticed he didn't let on.

"Are we going to stand here forever?" Jack said, looking around the room, avoiding the Squire's eyes. He didn't even want *that* kind of contact. He felt soiled just by being in the same room as this man who, ultimately, was responsible for all of their suffering and trouble.

"We might as well get this over with, don't you think?"

Maybe the Squire sensed the palpable and unbreakable antagonism emerging from the pair. One thin eyebrow raised almost imperceptibly. Squire Huil nodded slowly. He made a gesture in the direction of the settees. "Shall we?" The voice was thin and brittle.

They sat down on one of them while Squire Huil occupied the other.

"Can I offer you a drink?" A final attempt at some form of civilized interaction, which Jack rejected with a minute shake of his head.

The Squire made a small gesture in the direction of his desk. "I have reviewed your message," he said casually. "It is interesting. And inconvenient—as is the fact that you've used my niece as a courier; and that you saw fit to involve her in this matter at all."

"She involved herself," Claury said. "When she found out what you've done to us . . ."

Squire Huil's eyes widened slightly. It appeared that Teara had not seen fit to divulge certain facts.

"You actually told her? How dare you?!"

Jack nodded. "Everything we know."

"Whom else have you told?"

"Not many," Jack said casually. "But, of course, that's not important. The information is now in several widely-dispersed databanks, being propagated through every network it has access to. Dissemination will be automatic unless we periodically renew a time-lock which is currently in place."

Squire Huil watched them from underneath hooded eyelids which hid the anger Jack knew was boiling underneath.

Tough luck, he thought.

Squire Huil regained his equanimity.

"What do you want?"

"In one word?" Jack asked him. "Freedom."

“Meaning?”

Jack looked at Claury and he saw her look at the Squire, and in her eyes he saw the anger and rage that flared within himself.

It was a lie, of course. They did want freedom. This was true. Freedom for themselves. A chance to live their lives as they pleased; without the pall that had hung over them for most of their adult lives.

But they both wanted more than that. Much more: especially a sweet thing called ‘revenge’—and, though the Squire would not know for a little while yet, they would get it.

“We want your curs off our backs. No more harassment by your spies. No more death threats. No more threats at all. No more surveillance . . . and some answers . . . !”

Squire Huil studied them silently for a moment. “You may be less secure than you think,” he said in his reedy voice.

Jack shook his head. “I don’t think so. And if you do you’re a greater fool than you have any right to be.”

A flash of anger in the Squire’s face faded as quickly as it had flared up.

“You and your kind have taken a precious chunk out of our lives,” Jack said, and his voice sounded so brittle with the hatred he felt that he thought it would crack. “We want to know why.”

The Squire shrugged. “At least you are alive,” he said.

“Yes,” Claury said, leaning forward, “tell us about that. Why did we were we allowed to live? Why weren’t we killed, like our parents?”

The Squire hesitated.

“Maybe I should tell you,” Jack said to him, “that I’m a full intuit. That I know when people lie to me.” He pointed a finger at Squire Huil. “I will know if you lie. I will know if you evade. Nothing but the truth will do . . .”

“How dare you . . .”

Something in Jack broke. “Be quiet!” he roared, his patience exhausted. “Tell us, damn it! Why?”

Claury laid a restraining hand on his arm. He shook it off and stood up glaring down at Squire Huil.

“Do you understand?” he grated. “It’s over. No more stalling. No more polite chit-chat. Cooperate with us or . . .”

“What?” Squire Huil snapped.

Jack sat down again. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing,” he said grimly. “Meaning that in less than a month you’re done. Just like that . . .”

The Squire shook his head. “It’ll take decades to perfect the technology. Nothing’ll happen for years. I have lots of time to prepare.”

Jack laughed. “Yeah, but once it’s known that a scoop of water from the ocean contains enough Coralia Crystals to keep a zombie functional for several weeks . . .”

The Squire shook his head. “It’s not that simple. The crystals don’t survive in water for very long. It would be quite impractical.”

Jack made a gesture interrupting the Squire’s reply. “Who are you trying to convince? Yourself? Remember what I told you about me? I know when you’re lying—and I know you’re doing it now. If this gets out it’ll be the end of everything you are and have fought for. You know this—and I know that you do.”

The Squire’s face was cold and impassive. He sat in thought for a few moments.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“We want to know why you didn’t have us killed,” Claury said. “What was the purpose this whole sick intrigue?”

“I would have preferred you dead,” the Squire agreed. “It would have been the logical and most expedient solution: to erase all traces of those who know or might know. But we couldn’t. There were . . . complications.”

“Like?”

“We received a communication—soon after the death of Will Corwin—from someone who, like yourselves, was aware of the research and its results.”

Jack and Claury stared at Squire Huil. “And?”

“This individual proceeded to present us with a set of conditions not unlike those you’re attempting to impose right now. Except that his demands confined themselves to a guarantee of your safety.”

“What?!” Jack looked at Squire Huil, aghast at what he’d just heard. Claury’s hand clamped down on his arm.

The Squire shrugged. “We negotiated with the individual concerned. A bargain was struck. We agreed to the demands— under certain conditions: one of those being that you should be kept apart from each other for the rest of your lives.”

“Why?” Claury’s voice was hoarse.

"Because we felt that together you might be motivated into pooling what you knew. This could have resulted in unacceptable complications. It was decided that keeping you apart was the safest alternative. The individual concerned agreed to this. He also agreed that, in the case of this condition being breached, your termination would be an acceptable alternative."

Jack didn't believe his ears. "Who would agree to such absurd terms? And why?"

"The person concerned is very resourceful," the Squire told them.

"You speak of him as a man," Jack said.

The Squire shrugged. "A linguistic convenience."

"You know his identity."

"It is irrelevant."

"Who killed my father?" Jack asked.

"One of my men," the Squire told him.

"Who?"

"He followed orders."

"Who?"

The Squire shrugged. "Tril Wumford."

Jack expelled a gush of air.

Of course.

Who else?

What had his father said? ". . . sometimes I wonder about Tril. There's no doubt that he's a member of the Squire's Corps. But he's also become . . . well, a friend of sorts—if that's at all possible. I wonder if he has conflicts of loyalty. Is such a thing possible in a member of the Squire's Corps?"

Well dad, thought Jack, now you know. Now we all know.

The focus of his anger vectored in on the new target. He didn't care about who told whom to do what. Tril Wumford had yielded the executioner's axe. That mattered.

"I want him," he said.

The Squire shrugged again. "If it makes you feel better . . . What're you going to do?—Kill him?"

Jack nodded. "It seems like the least I can do." He eyed Squire Huil unpleasantly. "You're no better, of course, and I wished I could do the same to you. But Wumford comes first."

"Who killed my parents?" Claury asked.

Squire Huil took his eyes off Jack and gave her a crooked smile. "I'm afraid you'll have to ask someone else."

"Like who?"

"GenSpac's security division."

Claury made a choked sound and glanced at Jack.

"He's telling the truth," he said.

"But . . ."

"It makes sense. GenSpac stood to lose almost as much as the Coralians. And what's a couple of lives when compared to billions of EUs?"

He glanced at Squire Huil, who considered him with ineffable condescension. "It's the way of things. From your point of view it is regrettable that you got caught in it, but that's what happens." He shook his head. "You two don't seem to appreciate how lucky you actually are. If it hadn't been for our blackmailer you wouldn't even be sitting here threatening me. Instead of whining about being alive you should just get on with your lives." He grimaced as if he'd tasted something bitter. "After all, it appears that you've put me in a position where I have no choice but to allow you to walk free and live."

We're not done yet, Jack thought. If only you knew.

But first...

"Where is he?"

"Wumford? He's based at Corps headquarters in Tyre."

"I want him alone."

Squire Huil made an indifferent gesture. "Feel free to follow your whims. What do you intend to do with him?"

"We'll see," Jack replied. "How can I get hold of him outside the Corps?"

Squire Huil shrugged, picked up a UnIfac from the coffee table, issued a command to transfer Wumford's address to his UnIfac.

A moment later, the device clipped to Jack's belt emitted a bleep, signaling the receipt of a data-packet.

Jack glanced at Claury.

She nodded. "Let's get out of here. This place makes me sick."

From Squire Huil came a clearing of the throat. "I will need *some* proof of your good faith."

"There is no such proof," he said. "There never will be. And we are leaving."

Squire Huil considered them, his face devoid of expression. Despite confidence in his ploy Jack felt a momentary twinge of unease. Mentally he ran over all the known flaws in his grand scheme.

Had they missed anything.?

Claury reached for Jack's. He looked at her and realized that she was near tears, which she held back some effort. He had an inkling of what was going on in her

head. There would never be a reckoning for her parents' murders. GenSpac would never be susceptible to the kinds of pressures they'd just applied to the Squire because they had far less to lose. Will Corwin's secret was inconvenient, to be sure, and it would cost them billions—but in the end they would emerge profitable again. After some upheavals maybe, but alive nonetheless. The Squire, on the other hand, would lose everything. His relevance on the galactic scene would fade to nothing.

Squire Huil remained seated on the settee, not looking at them, but staring at a point on the wall ahead of him. Was it Jack's imagination, or did he look smaller?

Slumped maybe.

Defeated.

Jack turned to go. Away from this place, which oppressed him.

And that wasn't all—for something was wrong; dissonant; jarring.

Maybe it was all far too easy; or maybe his sense just sent him messages he wasn't able to interpret correctly as yet. He looked over his shoulder at Squire Huil's head.

Too easy. Too many unanswered questions, important questions—and even those answers that had been given felt . . . incomplete.

Deliberately so?

Claury reached for the antique handle and pushed the door open. In the hallway outside stood Teara, waiting. When she saw them her eyes lit up.

"Are you all right?"

They nodded mutely.

"Did you get what you came for?"

Jack sighed. "Most of it." They filled her in as she walked them back downstairs.

Teara stopped. "You're going to see the man who killed your father?"

Jack nodded.

"What are you going to do?"

Jack thought. He really didn't know. Not yet anyway. He'd often wondered what he'd do, but there had never been an answer. Killing the man was the stuff of his fantasies—but he wasn't sure that he'd ever be able to translate that into real action.

"You really should be armed," Teara said. "Tril Wumford . . . I know the name." She grimaced. "The corps protects its own."

Jack shrugged.

"You're going to face him unarmed?"

"Something more lethal than my bare hands might be useful," he admitted.

Teara nodded. "Come."

The major-domo caught up with them again. Teara rudely told him to get lost. He took one look at her and hurriedly obliged. Claury looked at Jack. He knew what she was thinking. Teara exhibited some interesting character traits. She also appeared to exert a significant measure of authority.

Their guide led them into another office-like room. She went straight to a tall wall-cabinet and opened it to reveal a small armory. Plasma rifles, handguns, body-armor, ammunition.

Teara saw their looks. "I found this one day when I was snooping around the place."

"Snooping around?" Claury echoed.

Teara grinned like a little girl who'd been caught with her fingers in the cookie jar. "I used to do that a lot. The cheap thrills of a bored teenager. I know things about this place you wouldn't believe."

She took out two small-caliber handguns, capable of delivering high-speed duranium slugs with a compressed-gas driver from a magazine holding ten rounds and the gas.

"Do you know how to use these?"

Jack and Claury nodded—then looked at each other with expressions of surprise.

"There have been occasions . . ." Claury looked at the gun in his hand. "What about you?"

"A part of basic Pilot training. Just in case." He eyed the gun. "Mind you, I'm a terrible shot."

Teara gave them two spare magazines each. Claury and Jack pocketed the weapons and ammunition. Teara closed the armory door and led them out of the room and toward the entrance. As before they met nobody.

"Who lives in this place?" Claury asked Teara.

The petite Coralian shrugged. "My uncle. Downstairs there's a cook and two maids—and the major-domo of course. The cottage houses five security guards. And that's about it."

Jack looked around the empty halls. The carpets absorbed the sound of their footsteps. The ambience had a surreal quality.

"He lives alone?"

"He prefers it that way," Teara told him. "My uncle's a strange man. He seldom leaves this place. Indeed, he seldom ventures into most areas of this house and virtu-

ally lives in his library. Everything he needs is in there. The only people who come and go are from the corps.”

“A strange man indeed,” Jack agreed.

“What about his family?” Claury asked.

“There isn’t much of a family,” Teara told her. “His only sibling, my mother, died almost ten years ago in an accident. My father died a few years after her. Another accident. My father was a good man, but my uncle loathed him. He thought he wasn’t good enough for my mother—or to be my father, for that matter.

“I’m their only child and the only close relation he has. He tolerates me and makes sure I’m looked after. He may even like me, though he wouldn’t show it if he did—and I really don’t care. I can come and go as I please—more or less.”

“But the dynasty?” Claury wondered. “If he has no children . . . What if he dies?”

Teara shrugged. “I don’t know. The dynasty be damned. It can disappear for all I care. Besides, uncle Hertzog doesn’t seem to want to die. He’s as sprightly now as he’s ever been—at least for as long as I’ve known him.”

“But you would be the logical heir.”

Teara shrugged. “I suppose so. But I don’t want it. What would I do? Live here, like . . . this?” She made a gesture encompassing the emptiness surrounding them.

“It wouldn’t have to be like that,” Claury pointed out.

Teara grimaced. “Yes, it would. That’s part of being the Squire of Coralia. Oh, I wouldn’t have to be a hermit like him, but . . .” She shrugged. “Anyway, that’s all going to be dead and gone, isn’t it? After what you’ve told me . . .”

“There is that,” Jack agreed.

“It’s just as well,” she said. “This has been going on for far too long. My uncle’s the fourth in the line of Squires. That dynasty has survived for almost three hundred years . . .”

Jack frowned. “Four Squires. Three hundred years—that’s standard years, right?”

Teara nodded.

“And your uncle’s how old? About two hundred standard years? Which means that the previous Squires only reigned for . . . what? Maybe forty to fifty years each?”

Teara nodded. “I guess so. Never really thought about it. They died young.”

Jack and Claury looked at each other. “Very young. Now you can see why he’s so paranoid.”

Claury embraced Teara. “Are you coming with us; back to the city?”

Teara nodded. She looked around her as if to make sure that nobody was within listening range. A futile act; microphones were much more effective at listening than people. If anybody was snooping on them there was nothing they could do to prevent it.

“I want nothing more of this place,” Teara declared. “I know I’ll be as homesick as anything, but I just can’t . . .”

“Where are you going?” Jack said.

Teara stopped. She took a deep breath. “I have a favor to ask of you,” she said lowly. “I know it’s a big thing, but . . . when you leave here . . . I want to go with you.”

“You want to leave Coralia?” Claury asked.

Teara nodded.

Jack smiled. It appeared that Cale wasn’t going back to Earth alone. “You’re more than welcome to share our berth. And Cale will be ecstatic . . .”

Teara shook her head. “I’m afraid my uncle won’t let me leave again,” she said. “Even if he wouldn’t restrain me physically, he could stop me simply by making it impossible to pay for the passage! I have no resources of my own.”

Jack nodded. “Now you have. If there are any problems I’ll foot the bill, and we’ll make sure they won’t try to stop you in any other way.”

They took the Coralian between them and headed for the door.

“Keep your bags packed.”



Chapter 25

Tril Wumford’s porcine face appeared on the vidcom.

“I heard you’d returned,” he said, not bothering to feign surprise. “It’s been a long time.”

Jack nodded. “So it has. It also appears that we have some unfinished business, you and I.”

Tril Wumford’s face on the screen was unreadable. Jack wondered if he knew about their meeting with Hertzog Huil, and if he suspected that the Squire had given them the identity of Will Corwin’s killer. He

stared at the jowled countenance on the screen, trying to get a feel for the situation—but drew a blank.

Tril Wumford inclined his head. “I agree: we should talk.”

“How about tomorrow evening?”

“Where?”

“Somewhere private. Out of the reach of micro-phones and vids.” Jack suggested.

“Definitely,” Wumford said.

“How about Twisted Tree Point?” Jack had phrased it like a question but his tone belied it. Jack saw on Tril Wumford’s face that the fat man understood that.

“At 2000h then?”

Wumford nodded. “I’ll see you there.” He broke the connection.

Jack turned to Claury who had positioned herself outside the range of the vid pickup. “That’s it,” he said. “Tomorrow’s the day. . . .”

“You’re not going to kill him, are you?” Her face was anxious.

Jack shook his head. “I really don’t know what I’m going to do. This guy murdered my father. He sprayed Plague into his face and watched him die. And for what? To keep concealed a secret profiting only a bunch of self-serving opportunists? Dad thought that man might be his friend! Just think of it! I just want to. . . .”

“. . . make him suffer,” Claury completed quietly.

“Something like that. Something to make up for all that pain and anguish. For the loss of my parents. . . . and you. . . . I want to hurt him someplace it matters.” Jack felt something welling up from within him. The world blurred before his eyes, which felt hot and wet.

Damn! Why now?

Claury came over and pulled him to his feet. “Come here,” she said. She made him lie down on the bed and lay down herself, putting her arms around him and cradling his head against her; letting him have his grief.

“I know how you feel,” she told him softly. “But, whatever we do tomorrow, we’ll have to live with it for the rest of our lives.”

He pulled away from her. “You’re not. . . .”

“I’m not what?” she interrupted him. “Remember our promises?”

“But. . . .”

“We had a deal!”

Jack scowled at her, but he didn’t really want it any other way. His protestations were tokens without substance—and Claury knew it—which only left just about everything unresolved, especially the vexed mystery of their unidentified benefactor—if that’s what he could be called.

Why would anyone go to such trouble to protect their lives?

And who was he?

Teara called them later that evening, when they were having dinner in a seaside restaurant which invoked poignant memories in both of them. Jack, who had calls to their room re-routed, took the call on his UnIfac.

“I told uncle Hertzog that I was leaving Coralia—for good. . . .”

“How did he react?” Claury asked Teara’s image.

“‘Apoplexy’ leaps to mind.”

“And?”

“He told me that I was betraying him. I responded by telling him that I never promised my loyalty. He advised me that I would be disinherited. I told him where he could put his inheritance. He threatened to block my account to prevent me from obtaining a berth.”

Jack nodded. “I told you, that’s not a problem.”

Teara’s face was unhappy. “The argument got out of hand. He insisted that I would not be allowed to leave.”

Jack made a vexed sound. “Well, I hope somebody’s listening into this conversation, because that may be the easiest way to tell your uncle. . . .”

“The bottom line: if you want to leave, you can. Our shuttle departs the day after tomorrow at 1015h. We expect you here at the hotel two hours before that. If you’re not, or if anybody at the embarking point tries to stop you from leaving, we will do whatever is necessary to ensure you are allowed to get on that shuttle.

“I would like to remind your uncle of the certain, and extremely unfortunate, consequences if during such an altercation any harm came to either of us—or to you, for that matter. So, there. Do you think that’s clear enough?”

Teara nodded. “Thank you so much!”

“We’ll arrange for your berth,” Claury told her. “Remember, Habaday, 0800h, at our hotel.”

“I’ll be there,” the Coralian told them. She hesitated. “I’m going to do my best to pay you back. I just don’t know what else to do right now. . . .”

"Don't mention it," Claury told her. "We owe you—more than you know."

They discommed. Jack connected to the *Lister Diamond* and Lila Sanders' private number. Her face appeared after a small delay.

"Social call?" she said wryly.

Jack laughed. "We'll do that once we're back in space. Right now we just need a small favor."

Leila Sanders smiled when he told her. "At least one of my Pilots will be a very happy man, I think."

After they had discommed Jack looked at Claury. "You think Teara and Cale are going to make it?" he asked her.

Claury nodded. "It won't be easy, but I think so."

"I think you may be right."

They finished their meal and returned to the hotel, taking their time, walking in the balmy eastern breeze along the long waterfront promenade, among hundreds of other visitors from the *Lister Diamond* and another, smaller, cruise ship, the *Stardust*, which had arrived from Organum Pegasi only this day.

Jack's UnIfac beeped again. It was Cale.

"I just heard the news." He was beaming.

"I thought it might meet with your approval," Jack said dryly. "Can you come down with that shuttle? I dont really think there will be problems, but . . ."

Cale looked concerned. "They're not wanting to let her go?"

"Something like that. I think they will, but I've been known to be wrong."

"I'll be there."

"Good."

Jack clipped the UnIfac back onto his belt.

"What can Cale do on the other side of immigration control?" Claury asked him.

Jack shrugged. "I'd rather have him somewhere close. He'll think of *something*."

The next day finally came. They were up early, well before the break of dawn. Their biological clocks were unaccustomed to Coralia's long day-night cycle. As they had breakfast in the downstairs restaurant they recognized several faces from the *Lister Diamond*. It appeared they were not alone in their predicament.

They spent the day driving into the Hunge's interior; through the farming belt and into the open country beyond. The road was unpaved and dusty, being used only infrequently. A few farmers lived out this way, but

they kept to themselves, showing their faces in Tyre only on their occasional trips for supplies or to bring in their products.

For the most part the Hungian interior consisted of endless stretches of tussock growing over low rolling hills. The rest was covered with forests; most of them planted by the settlers. Earth trees, everything from pines to oaks and palms, took to the Coralian atmosphere and soil with a vengeance. They grew at several times the normal rate, and often to twice or three times the size, spreading themselves over the landscape with ferocious fecundity. A fallen pine cone or acorn was, so it had been calculated, at least ten times as likely to grow into a viable tree as would have been the case in the most favorable conditions on Earth. In another few hundred years Hunge would be covered with one huge forest, and man would have to work hard to keep clear those areas allocated for agriculture.

The day passed pleasantly, though a certain tension was present throughout their trip. Evening could not come soon enough for Jack, who wanted to get everything over and done with. Claury, infected by his mood, was as antsy as he. Despite this they managed to keep themselves under control and at least partly enjoy the experience. They went over their plans for the evening again and again, until they were reasonably certain that they had covered all conceivable eventualities and how to react to them.

Half an hour before the appointed time they parked their vehicle behind a copse of trees, some distance past the point where the track to Twisted Tree Point joined the main coastal road. They had a clear view, not only of the road, but as far as the Point itself, where two vehicles still stood in the parking area. It appeared that today of all days there had to be some enterprising tourists around. Jack hoped that they would disappear soon.

Claury and Jack settled down, waiting for Tril Wumford to arrive.

With relief Jack saw that the cars were leaving the Point; people heading back to Tyre for the evening's activities.

A few minutes before the appointed time a single vehicle appeared from a southerly direction. Jack took out a hired scope and zoomed in on it.

"It's him."

"Alone?"

"Looks like it."

Claury reached into a small storage compartment and took out the guns. She extracted the magazines from the grips and pushed them back in again, satisfied that they were fully charged and operational. Earlier in the day, somewhere between nowhere and nothing, they had done a little target practice on an old tree stump. They had sacrificed one magazine each, getting some feel for their weapons. The duranium slugs had done amazing things to the dry oak trunk, proving that they would happily punch their way even through body-armor.

"Shall we go?"

"Let's."

Jack steered their vehicle back onto the road. They came to the turnoff and followed Tril Wumford down to Twisted Tree Point. When they pulled up he was already out of the vehicle and out at the observation point. Jack parked their vehicle so that it effectively blocked the way out. Wumford, clearly visible in dusk's ruddy light, watched the maneuver without moving.

Jack wondered what he was thinking—or planning, for that matter. Another squirt of Plague maybe? They wanted Wumford downwind, and if that wasn't possible, then at least at right angles to it. The erratic gusts made it impossible to establish an optimal position.

Jack nudged Claury. She moved off to the left. Her hand was in her pocket. Jack went to flank Wumford on the other side.

Their quarry just stood there, watching them as they approached. They took up positions about ninety degrees apart on the circumference of a two-meter-radius circle, with Wumford in the center, between them and the ocean.

Jack thought to detect a certain wry amusement on the jowled face. Wumford wore a dark gray pair of loose trousers and a blue storm-jacket over a grass-green turtleneck sweater. His hair showed streaks of gray where once it had always been uniformly dark brown. His oleaginous countenance was much as Jack remembered it.

Too much grease for wrinkles, Jack thought. Wumford had always been that way: a permanent sheen covering his face; almost as if his pores were continuously secreting some oily substance.

"Hello, Jack," Wumford said quietly when they stood before him. "Claurinda." He nodded at Claury; looked at her hands, stuck in the pockets of her jacket.

Jack noted the look. "Just to make sure."

"Of what?"

"That we won't suffer my father's misfortune."

Tril Wumford stood silently, his head inclined at a slight angle, as he considered first Jack and the Claury.

"Don't bother denying it," Jack told him. "We know everything."

The fat man shook his head. "Everything?" His face twitched. "I doubt it."

"We know enough," Jack said, not knowing why he was bothering to correct himself.

But even as he said it he suddenly knew that his confident, defiant tone could do little to conceal the feeling rising inside him: the same he'd had when leaving the Squire, only even stronger: a notion that something was fundamentally wrong about all this. That it was all true, and yet . . .

"Who told you?" Wumford broke into Jack's thoughts.

Jack forced himself back to immediacies.

"The Squire. Who else?"

"You must have come armed with a potent talisman to gain an audience with Hertzog Huil—and to compel him to divulge this information!"

"We were persuasive," Claury said, her voice thick with loathing.

Tril Wumford eyed her curiously. "And who provided *that* particular bargaining chip?" he asked her.

"My father," Jack told him.

Tril Wumford's eyes swiveled in his direction. There was genuine surprise in his face. "I see. So he *did* leave something behind."

Jack reached up with his free hand and withdrew the pendant. The disguised memory tab had been reinserted into its protective cover. Tril Wumford's eyes widened. His small mouth with its thick, effeminate lips, formed a small 'o'.

"How could I have missed that?" His words were almost inaudible in a series of buffeting swirls.

Wumford shrugged. "So, you think you know, eh?"

"We know about their research," Jack told him, "and the crystals—and you. He said that he thought you might actually be his friend."

A shadow passed across Tril Wumford's face.

Pain?

Remorse?

The fat man's eyes fixed on the pendant. "When did he give you this?"

"A few months before his death," Jack said. "Why?"

Tril Wumford heaved a sigh. "I see."

Claury pulled her hand out of her pocket and pointed the gun at Tril Wumford. He regarded it with indifference. "You want to use that; not until I've told you the rest of the facts: what Will Corwin didn't—if for no other reason that at the time he generated that message he simply didn't know."

He paused and allowed himself the faintest of smiles. "And then, of course, there's the small matter of you owing me your lives."

Claury's eyes widened.

Jack felt an almost electric shock.

The first of the last parts of the puzzle falling into place.

Who else?

"You?" Claury whispered, her voice brittle with emotion. Her gun came up, almost as if of its own.

Tril Wumford shook his head.

"I killed Will Corwin; this much is true. But your parents died on orders from GenSpac—and if I hadn't intervened, both you and Jack would have shared their fate.

"Understand this: you are standing here for one reason only; because I became a traitor to my own people and forced them to let you live. So I suggest you hear me out and stop being so petulant about being alive! Believe me, the alternative would have been considerably easier! The only reason why I did what I did," and here he turned to Jack, "is that your father was right. He *was* my friend. As was Gart Finisterre. They were good men, who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"You lie!" Claury grated.

"No," Jack said.

"But . . ."

"Hear him out."

Jack went over to her, keeping his gun trained on Tril Wumford. He might be telling the truth, but Jack sensed a hidden intent.

The fat man leaned against the railing of the guard-fence. "Will Corwin not only was my friend," he said to Jack. "He was also married to your mother—who was my cousin."

Tril Wumford looked into Jack's shocked face. "I don't think Will knew. Your mother wouldn't have told him. She was too ashamed of who I was. Her father, my uncle, had always hated everything the Squire stood for. That's why he and his family left Coralia. He also

never forgave me for entering into the Squire's Corps—even though he blamed much of it on my own father—and my mother, who dared to marry him . . . thus creating a most unfortunate schism in our family. Your mother, on the other hand, despite her shame, tolerated me. But she would not have told Will."

"Dad would have understood," Jack said.

"I think so, too. But your mother's sense of shame was strong. That was her father's doing. He, in his own way, was a fanatic of sorts. He wanted Coralia to become a democracy. Abolish the autocratic rule by the Squire's family."

"Grandfather?" Jack's maternal grandfather had always been a benign figure in his life—right up to the day of his untimely demise. Not a man in whom one might expect strong political beliefs.

Tril Wumford, divining the direction of Jack's thoughts, nodded. "Ultimately it was deemed necessary to dispose of him."

More murders!

"I killed Will Corwin myself, because if I hadn't someone else would have," Tril Wumford said tonelessly.

"With Plague!" Jack grated.

"Yes—because it's the most humane way of killing anybody. It causes instant neural shock that acts so swiftly that there isn't even time to register that something's happened at all. The victim never knows. The physical disfigurements, the blisters, the pustules, are a physiological after-effect that sets in well after the victim's brain has ceased to function.

"Someone else might have shot Will. He would have known that. One last instant of realization that death was imminent. One last thought of despair, of pain, of anguish for those left behind.

"Your father's face was turned away from me when I sprayed the mist at him. He never knew a thing." He looked at Claury. "I wished I could have done the same thing for your parents. But Gart Finisterre reacted instantly and left before I could set up something suitable. So it was that GenSpac took it into their own hands and arranged for them to be killed on Earth.

"I knew they would kill the children as well—and I decided that I would not let that happen."

"Why not?" Claury asked tonelessly. "What's a couple more corpses?"

Tril Wumford motioned at Jack. "Will was my friend. Jack is family. I have very strong feelings about

the duties toward family. They certainly do not involve allowing them to be killed.”

“And what about me?” Claury asked.

“Jack loved you,” Tril Wumford said. “He always has and always will. That makes you family, too.”

Claury stared at him.

“I knew I had to act swiftly,” the fat man told her, “not just to protect you and Jack, but also my cousin. It was risky but it worked. You, Clairinda, were almost killed—would have been, if you had gone with your parents that day. But you stayed with your aunt. Before they had a chance to dispose of you as well, GenSpac received the message about the agreement the Squire and I had negotiated less than two days after Will Corwin’s death. It was most fortunate that two ships departed Coralia for Earth within the space of three days—and that the second one had a better Pilot than the first. Otherwise the message would not have arrived in time and you, too, would have been killed.”

Jack shook his head. “I suppose we should be grateful,” he said mutedly. The truth of Tril Wumford’s words was in no doubt. His own anger against the man was rapidly abating, to be replaced by an overpowering resignation at his inability to correct the uncorrectable evils of the past.

“But why keep us apart like this?” he asked. “What was the point?”

Tril Wumford made an apologetic gesture. “Everything has a price. The Squire and GenSpac feared you: for good reason, as it turns out. The thought of having you two run around the galaxy, preoccupied with thoughts of vengeance, asking questions that might one day find answers, was too much to tolerate. There was a distinct possibility that, between the two of you, you knew enough to solve the puzzle. What they did to you was the best they could, given that they were obliged to keep you alive. That was the deal: that you’d never be allowed to come near each other—and that, if you did, you would both be disposed of. I had no choice but to agree. Otherwise there might not have been a deal. But I did make sure that they understood that I would tolerate no deliberate sabotage of the agreement.

“Everything worked well until . . .” He frowned. “Until what? What happened? You’re here with Her-rykairnean IDs. That’s where you,” he nodded at Claury, “were last.”

“And where I took some shore-leave,” Jack said dryly.

“Ahh.” Tril Wumford nodded. “The best laid plans of mice and men.” A smile spread over his face. “Just as well. And now it’s time that you knew the rest.”

“There’s more?”

“Of course there is! And, as usual, what matters is not what you know, but what you don’t. And there’s a lot you don’t; if for no other reason but that Will Corwin didn’t when he gave you that pendant.” He paused. “I gather it contained a memory-tab, yes?”

Jack nodded.

Tril Wumford sighed. “We should have looked more diligently.” He made a small gesture. “I really don’t know what your fathers thought! That they could go on and hide their research from us? How naive could they be?”

“I suppose a lot had to do with the fact that, ultimately, they were scientists, not politicians or spies. They thought they were being so clever and circumspect! They were—but you cannot hide such things—as the Squire well knows. We knew what your fathers were doing before *they* did—if for no other reason but that we’ve known the basic facts about the crystals for almost a century! Any thorough and persistent analysis will sooner or later come up with the same data and lead in the same direction that your fathers’ investigations took. So, when Coralia agreed to a cooperative research effort with GenSpac—something which they had to do for cogent political reasons—they actually anticipated that Corwin and Finisterre would find the facts soon enough. The only question was what your fathers were going to do!

“It was unfortunate—from a Coralian point of view—that your fathers were able to leak a communication to GenSpac. Ironically it was this communication which sealed your parents’ fate—for GenSpac decided that the discovery ultimately was not be in their economic interest. As a result of this, the rivalry between GenSpac and the Squire metamorphosed into collaboration, at least on this issue. Neither Corwin nor Finisterre were considered to be of a ‘sensible’ disposition.”

Tril Wumford shrugged. “So . . .”

The ground shook as a particularly large wave crashed into the hollowed-out grotto below their feet. Plumes of spray erupted from the blow-holes behind the ancient tree, were taken up by an erratic gust and blown across their faces.

"And now you're going to tell us why you *really* killed them," Jack said.

Tril Wumford eyed him for a few moments. "You are a dangerous man, Jack. Maybe it was a mistake to let you live." He grimaced. "Things are as they are. You live and you know the truth. It is time I made you understand that it must remain buried.

"Will Corwin couldn't tell you this because he only found out after recording that message for you."

Tril Wumford leaned against the guard-rail again. He seemed tired and exhausted. "The truth is, Will and Gart *had* to die; and not just because of corporate greed, but because with what they knew—and because of what they refused to see—they had become too dangerous to be allowed to live."

He saw Jack's expression and raised a hand.

"Hear me out—please. Consider the following scenario. It becomes widely known that the active constituent in gnarl juice is a relatively simple crystal whose structure lends it certain interesting quantum properties. A few years of research, and the substance will be synthesized. A few more years and the crystals will be incorporated into automatic direction-finding equipment. Pilots and nav-zombies will become obsolete. The great monopolies will collapse. A new era of space flight will begin."

He paused.

"It sounds all good, does it not? But technology won't stop there. One of the main parameters in the current human social equation will change drastically. History will repeat itself—only this time on a grotesquely expanded scale."

Tril Wumford considered their puzzled faces and grimaced. "Consider the nature of the Coralia Crystals. Their quantum states, and those of any structures derived from them, depend on the states of others of their kind. This correlation is non-local, and therefore instantaneous and unaffected by distance. Furthermore, unlike in other quantum systems, these states can be easily controlled. Suitably correlated systems can therefore be used for instant communication over arbitrary distances."

Jack whistled tonelessly. Then he shrugged. "So what? It's all for the better."

Trim Wumford shook his head. "Have you learned nothing from history? Have you forgotten the Listerite revolution? Can you imagine what it would mean if the colonies were linked in the manner of a single world?

If communication was virtually instantaneous? If the precious protection afforded by the cumbersome delays of interstellar travel is suddenly removed? If there's no place to hide anymore?"

Trim Wumford regarded them shrewdly. "I'm sure Jim Heldin would see the bitter irony."

"Heldin?" Claury echoed.

Trim Wumford eyed her unsympathetically. "Forgot your history? Jim Heldin was the Listerite leader who caused the collapse of TransNet in 2065, and who had to flee Earth because his name was reviled and because people didn't understand. Under a false identity he came, with his wife and the first wave of colonists, to Coralia, and contributed significantly to the exploration of this world.

"Heldin would have been horrified to learn what your fathers' researches were leading to: a galaxy-sized replica of the communication-web that once spread across the Earth. Initially that was a blessing and a boon, as such things often are; but then, when the peoples of the Earth had become sufficiently dependent on it, it turned into a tool of oppression."

He pointed a pudgy finger at them. "*That's* what will happen—again. Only this time it won't be just one planet. It will engulf all the human worlds. Control will go into the hands of precisely those who *shouldn't* have it; who are ruthless and greedy enough to seize the opportunities and use them for their own ends—and the inevitable detriment of everybody else—just like InfoGen tried to in the twenty-first century.

"*Then* it could be stopped—and it *was*. But I'm not sure that it could be stopped again."

Trim Wumford's shoulders slumped. "The monopolies now—GenSpac and the Squire—they are puny and insignificant compared to the horror your fathers were thinking of unleashing."

"And that's why you killed him," Jack said tonelessly.

"He and Gart refused to consider the consequences of their actions. Even when they finally understood the nature of the Crystals—and this was *after* your father gave you that pendant!—they persisted; refusing to acknowledge that sometimes the truth is better *not* known."

"You weren't just trying to protect Coralia," Jack said lowly.

"He was trying to protect the human galaxy," Claury said. She eyed Tril Wumford without affection. "I

loathe you for what you've done—but I think I understand why you did it.”

The fat man grimaced. “What else *could* I do?” He made an odd sound that was lost in the wind. “But you both are alive,” he added, “and, against all odds, you are together.”

He turned around and leaned on the guard-rail, slouching forward tiredly, staring out over the ocean and down into the chasm where huge breakers were slamming into the grotto underneath them. Then he straightened and reached into his jacket. Jack tensed and raised his gun. Wumford saw the movement, grinned ruefully and carefully withdrew his hand. He was holding a UnIfac which he proffered to them.

“Take it. I've removed my personal thumb-print and voice protection.”

Claury took it. “What do you want us to do with it?”

Tril Wumford shrugged. “Whatever you want. It contains certain data from the relevant areas of the Squire's network, which I downloaded into the memory matrix earlier today.”

He gave a brittle laugh. “They know who I am, of course. There was no point in concealing it. But I have certain safeguards in place; and so here I am: still in the corps, and still doing my job. The Squire fears me; and for good reason! He would like nothing better than having me dead. But he also knows that keeping me alive is ultimately beneficial to him. And if you two have done things right, keeping you alive is now equally beneficial—though no doubt even more galling—to him as well. All of which means I can leave things with you now and retire. Permanently. . .”

He took a few quick steps which brought him to the end of the guard-rail and around to the other side. Suddenly Jack undertood.

Tril Wumford shook his head. “Don't! I'm tired. You have no idea how tired.”

He held onto the rail with one hand as he looked down into the chasm opening up before his feet.

“Good luck.”

Tril Wumford turned around let go of the rail. He took one step into the void. His body disappeared from sight. The ocean received him with a thunderous shudder as another wave hit the grotto below them. The blow-holes erupted and blew a pink mist of water, Coralia Crystals, and blood across the twisted Saptak tree.



Chapter 26

The lights of Tyre lay ahead. Huil Tower reached for the sky, its bulbous tip ringed by several layers of illuminated windows. Jack made Claury pull up at the side of the road and turned on the inside lights.

“What are we going to do?” Claury asked.

Jack retrieved Tril Wumford's UnIfac from the back seat. “We'd better do this before we get to the hotel. At least out here we're reasonably private. I'm not so sure about our room.”

“That's not what I meant.”

He stopped doing what he was doing and looked at her. “I know,” he said grimly, “but first things first. The big decisions will have to wait until later.”

She looked at the instrument. “I wonder why he left this for us.”

Jack shrugged. “Atonement. I think dad might have been right. Tril Wumford was his friend.” He activated the UnIfac. “Let's see what there is.”

When he saw it he nodded appreciatively.

“Tril Wumford was a resourceful man! I wonder how he did it. I wonder if anybody suspects.”

“I don't know how to feel about him,” Claury said darkly.

“Neither do I.”

“You think they're going to let Teara leave?”

“I doubt it. We'll have to make sure they do. I think we have the means to do so now.”

Jack had the UnIfac retrieve the Squire's private com-link ID. He dictated a message for Hertzog Huil and sent it off.

“If they're going to make trouble, I think that'll convince him, don't you?”

“I hope so,” Claury said dubiously. “Unless he thinks you're bluffing.”

“I don't think he'd risk that.”

“You hope.” She didn't sound convinced.

“Trust me.” Jack used his own UnIfac to call Cale on the *Lister Diamond*.

“I'm uploading you a secured data-block. The key is the name of that blonde you were so keen on in our first year at the academy. Can you decode it for me, read it, verify the data, encode it again, and spread it around some of the cores? Just so it's guaranteed to be *somewhere!* Make sure it's encoded and has a, say, three-week obsolescence flag tagged to it.”

Cale's image nodded. "Done."

Jack pressed a key and transmitted a copy of his message to Squire Huil.

There was a small delay. "Got it," Cale said.

"Good. This is a copy of a message, which will be sent to the Squire if he refuses to allow Tera to depart. Needless to say, it's strictly between us. You may find it a bit cryptic. We'll talk about it when we come on board."

Cale's image grinned.

"Done. Cale out."

Claury gave Jack a crooked sideways grin. The electric motors whined and their vehicle regained the road. Presently they merged with the traffic of Tyre and arrived back at their hotel.

"I don't feel like going out tonight," Claury announced.

Jack agreed with her. They ordered room service and had dinner on the balcony, looking out over the lights of Tyre, thinking their private thoughts and saying their goodbyes to Coralia.

It was 0815h and Tera had not arrived. There had been no message either.

"They're not going to let her go," Claury said.

Jack, who had been pacing up and down, picked up Tril Wumford's UnIfac from the bed and activated it. He called up the Squire's private com link.

A few seconds elapsed. Squire Huil's face appeared on the display. When he recognized Jack his face hardened.

"How did you get this number?"

Jack grinned without humor. "It's an insecure universe we live in. You've read the message I sent? If Tera isn't with us in half an hour the same message will be sent to every address on Coralia's public networks as well as the networks on all orbiting ships." He made a negligent gesture. "I suggest that you clear her ID and allow her to leave Coralia with us later today."

Hertzog Huil eyed him unpleasantly. "What makes you think you can..."

Jack broke the link.

"He's not happy," Claury observed dryly.

Jack glanced around their hotel-room. "Got everything?"

Claury nodded.

"I guess we'll just wait."

Tera arrived two minutes before the expiry of the deadline. She hugged them both. She was pale and they could see that she had been through an ordeal of sorts. But now was not the time to ask.

"Let's get out of this place. You have your ID tab?"

Tera nodded.

"Is there anything else?" Claury asked her, noting that Tera had arrived without luggage.

"I just want to leave," the Coralian said.

A taxi took them to the shuttle terminal.

"What did you tell my uncle?" Tera wanted to know. "He came into my room, almost foaming at the mouth, shouting something about being blackmailed by cretins."

"My, my," Jack said siccantly.

"We persuaded him that it would not be in his interest to deny our requests," Claury added.

"He's very angry," Tera said.

"I imagine he would be," Claury laughed.

"I've never seen him like this."

"He's had to adjust to novel circumstances," Jack said. "And this is just the beginning."

Tera looked from one to the other. "You two are scary."

"We try our best"

The conveyance arrived at the terminal. They disembarked and left their bags at the *Lister Diamond's* service counter.

Jack took a deep breath and indicated the immigration gate; a narrow tunnel—about two meters long and just wide enough to allow passage of a single person—through the transparent meta-plast barrier which separated Coralian territory from what was effectively 'outside'. Two Coralian security guards, armed with plasma projectors, flanked the entrance. If anything went wrong here, Jack thought, their own weapons wouldn't do them much good.

"Who goes first?" Jack asked

"Tera," Claury said. "I think we'd want to be on this side if there's any trouble."

Jack nodded at the Coralian. "Don't worry. You'll be fine. We'll follow in a few minutes."

Tera, her face pale but determined, headed for the scanner. On the other side of the barrier—right on time—appeared Cale. He waved at them and gave Tera a beaming smile. Her steps quickened. After the briefest of hesitations she inserted her 'card into the reader and passed into the narrow tunnel. She waited.

A light at the exit changed from red to green, indicating that she was cleared. She recovered her 'card from the reader and stepped out of the gate and into Cale's arms.

Cale waved. Jack made a gesture indicating for his friend to wait for them. They went to the back of the departure lounge, found a quiet place, and surreptitiously dumped their weapons and the spare magazines into a trash receptacle. Then they joined the short queue which had suddenly formed in front of the immigration gate. There were another few apprehensive moments as they were scanned, but finally they were both on the other side.

Jack hugged Claury and only now allowed himself to believe that they had succeeded.

"Let's go," he said to Cale.

Teara looked back through the barrier at the Coral-ian side. "I can't believe I got out of there," she whispered.

Cale put an arm around her. "They told you they'd get you out, didn't they?"

Teara looked at Claury and Jack. "I don't know how to thank you."

Jack laughed. "I'm sure we'll find a way."

Together they walked off to meet the waiting shuttle.

The *Lister Diamond* was cruising through A-space. Coralia was left far behind. Three more stops to Herrykairn. Two weeks, give or take a few days.

"You're determined to stay there?" Cale asked.

The four of them sat at their favorite table in the *Life Tide* café on the promenade; relaxed for once; breathing easily, drinking expensive wine.

"It's a good place," Jack told him.

Cale sighed. "I've been thinking about that transmission you sent me. It's even more unbelievable that everything else."

"Tell me about it," Jack agreed.

"What are you two going to do now?" Teara asked them. "You don't appear the kind that just settles down and takes it easy."

Claury laughed. "No, I guess not."

"Same goes for you," Jack said to his friends. "What are you going to do when this trip is done? Seems to me like you could do with jobs yourselves."

Cale eyed him suspiciously. "Why do I get the feeling that you already have something in mind?"

"Maybe because I do." Jack chuckled. "You see, I've been thinking."

Cale groaned and rolled up his eyes. "More trouble!" he said glumly.

"Shut up and listen." Jack said without rancor. "I've told you what Tril Wumford said to us, and I agree that the issue is ambiguous. But I also think that Wumford had a somewhat extreme view of the whole situation. 'Fanatical' may be the correct term. He was willing to kill for his convictions—even if the target was his friend."

Jack sighed. "But he knew what he was talking about! We ran through some historical databases. The situation on Earth at the time of the Listerite revolution *was* grim. If Wumford is right, it would be criminally irresponsible of us to even contemplate doing what I'm going to propose."

He glanced at Claury; found support there.

"But I'm not sure he is right. The historical parallels are suggestive, but that's it. Earth was a finite territory. Space is not. On Earth there was nowhere to run. In the galaxy there will always be another place; somewhere to hide if you don't want to play the game. Also, while it is true that the potential for a grotesquely magnified repetition of the InfoGen affair is possible, it's also true that the forces potentially opposed to such a development have similarly augmented resources. Dad once told me that Newton's first law applies universally and at all levels of existence. Call me an optimist, but I'd like to think he's right—and if he is, then Tril Wumford's fears are, if not unfounded, then at least exaggerated."

Jack paused and pondered his friends. "I think we should try and set up a lab on Herrykairn and see if we can synthesize the crystals. And if we do, then we'll see where we take it from there. We'll have a head start on everybody. Maybe, if we do it right, we can have our cake and eat it, too."

Cale whistled softly. "That's a pretty tall order, Jack."

Jack nodded. "Might as well go all the way." He paused. "And there's something else. I've been thinking about Jim Heldin and I wonder if he's still alive. A lot of people around from that period still are; people who remember the Listerite revolution—maybe even some who took part in it."

"I think I'd like to find Jim Heldin before we do anything drastic. Unlike Tril Wumford, Heldin seems to

have been a man with the courage of his convictions, but without the burdens of the fanatic." He shrugged. "So, there's another task for us."

Teara nodded thoughtfully. "I like it."

Cale looked at her with an expression of surprise. "You do?"

"It's risky," she said. "But it's good. I mean, what else are we going to do with our lives?"

Jack felt Cale's eyes on him. He grinned crookedly. "Listen to your girlfriend. We could do with your skills, your support, your friendship. It'll be a lot of work—and maybe, just maybe, it'll be futile. But it's worth a try. The potential rewards are significant."

"They certainly are," Cale agreed. "And, of course, Coralians will do their best to sabotage any effort in that direction."

"If they knew," Jack agreed, "and even then only if they could get close enough—which isn't likely on Herrykairn, where you can see them coming at you light-years off, and where the local authorities would be completely on our side. Of course, we'll need some laboratory equipment. But we can take our time with that. If we do it right, nobody'll ever suspect."

Cale eyed the petite Coralian at his side. "What do you think?"

Teara beamed at him.

Cale grinned. "That decides it." He reached out and shook Jack's hand. "You've got yourself a partner." He glanced at Teara. "Two?"

She nodded.

"Two *more* partners," Claury interjected briskly. She hooked her arm under Jack's and gave Cale a dirty look.

Cale raised a placating hand. "Forgive me!" he laughed.

"This time."

Jack smiled. He reached out, picked up his glass from the table, and held it up. "Here's to us and to our enterprise. May we be blessed with good fortune, and may we kick the butts of Coralians and GenSpac managers alike: right across the galaxy."

The other three picked up their glasses, clinked them together in the ancient ritual, and emptied them. Then they ordered another bottle of red wine, and, for a while at least, forgot about the long way ahead.

THE END

