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# THE TOWERS OF TORON

Samuel R. Delany



First Book Publication

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BEYOND THE INVISIBLE BARRIER

"We have received warning. The Lord of the Flames is loose on Earth once more."

Once before the Lord of the Flames had been driven halfway across the universe. His return would mean a new era of chaos and conflict for the populace of Earth.

The Lord of the Flames was a strange adversary—a force of evil devoid of physical substance. He sought warmth in unpredictable places: creeping into the soul of a worm or the stem of a flower or into the mind of a man.

Unless his hiding place could be discovered, the Lord of the Flames could crumble the world once more to ashes. But finding him was not a simple matter. Evil is everywhere and the thing from space only lurked in one being at a time.

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SAMUEL R. DELANY presents *The Towers of Toron* as the second of a trilogy dealing with the same epoch and characters. The first of the group was *Captives of the Flame*, Ace Book F-199. Prior to that, his novel *The Jewels of Aptor*, Ace Book F-173, received considerable acclaim.

Delany resides in New York City and is a prolific and talented young writer, whose work in poetry and prose have already won him awards. He is currently working on the third novel in the story of the war of Toromon.

**THE  
TOWERS  
OF  
TORON**

**Samuel R. Delany**

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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*Yes, Antoine, I was writing another novel.*

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THE LUNAR EYE

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## I

**E**NGRAVED on a four-by-five card in graceful black letters that leaned across the shiny surface like dancers:

*To Her Grace the Duchess of Petra  
 "We Have an Enemy Beyond the Barrier"  
 You Are invited to Attend a Ball at Dawn  
 Given by his Royal Highness  
 King Uske  
 In Honor of Our Successful Effort  
 And Impending Victory  
 In Our War with  
 Ketrall*

Two things caught the eye about this invitation: first, the paper was enamel-smooth except for the space around the word "Ketrall," as if some other name had been rubbed off and this one substituted, and second, there was a ten inch coil of wire taped to the lower right hand corner with a black bead at one end.

Petra tore loose the coil, threaded the wire into the revideo, pressed the button, and it was drawn into the machine. The screen glittered with dots of color that became the face of a blond young man with gaunt unhealthy features. "Well, there you are, dear cousin," said the face with languid insolence. "You see, I'm attaching this personal entreaty with your invitation. Do come away from your little island to my big one. You were always my favorite relative and life has been passionately dull since you went into—what else can I call it?—seclusion. Please, dearest Petra, come to my party and help me celebrate our coming victory. So much has happened in these three years since I saw you last. So much has happened. . . . So much has happened. . . . So much has happened. . . ."



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The Duchess made a disgusted sound, banged the shut-off button, and the face disintegrated. "A tic in the message wire," she said. "And since he conquered Tranu six months ago, you'd think he'd have the decency to print new invitations instead of scratching the name off the left-overs and printing across the blank space. Ambassadors of Tranu are going to be there—prisoners of war in fancy dress—and you'd think he'd have the decency . . ." She let out a long breath.

"We're in a country that isn't used to war. Perhaps the etiquette of conquest . . ."

"There is no etiquette of conquest," she cut him off. She brushed her hand across her sunrise copper hair pulled back from her temples and forehead by a burnished cluster of gold sea-serpents. "But there is a sense of decency that's like a barometer to a man's or a country's health. I don't know, Jon. Perhaps I'm too much in love with some idea of the aristocracy; I was born into it; I turned away from it when I was young. And now I'm back in it again. I think we're going to attend this ball, Jon Koshar."

"With Arkor too?"

"Yes," she said. "The three of us will be needed again. You received a warning, didn't you?"

The black-haired man nodded.

They turned at a sound behind them. Doors shaped like double mollusk shells fanned apart, and in the doorway stood a giant seven feet and a handful of inches tall. On the left side of his face three scars jagged down his cheek and neck, darker parallel welts in dark skin. "When will we leave?" he asked. The triplex of scars was the brand with which the frequent telepaths among the tall forest people were marked.

"Tonight," Petra said.

"You're going to take Tel and Alter," said Arkor. It was a statement, not a question.

Jon frowned. "Are you, Petra?"

"We're all going to pay my cousin the King a visit," she told them. "We've received warning. The Lord of the Flames is loose somewhere on Earth once more."

"We drove him halfway around the universe three years ago," Jon said.

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"Well, we may have to do it again."

Across the evening salmon-colored clouds strung out like floating hair. Red light caught on the polished brass rail that ran around the yacht deck. Water flopped at the side of the boat. "Everyone's aboard," Jon told the Duchess.

"Then we can start." She turned and issued an order. Engines rang out like plucked chords on a musical instrument. The ship mounted, then plunged forward toward the night. As blackness washed the sky and stars stuck diamond-tipped pins into evening, Jon and Petra lingered at the rail. "Where is Ketrall?" she asked.

"Who knows." Jon motioned toward the horizon. "Somewhere beyond the radiation barrier, some other oasis of life out in the dead misty land we call our planet. It's probably the same as Tranu. Only it isn't fortunate enough to be populated with humans as Toromon is."

Suddenly one of the motormen cried out from the yacht bridge. "Toron ahead!"

"We're nearly there," said Petra. They looked over the prow of the ship, across the dark water.

Imagine a black gloved hand, ringed with myriad diamonds, amethysts by the score, turquoises, rubies. Now imagine that glittering hand rising slowly above the midnight horizon, in each jewel an internal flame. Thus, the great island city of Toron thrust over the edge of the sea.

The windows of the Grand Ballroom in the royal palace of Toron rose coffin-shaped two stories toward the ceiling. As the panes lightened, the musicians blew windy music from their tuned sea-shells, and above the marine chords, the weaving voice of a theremin dipped and climbed. Emerald and coral gauze swirled from the women's arms. Purple and crimson satin glistened on the doublets of the men.

Through the wide windows, against the ending night, the dark band of the transit-ribbon leaped away from the laboratory tower of the palace and disappeared among the other towers of the city until, at last, it soared over the sea, over the mainland beach, over the forest of lush titan-palms and descendants of the oak trees of an Earth fifteen hundred



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years in the past, across the penal mines where men and women prisoners toiled the metal tetron from shafts sunk in the twisted rocks, across groved plains where only in the past three years had vegetation dared creep, and at last into the mainland city of Telphar. Telphar—the strongest military establishment Earth had ever seen, her generals boasted.

“A ball in the morning!” the young girl in the ruby silk exclaimed. The shoulder of her dress was fastened with a copper lobster whose beaten tail curved down to cover her right breast. “Don’t you think this is a wonderful idea, to have a ball at dawn?”

The elderly woman beside her pulled her thin lips tighter. “How ridiculous,” she said softly. “I remember when balls were affairs of taste and breeding.” A caterer passed them offering hors d’oeuvres. “Just look,” the woman continued who wore on her head a silver wig coiled through with roped pearls, “just look at that!” Strips of fillet were wound about toasted circlets. “That fish came from the aquariums. Fish from the aquariums served at an affair of state! Why I remember when no one would think of serving anything but fillet imported from the mainland fishermen. Aquarium-grown fish! Why, the idea. What have we come to?”

“I never could tell the difference between one and the other anyway,” the girl in the ruby dress replied, munching into a patty of fish-roe and chopped scallion.

The woman with the silver wig humphed.

Jon Koshar moved away and wandered through the hall, over the polished white floor that shimmered with the reflections of fabulous gowns. Isolated to one side of the room and swathed in furs were two representatives of the forest guards, the lonely giants of Toromon’s forest on the mainland. Further away were the six-legged, arthropod ambassadors from Tranu. A few feet nearer stood three squat ambassadors from the neo-Neanderthal tribes that lived in the ruins beyond Telphar. They wore crude bronze wrist bands and leather skirts. Three years ago, Jon Koshar reflected, three years ago the empire of Toromon, of which the island Toron was capital, did not even know of their existence. But now  
... now ...

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Someone screamed.

Jon whirled around as the scream came again across the ballroom. Heads turned, people crowded forward on one another, then pushed back. Jon was shoved sideways and someone put an elbow in his chest. More people screamed, backing away from what was coming across the floor!

Something inside that had always made him go against crowds took him forward, and suddenly he was at the edge of the clearing. An elderly man in a bright red suit was staggering about, his hands against his eyes. Behind him a scarlet cape billowed, sagged about his ankles, then billowed once more as he lurched forward.

Sticky crimson bubbled between his fingers and dribbled down the backs of his hands, staining his scarlet cuffs still darker. He cried out again, and suddenly the scream turned into liquid gurgling.

The man went down on one knee. When he came up, there was a smear of blood over the white tile and the knee of the trouser leg had deepened to maroon.

Another figure had detached himself from the crowd, slim, blond, dressed in white. Jon recognized the King.

The staggering figure splattered to the floor at His Majesty's feet and rolled over, his grasping hands falling from his face.

Now more people cried out and even Jon gasped in a breath and bit down on it like metal.

Blood puddled from both cuffs and trouser legs. Red jelly slipped away from what had been a face. Suddenly the barrel chest collapsed and the red cloth that had covered flesh now sagged down till it obviously draped no more than the spikes of meatless ribs. Reflexively one hand raised two inches from where it lay on the bloody cape, then fell back, bones separating, scattering, as the stubborn radial tendon dissolved. At the same time, the skull rolled away from the neck: cheek bone, nasal cartilage, and chin chuckled over the tile.

Through the crowd across from him Jon saw the red-headed figure of the Duchess moving toward the arched ballroom entrance. Immediately he turned, made his way to the edge of the room, and in three minutes had skirted the floor



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to the entrance where the Duchess was waiting. She seized his shoulder. "Jon," she whispered, "do you know who that was? Do you know?"

"I know how it was done," he volunteered. "But not who."

"That was Prime Minister Chargill, the head of the Council." She took a breath. "All right. Now you tell me how."

"When I was in prison at the mines," Jon said, "a not too close friend of mine was an expert toxologist, and sometimes he used to shoot off his mouth. That was terenide. It's an enzyme acting as a cellular tranquilizer."

"You mean the body cells get so tranquil they can't even hold onto one another?"

"That's about it," Jon said. "The results are what you saw happen to Chargill."

The music, which had stopped, suddenly resumed, and above the twining melodies a casual voice sounded over a loud-speaker system: "Ladies and gentlemen, I am so sorry that this unpleasantness has interrupted my morning party, so terribly sorry. I must request you, however, all to repair to your homes. Our orchestra will now play for us the Victory Anthem of Toromon." The melody on the theremin halted abruptly, then plunged into the soaring theme of the Victory Anthem.

"Come up to my suite immediately," whispered the Duchess to Jon. "There's something I wanted you to see before this. Now it's imperative."

Across the room, the first light stained the panes a polished copper in the immense coffin-shaped windows. Like violet blades, light slanted through the ballroom, over the heads of the scurrying guests avoiding the scarlet horror drying on the ballroom floor.

Jon and Petra hurried through the arched doorway.

The Duchess Petra had secured a family suite among the personal chambers of the palace. A few minutes after they left the ballroom, she ushered Jon through the triple door into the softly lit, purple-carpeted room. "Jon," she said as they stepped inside, "this is Rolth Catham. Rolth Catham, this is Jon Koshar, whom I told you about."



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Jon had stopped at the door, his hand half extended, looking at the man in the chair. He wanted to close his eyes and rub them, but what he saw was not going to go away. About half of Catham's face was transparent. Part of his skull apparently had been replaced with a plastic case. Through it Jon could see blood boiling along the net of artificial capillaries; metal teeth studded a plastic jawbone, and above that an eyeball hovered before the ghostly gray convolutions of brain, hidden by a web of vessels.

Jon's mind thawed from the first surprise, and he said out loud, "Catham. Catham of *Catham's Revised History of Toromon*." He jumped at the first familiar thought in his mind, turning it into a pleasantry. "That's right, we used your book in school."

The three quarters of Catham's mouth that was living flesh smiled. "And your name is Koshar? Is there any connection between you and Koshar Aquariums or Koshar Hydroponics? Or for that matter with Dr. Koshar who discovered the inverse sub-trigonometric functions and applied them to the random system of the spatial co-ordinates—which is more or less the technological reason behind the present conflict Toromon has gotten itself engaged in?"

"Koshar Aquariums and Hydroponics are my father. Dr. Koshar is my sister."

Chatam's one mobile eyebrow shot up.

"I told both of you before that I would have surprises for you," the Duchess said. "Professor Catham, we're going to exchange stories this evening. Just a moment. Arkor?" the Duchess called.

In the silence following, Professor Catham caught Jon staring at his glittering visage. The three-quarter smile came again. "I usually announce right off whenever I meet someone for the first time that I was in an accident fifteen years ago, a freak explosion out at University Island. I'm one of General Medical's more successful, if a trifle bizzare experiments."

"I figured it was something like that," Jon said. "I was just remembering once when I was in the prison mines. There was an accident and a buddy of mine got one side of his face smashed in. Only General Medical was pretty far



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away, and the medical facilities out there were never particularly famous anyway. He died."

"I see," said Professor Catham. "That must have been the mine disaster of '79. Did they do anything about safety conditions after that?"

"Not while I was there," Jon said. "I went into prison when I was eighteen and the tetron explosion was in my first year. Five years later, when I got out, they hadn't even changed the faulty cutter machinery."

Just then a door in the side of the room opened and Arkor came in.

At the sight of the triple scars that branded the giant's neck, the historian's eyebrow was raised once more. "Do you always keep a telepath in your service, Your Grace?"

"Arkor is not in my service," the Duchess said. "Nor are we in his. Professor, this is very important. Not twenty minutes ago Prime Minister Chargill was assassinated. I'd like you to go over what you told me when I spoke to you earlier."

"Chargill," began the historian, and the single eyebrow now drew down toward where the other would have met it in a frown, "assassinated?" Then the half-face relaxed again. "Well, it's either the Malis who are responsible, or perhaps the council itself wanted him out of the way . . ."

"Please, Professor," said the Duchess. "Will you repeat what you told me before. Then we'll add what we can."

"Oh, yes," Catham said. "Oh, yes. Well, I was telling the Duchess, when she first called me at the University, or rather ferreted me out of . . . Well, anyway—" he looked from Jon to Arkor, to Petra, and back—"anyway," he went on, "Toromon is perhaps the strangest empire in the history of Earth. You have lived in it all your lives so its unique properties do not strike you, but to one who has studied the development of the world before the Great Fire, fifteen hundred years ago, its uniqueness is immediately apparent. Until three years ago, Toromon's empire consisted of the island of Toron, the handful of islands scattered near it, and the fifteen hundred or so square miles of mainland opposite the islands, a strip of beach, then meadow lands, bordered by forests, bordered, in turn, by an uninhabitable rocky crescent that more or less cuts off this fifteen hundred square miles

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from the rest of the mainland continent, which is still hopelessly radioactive. After the Great Fire more than a thousand years ago, this area I've outlined was completely isolated from the rest of the world by radioactive land and two freak radioactive currents in the sea. Until recently, we never thought that there was anything left on earth to be cut off from. There were several good technical libraries that survived the Great Fire, and our ancestors fortunately were literate, educated people; so we have a fairly good picture of what the world was like before. And although there was some economic and social back-sliding at first, when a balance was finally achieved, technology began to progress once more and within a comparatively short time, it had equaled that of our ancestors, and in many non-destructive areas, far surpassed it. Very early in our history, we discovered the metal, tetron, as a source of power, the one major fact that our pre-Great Fire ancestors seemed entirely ignorant of, from the records we have.

"Now what is unique about Toron is simply this. No empire that we know of before the Great Fire ever survived for fifteen hundred years, first of all. Nor did any empire ever exist for over a hundred years or so in complete isolation from any disruptive force. Nor did any empire, country, or even tribe that was in isolation ever continue to develop once it had been isolated.

"Yet, through the strange set of circumstances I have outlined—the surviving libraries, the intelligence of our ancestors, the geographical diversity of our land allowing for interchange between rural and urban cultural patterns—Toromon has existed for one and a half thousand years in isolation while still managing to preserve a constantly developing technology. The details of this process are fascinating, and I have devoted most of my life to their study, but that is not what I want to explore now.

"The effect of this situation, however, is like a thermite explosion going on inside a sealed bottle—for fifteen hundred years! It doesn't matter how long it takes, eventually the bottle will explode. And the longer the bottle remains sealed, the further the fragments will fly. With the discovery of these other oases of life in this radioactive world, that



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explosion has taken place." Catham leaned forward in his chair now and meshed his fingers together like the interlocked tines of two forks. "Sixty-eight years ago Toromon's scientists conducted the first experiments in matter transmission across wires. The transit ribbon was built between Telphar, our one city on the mainland, and Toron, our island capital. Then Telphar was cut off from us by an increase in the radiation barrier—almost as if the area of Toromon's empire were being purposely diminished to hasten the final explosion. Three years ago we learned that an atavistic mutant race, living on the other side of the first barrier had managed to increase the radiation artificially using some surviving equipment from before the Great Fire." Catham turned to Jon now. "Three years ago, as well, your sister, Dr. Clea Koshar, discovered the inverse sub-trigonometric functions and their application to the random system of spatial co-ordinates. In six months the old transit ribbon was turned into an antenna that could beam matter wherever we wished, and Telphar, inhabitable again, became a military establishment to send men, by the thousands, from any place on the globe. We annexed the neo-Neanderthal race that had manned the projectors, the same way that we had annexed the forest people forty years previously. Contact was established with one non-human mutant race, Tranu. We conquered them in a year. Now we have contacted Ketrall, and we are already hopelessly at war." Catham raised one hand to his transparent cheek. "Why a war? Why not peace? Toromon has been too long held in. That's all I know."

"I thought you would mention what I saw as the most obvious thing about all of this," the Duchess said. "Three years ago, before we even knew that there was anything on the other side of the radiation barrier, it was decided by the council that there must be an enemy of Toromon's somewhere, and the council had my cousin, the King, officially declare war. The war started before the enemy was even discovered, and Toromon has been officially at war ever since, seeking out one new enemy after another. Do you remember the incident that caused war to be declared, Professor Catham?"

"Yes. The King's younger brother, Prince Let, was kid-

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naped. That must have been done by some early group of malcontents. The Malis go back quite a way, but they never were as strong as they are now. All they actually accomplish is stirring up trouble that goads on the war. And no one, so I hear, will even walk through the Devil's Pot after dark."

"It never was a particularly savory area of the city," replied the Duchess. "But Professor Catham, now I'm going to tell you my story. It's a lot briefer than yours, and a lot more incredible. But it's true. And we'll prove it. Toromon has had access to wireless matter-transmission on a large scale for three years. There are at least two other races in the universe that have had access to it for billions of years. They use it to travel among the stars. These races aren't even composed of individuals, but are rather collective consciousnesses. Their method of interstellar travel is more psychic than physical. One seems to be a sort of amoral experimenter. The other race, a much older one, is benevolent and composed of three centers of consciousness, rather than one, which seem to check and balance one another. We call it the Triple Being.

"You spoke of Toromon's uniqueness, it's combination of isolation and development. The experimenter, whom we call the Lord of the Flames was also aware of Toromon's uniqueness, and from the outside he began to meddle in order to keep it isolated as long as possible. You wonder where the neo-Neanderthals got the equipment and knowledge to close the radiation barrier? It was the Lord of the Flames.

"Jon, Arkor and I were contacted by the Triple Being three years ago. With their help we rooted out the agent of the Lord of the Flames among the neo-Neanderthals, though too late to stop the major explosion. But he's back again, Professor Catham. What the results of his presence will be this time we don't know. Incidentally, the kidnaping of Prince Let was our doing. For the past three years he's been safely with the forest guards on the mainland. We hope that eventually this hysterical war will end, and then Prince Let can come back and perhaps straighten out whatever's left of Toromon, if there is anything. While he was in the palace with his mother and brother, his very life and sanity were in danger. It was all we could do."



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"I see," said Catham. "And you're going to prove all this? Why tell me about it in the first place?"

"Because we need someone with an historical orientation to help us and advise. The Triple Being will only help so much, in order not to upset our culture pattern by introducing extraneous upsetting elements. The first advice we need is what to do with two youngsters that helped us in our first effort, a boy and a girl. The boy, Tel, had run away from a small fishing village on the mainland to Toron when he got involved with us. The girl is an acrobat. They were very helpful to us then, but we don't need them any more, and it seems a shame to keep them away from society this long. But they have a tremendous amount of information that might be dangerous especially to them. And there's one more problem." She turned to Arkor. "Bring the kids in, will you?"

Arkor turned from the room. He came back followed by a boy about seventeen with dark skin and sea-green eyes. After the boy came a girl perhaps a year older and nearly an inch taller. Her skin was tanned the same as the boy's, but her hair was the color and texture of bleached silk, and her eyes were fog blue. Both looked surprised at the apparition that was Catham, but they were silent.

"The special problem is this," the Duchess told him, and reached for a button on the arm of her chair. At her touch, the lights in the room dimmed to half their original brightness.

Rolth Catham started forward in his seat. He was sitting alone in the purple carpeted room—with five empty, but animated suits of clothes, a woman's sitting in the Duchess's chair, two men's standing beside it, and the scant garb of the two youngsters hovering by the door. But though the lights were dim, they were still bright enough to see that the bodies inhabiting them had vanished.

From the chair the Duchess's voice, natural and unruffled, continued. "During the time we were first involved in this affair, the Triple Being went as far as to make us immune to certain frequencies of radiation by restructuring our crystallization structure. The side effect, however, was that the index of refraction of our bodies' substance took a nose dive. Which means that when the light gets below a certain

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intensity, we disappear . . ." The light went up, and the five people were back in the room. "So you see the problem. That demonstration, incidentally, is our only real proof."

"I'm impressed," Catham said. "No, I don't believe you. But I will take it on as a theoretical problem, which might be fun to work on. You want to know what to do with the kids? Spray them with pigmented viva-foam, turn them out on the world, and leave them to their own devices. The remaining three of you concentrate on the Lord of the Flames." Catham rose. "You can contact me back at the University. I must say it's all very interesting. But I seriously don't believe it's anything more than a psychotic fantasy on your part." He smiled his three-quarter smile. "And that's a shame, your Grace, because you have a terribly vivid imagination. But I will advise you to the best of my ability, however I can." He stopped. "Consider this before I go. You say you're responsible for the kidnaping of Prince Let three years ago? The government finally decided it was Malis. Malis probably are responsible for Chargill's death—if he is dead. In your fantasy world, aren't you perhaps responsible for that?" Catham went to the door, opened it, seemed surprised to find it not locked, and went out.

Arkor, Jon, and the Duchess looked at one another.

"Well," said Arkor. "He is serious about advising us, but he doesn't believe it."

"That's better than nothing," Jon said.

"Arkor, find out what in the world viva-foam is, and get hold of some as soon as possible," the Duchess said.

## II

FIFTEEN copper centi-units, on top of an empty cardboard crate, had been arranged into a square—minus one corner.

Then a hairy fist whammed the surface, the coins leapt, and the three men who had been kneeling around the box fell backwards spluttering. "What's the idea?" demanded one with curly brown hair.

"Hey! Hey, you look at me!" A grin slashed the wide face



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of the interrupter. Squat, barrel-broad, with no neck and little chin, he had hair and eyebrows the color of unraveled hemp. "Look at me!" he bellowed again, threw back his head, and laughed.

"Aw, cut it out," whined the green-eyed, heavily freckled kid they called Shrimp. "Why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

Lug's squat torso rolled back on his pelvis and his brachydactylic hands slapped at his low, heavy stomach. "I pick on—" He turned to the third man. "You!"

Waggon, the third man around the crate, had the same thick physique, only his hair was wiry and black and his forehead even lower.

"Aw, leave Waggon alone," Shrimp complained. "We're trying to teach him to play a game."

"He's my size," grunted Lug, giving Waggon a playful wack on the shoulder.

Waggon, who had been concentrating on the coins, looked up surprised, his wide eyes blinking. Very little white showed around his pupils.

"Leave him alone, Lug," Shrimp said again.

A second time Lug belted Waggon's shoulder. Suddenly Waggon rolled to his feet, ropes of muscle knotting along his shoulders, arms, and thighs. He leaped, and they tumbled to the floor. The other recruits looked up from their bunks where they sat reading military pamphlets. One seven foot forest guard who had been leaning by a double-decker bed peeled himself away from the olive colored wall, and walked toward the two sprawling Neanderthals. Suddenly he reached for them. There was a howl, another howl, and then Waggon and Lug were dangling by their collars from the forest guard's fists. "Why don't you apes learn to do a passable imitation of human beings?" the guard asked in a reasonable voice.

Big-pupiled eyes blinked, fists folded like cats' paws, and the nearly opposable big toes, sticking through the open-toed boots, curled in. The forest guard let go, and they bounced to the floor, catching themselves on their knuckles. They shook themselves like dogs and lumbered off, at once seeming to have forgotten the incident.

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"Look ho," came a voice from the door.

Everyone snapped erect as the sergeant entered, followed by three new recruits: a forest guard with a shaved skull, a dark skinned black-haired boy about seventeen with vivid sea-green eyes, and an unusually squat Neanderthal who kept blinking.

"New men here," the sergeant said. "Look ho. Ptoron 047 AA-F." The shaved guard stepped forward. "Tel 211 BQ-T." Tel, green-eyed and silent, stepped forward. "Kog 019 N-N." The blinking Neanderthal moved up now. "All right you guys," the sergeant said, "don't forget there's an orientation meeting in"—he looked at the ceiling chronometer—"eleven minutes. When that gong sounds, hustle!" He turned from the room.

The three newcomers relaxed and tried to smile as half a dozen men called out perfunctory, "Hello."

Green-eyed and freckled Shrimp came over. "Hey, any of you fellows interested in a game of chance? Why don't you come over with me and get to know some of the guys. My name is Archibald Squash. Really. Imagine a mother naming a kid Archibald. But you can call me Shrimp." He seemed to be directing his attention more and more toward the Neanderthal. Now he turned directly to him and said, "Your name is Kog, right? Well, come on over and join the game."

Tel and Ptoron looked at each other, then followed Shrimp and Kog to where another man was arranging coins on top of the cardboard crate.

"Hi, Curly," Shrimp said. "This is Kog. Kog, Curly. Kog wants to play a little game with us, Curly. That's right, Kog." His enthusiastic friendliness seemed forced to Tel. But the Neanderthal grinned warmly and nodded. "You just sit down here," and Shrimp, his hand on Kog's shoulder, pushed him to a squat beside the crate. "Now this is the way we play—you got any money?—you arrange the coins in a square, four-by-four, but with one corner missing. Then you take this here deci-unit and just flip it across the box-top so that it hits the corner, see? And two coins fly off the far edges of the square, like that. Now we number the coins on the far side—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven—get your money out, Kog—and you bet on two of them. Let me show you.



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I bet on two and six. Now I flip the coin and—two and five fly off. Here, you get half a unit. That's cause only half my bet came in." He placed a half-unit piece in Kog's hand. "Now. You want to try."

"Eh—yeah." Kog nodded. "What do you call this?"

"Randomax, randy, double-dice, cut-coin, seven-down, take your pick."

"Randy?" Kog asked.

"Randy," repeated Shrimp. "All right. Now put your money down. Fine. Your bet?"

"Huh? Oh. Eh—two and six."

Kog flipped, the coin struck the vacant corner, and the two coins that were neither two nor six flew from the edge.

Shrimp made a regretful sound and Curly picked up Kog's unit note.

"Huh?" asked the Neanderthal.

"Oh, it's not over," Shrimp said. "That's just a first try. Now we all go again."

Glittering coins and crumpled notes landed on the box-top and the coin was flipped again, then again, and then again.

A bewildered frown had chiseled itself into Kog's face when suddenly the smooth-skulled forest guard leaned over the make-shift table and said levelly, "How about giving me a chance at that?"

Shrimp looked up, at first surprised, then uneasy. "I was just gonna suggest we break up the game. I mean . . ."

"Come on," insisted Ptorn. His long arm reached across Tel's shoulder and his brown fingers squared the coins. Shrimp and Curly exchanged worried looks.

"Money," Ptorn said and put a unit note beside the coins.

Curly said, "I think I'll throw in my rag right now." From around the box Shrimp kicked him and Curly's hand which had started leisurely for his winnings jerked back like a lengthened spring released.

"Three and five," Ptorn said. His wide ivory-yellow index nail struck the milled edge.

Three and five leapt away from the square.

Ptorn picked up the money. "Two and six," he said, moving the corner coin back for another shot.

Click-click.

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Two and six shot away.

Again Ptoru crumpled unit notes in his fingers. "Two and four."

"Now wait a minute." Shrimp interrupted.

"Two and four."

Click-click.

He waited while they placed the final bills in his double width palm. Then he dropped the money in front of Kog. "This is yours, ape," he said, and walked away.

Shrimp sucked air between his teeth. "Them God damn big boys," he muttered looking after the guard. "How do they do it, huh? How? It's a perfectly fair game, but they win it every time." Suddenly he looked directly at Tel and smiled. "Hey," he said. "I bet you're from one of the mainland fishing villages."

"That's right," Tel said, smiling back. "How did you know?"

"Your eyes," Shrimp said. "Green. Like mine. You know, us fishermen got to stick together. What made you hitch up with the army?"

Tel shrugged. "Nothing else to do."

"That's the truth," Shrimp said. "Oh, this here is Curly, my partner in crime. He's a farm boy."

Curly was still brooding over his randomax losses. "I'm no farm boy," he grunted. "I ran with a Mali gang in the Devil's Pot for almost a year."

"Sure, sure," Shrimp said. "You know, this *is* a perfectly honest game. On His Majesty's yellow locks, I swear. But somehow . . ."

A gong broke the air like china and a metallic voice wedged into their ears. "All new recruits report to the Stadium of the Stars. All new recruits report to the Stadium of the Stars."

"That's us," Shrimp said, and among the others, he and Tel, with Curly behind them, started for the door.

Among the central buildings of Telphar to which the activity of the recruits was restricted was one structure that sank into the city like an inverted blister. Large enough to hold ten thousand beneath its canopy of flood-light simulated



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constellations, only one section was filled with new restless, rangy soldiers.

On the dais glinting officers looked like clock-work toys. One approached the microphone, coughed into it, and as the echo staggered from wall to wall through the arena, he began: "We have an enemy beyond the barrier. We have made contact with two intelligent species beyond the radiation barrier, and both have proved so hostile and abominable to every principle that mankind. . . ."

Among the six hundred new soldiers, Tel sat, and listened, with more questioning than some, and not as much as others.

Then there was free time for the recruits until the next day when they would be moved to training headquarters. Tel still tagged after Shrimp and Curly. "How does that game really work?" he finally asked when they were walking back to the barracks over the raised highway.

Shrimp shrugged. "Actually I don't exactly know. But somehow, the apes just don't have a chance. Oh, it's honest. But they just don't seem to win more than one out of ten. Regular people like you and me, well, we do all right and get better with practice. But those big guys—just forget it when they're around. Aren't you coming inside with us?"

They stopped at the barracks door. "Naw," Tel said. "I think I'm going to keep walking and see what's around."

"I can tell you it's not much," Shrimp said. "But suit yourself. See you later."

As Tel went off, Shrimp started in, but Curly looked after the figure disappearing down the roadway.

"What are you waiting for?" Shrimp asked.

"Shrimp, what color are that kid's eyes?"

"Green," Shrimp said. "A little darker than mine."

"That's what I thought too, this afternoon. But I was looking at them all the way back here, and they're not any more."

"What color are they then?"

"That's just it," Curly said. "They're not nothing. They're just like he's got two holes in his head."

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"Hell, it's halfway dark. You just couldn't see."

"Oh yes I could. And I swear there wasn't a thing behind his eyelids. Just holes."

"This evening air's no good for you, boy," Shrimp said, shaking his head. "Come on inside and I'll play you an honest game of randy."

Tel wandered up the darkening roadway. He took a covered ramp that mounted from one spiraling ramp to the next and came out above most of the surrounding buildings. Only the Central Palace was noticeably higher than this one. As the roadway wound up to the dark tower, he could look across the triple railing over the smaller buildings of Telphar.

Below the city stretched toward the plains, and the plains toward the mountains which still flickered faintly purple from the radiation barrier along their snagged edge. Mercury lights suddenly flicked on and bleached away the shadows on the ramp. Looking up, he saw a figure perhaps twenty yards away, another recruit out exploring.

As Tel approached, he realized the man was shaved bald. Then, coming closer, he recognized the forest guard who had arrived with him that afternoon.

Ptorn saw him and waved. "How you doing?"

"Fine," Tel said. "You just out walking too?"

Ptorn nodded and looked back over the railing. Tel stopped beside him and leaned on the top bar. A breeze pulled their sleeves back from their wrists and tugged at their open collars. "Hey," Tel said after a minute. "How did you work that thing with the randomax game?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Huh?" said Tel. "Sure I would. Try me."

Ptorn turned sideways against the railing. "If you really want to know, try and follow this: suppose you're in the city, say in Toron, and you're on the sidewalk. Now let's say one of those big trucks Koshar Hydroponics uses to ship stuff from the docks to the warehouses is coming down the street. And let's say it stops about a quarter of the way from the end of the block. What happens?"

"It stops?"



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"Well, no, I don't mean stop exactly. Let's say it just cuts its motor."

"Then it goes on rolling."

"How far?"

Tel shrugged. "That depends, doesn't it, on how heavy the truck is, or how fast it is going?"

"Right," Ptoron said. "But if you were crossing the street, you could judge pretty accurately whether you'd have time to get over, or even just about where the truck would stop—once you saw it start to slow down."

"I guess so," Tel said.

"Well, do you realize that when you do that, you're doing unconsciously a problem that would take a mathematician with pencil and paper who knew the exact weight of the truck, speed, rate of deceleration, and friction component of the wheels at least a couple of minutes to solve? Yet you do it in under half a second with only the inaccurate information your senses can gather in a moment or two."

Tel smiled. "Yeah, that's pretty amazing. But what's that got to do with the game?"

"Just this. You and I can do that. But if you put one of the apes on that street corner, he'd have to stand there until the truck came to a dead stop before he'd dare cross over. Oh sure, if you taught him the mathematics and gave him a pencil, paper, and all the factors, he could figure it out in about the same time any other mathematician could. But he couldn't just glance at the decelerating truck and figure where it would stop."

"I still don't quite see," Tel said.

"Well look—the way you men can just figure out by looking at things that the apes could never perceive, we can figure out things with just a glance that you men couldn't see either, like what angle and how hard to shoot that coin to make the ones we want fly off the edges of the randomax square. If you can judge the direction and the velocity of the coin, you can figure the give and play of forces in the matrix and how it'll work out by the edge."

"I think I understand," said Tel.

"I can't explain the mathematics to you, but you can't explain the mathematics of your slowing car to me."

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"I guess not," Tel said. Suddenly he looked up at the forest guard and frowned. "You know when you said 'men' just before, you made it sound like something that—wasn't you."

Ptorn laughed. "What do you mean? The apes are part of you, just like you men are part of us."

"There," Tel said, "even just now. Can't you hear the way you say it?"

Ptorn was quiet a moment. Then he said, "Yes. I hear it."

And the quietness suddenly repelled the youngster. "About the game," he said. "Could any of—us men, do what you did just guessing?"

Ptorn shrugged. "I suppose some exceptional minds among you could. But it's really not important, is it?"

"I guess not," Tel said. "Us men," he repeated. "What do you call yourselves, if you don't think of yourselves as men?"

Again Ptorn shrugged. "We think of ourselves as guards, forest guards. Only the 'forest' isn't so important."

"That's right. Sometimes you're referred to as forest guards, sometimes as forest men. Why's that?"

"As 'guards' we guard your penal mines at the edge of the forest and return escaped prisoners."

"Oh yes," Tel said. "I'd forgotten." Again he looked over the dark buildings. "I knew an escaped prisoner once, before I joined the army." He was quiet for a moment.

"What are you thinking about?" Ptorn asked.

"Huh?" said Tel, looking up again. "Oh. As a matter of fact I'm thinking about a necklace."

"A necklace?"

"Yeah," Tel said. "It was made of shells, polished shells that I strung on leather thongs."

"What's that got to do with the escaped prisoner?"

"The girl I gave it to knew the prisoner too. It got broken once, stepped on. But I fixed it later. It was a pretty necklace. I polished the shells myself."

"Oh," Ptorn said, a little softly, a little gently.

"What do you suppose all those lights are way over there at the edge of the city?" Tel asked.

"I'm not sure. Maybe they have something to do with the



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basic training camp. That looks like it's out in the restricted part of the city, though."

"Yeah," said Tel. "But then why would they have lights on if there weren't any people there?"

"Who knows." Suddenly he stood straighter. "Hey, look."

"What is it?" Tel asked.

"Can you see? Some of them are going off, just flicking out."

"Oh yeah, I just saw one. I wonder how far away they are?"

"I'm not sure," Ptorn said. "The ones that go out aren't coming on again. I wonder what it might have to do with basic training. You know it's supposed to be a pretty tough six weeks."

"I hear it's rough."

"Yeah," said Ptorn. "But so are the Ketrall."

"You know," said Tel, hunching his shoulders. "I haven't seen any of—you guards in the recruits who can read minds, the ones with the triple scars."

Ptorn stood up from the rail. "Really?" he said. "What do you know about the telepaths?"

"Nothing," Tel said. "I just know . . ." He stopped. "Well, I knew a guy once, I mean a guard, who could read minds. And he'd been scarred . . ."

"You know a lot of interesting people, don't you," Ptorn said. "Did you know that very few of you men know about the telepathic guards? Very, very few. In fact I'd say there were only about forty of you who knew."

"You're—not a telepath?" Tel asked.

Ptorn shook his head. "No. I'm not. And you're right. There are none in the army. They don't draft any."

"I don't usually talk about them," Tel said, warily.

"I think that's good," said Ptorn. "That's good." Suddenly he dropped his arm around Tel's shoulder. "Come on back to the barracks with me, kid. I want to tell you a story."

"About what?"

"About a prisoner. I mean about an escaped prisoner."

"Huh?"

They left the railing and walked toward the ramp that would take them back to barracks level. "I used to live near

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the penal mines, Tel. Not all of the forest guards patrolled the mines, but if you were born near them, chances are you would. We're organized there into squadrons, platoons, sort of a miniature army. Further away the tribes of guards are much more informal, but near the mines where there's a job to do they have to be fairly strict. The guy in charge of our platoon was a quiet guard, with three scars banding his cheek and neck. We would sit around the campfire, talking or wrestling, but Roq—that was his name—would stand against a tree and watch. At the time I speak of, it had just gotten dark, and the sticks on which we had roasted our meat still leaned against the rock-rimmed fireplace, their tips shiny with grease. I could feel rain in the air hanging behind the still leaves.

"Then a branch snapped, leaves brushed one another, and Larta entered the clearing. Larta was a lieutenant in Frol's platoon that patrolled the woods a mile away. The left side of her face was also run with triple scars. She pushed a black pelt from her shoulder so that the swinging fur shimmered with orange firelight. Silently she and Roq conversed for perhaps ten seconds. Then, still without looking at the rest of us, they spoke so we would understand. 'When will they try to escape the mine,' she asked.

"'Just before dawn,' Roq said.

"We all listened now.

"'How many will try to run,' asked Roq.

"'Three,' said Larta. 'There is the old man with the limp. He has been at the mines fourteen years. His right leg was smashed in the cave-in five years back. He holds hate in his brain like a polished ruby, flickering behind his eyes with a secreted flame. He is crouching beside the guard-house steps, rolling a twig between his fingers while he waits, trying not to think of the pain in his leg, feeling very old. Beside him is the heavy one. The texture of his mind is like iron and mercury. He is very conscious of his body, and as he crouches, he is thinking of the roll of fat where his legs bend at his waist and his stomach rolls across itself under his prison uniform. He is conscious of the six freckles on his right cheek and the ten on his left. There is an appendectomy scar across the right side of his belly, and he thinks of that



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now, briefly seeing the white walls of the General Medical Building with their chrome handles. He has always tried to give the appearance of an easy, adaptable person around the prison camp, flowing quietly and precisely into the few new situations that arose. But the determination with which he worked on this escape—the dirt under his nails is damp and crumbly, and feeling it roll out between his fingers, he remembers how he was nearly caught in the tunnel they dug with spoons and shoes and hands even to get so far as the guard house—the determination is cool and hard. The third one, the youngest one, with the black hair and the stunned eyes crouches behind the other two. Think of a smooth pool of water. Then think of something bright thrust up from below, a fire-blade, its sparks glittering in the surface ripples. This is how the idea of freedom thrusts from his young, arrogant mind.' As Larta spoke, the rain began, thin and gentle through the night.

"Roq said, 'They huddle closer now. A cord is tied across the guard-house steps in front of the entrance that faces back toward the shacks. The rear guard always leaves this way a moment before the forward guard leaves by way of the entrance facing the jungle. The first guard will trip on the cord and cry out. The second guard will run back to see what happened, and then they will dash across the spotlight strip into the trees. Mercury and Iron planned it. The Flicking Ruby tied one end of the string, and the Sparkling Blade tied the other. They are waiting, alone with their breathing and the thin rain.' We sat still and waited too. Larta returned to her platoon.

"That's primarily the story," Ptorn said. "The actual escape, how they heard the first guard cry out and the second run, how they sped across the strip and got separated among the dark wet trees; or how in the darkness I tracked beside the Secret Ruby, heard him limping over the damp leaves not seven feet away, heard him stop, hesitate, then whisper, 'Hank, Jon, is that you? For the love of . . .' and then I flicked the hilt of my fire-blade, and the wet leaves shone with glaring greenness, and he staggered back and screamed, the ruby of hate confounded in the corners of his eyes; he screamed again, then fell full face on the soft black

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earth. I drew the blade away, flicked the hilt again, and the brittle sparks died, and his body went out. Or how the chubby one screamed, and screamed, and clutched himself to a dripping trunk, his cheek pressed against bark, and screamed. And the mercury vaporized, and the iron flooded him with hot liquid fear. And at last he cried, still clutching the tree, 'Who are you! God damn it, where are you! Nol God damn it, come out and show yourself! It's not fair! Oh please, it's not fair . . .' And we circled him, and circled closer. Or, how we carried the bodies back at dawn, in the rain, and left them in the mud outside the shacks—that is really beyond the story, the real story of the escape."

They had almost reached the barracks. "Why?" began Tel. "Why did you say this to me?"

Ptorn smiled. "We only brought back two bodies. The third one, the youngest, got deterred into the radiation fields where we couldn't follow him. He should have died. But he didn't. He escaped. Now you said something about knowing an escaped prisoner, and there's only been one escapee in the past sixteen years. Also you know about the telepaths. And besides, your eyes are funny. Did you know that?"

Tel blinked.

"I'm not a telepath," Ptorn said again. "But any forest guard would have told you that story if you had said what you did. We trust each other with information a lot more than you men do. We—perceive things a little more clearly."

"But I still don't understand . . ."

"Look. We're going into basic training tomorrow. In six weeks we'll be off to Ketrall. Until then, friend, keep out of any more random games. They may not be as random as you think. And keep your mouth shut."

They turned into the barracks.

### III

THE ISLAND CITY of Toron is laid out in concentric circles. In the center along colonnaded streets are the Royal Palace and the towering mansions of the wealthy merchants and



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industrialists. Buildings stare wide-windowed at each other, many of the windows composed of layers of stained glass rotated across one another by hidden machinery. Brass or marble railed balconies lip the upper stories. Leisurely people dressed in dark colors wander along the trees.

The outer ring is the waterfront, piers, wharves, public buildings and warehouses. Clinging just inside is the section known as the Devil's Pot, a raveled webbing of narrow streets where furious gray alley cats stalk overturned garbage, and wharf rats are as big as double fists. Living here is the vast laboring population of Toron, and the less vast but more vicious underworld of the city, consisting of the roving gangs of Malis that range inward from the island's rim.

Between the inner and outer rings is a section of commonplace apartments, rooming houses, and even occasional private dwellings. Here live clerks and craftsmen, salesmen and secretaries, doctors, engineers, lawyers and supervisors, those who had worked hard enough and been lucky enough to rise out of the confusion of the Pot, and those too weak to cling to the center who had been flung off the whirling hub.

In a two room apartment in one of these houses, a woman lay on her back, her eyes closed, her mouth opened, her fingers twined in the bed sheets. She was intensely conscious of the city on both sides of her. And she was trying not to scream.

She clamped her jaws and her eyes snapped open in a doll's mechanical stare. On her door was a name-plate that said—black letters on yellow metal—CLEA RAHSOK. Rahsok was her real name spelled backwards. Once her father, at her suggestion, had called a branch company of refrigeration equipment. "Rahsok". She had been twelve when she first suggested it to him. Now she was using the disguise for herself. She had lived between her father's house and the University until three years ago when she had made three discoveries.

Now she lived alone, and did very little but walk, read, figure in her notebook, lie on her back, and try to keep from screaming.

The first thing Clea had discovered was that someone she loved, loved with an aching fondness that made the back of

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her neck tingle, that made her jaw clench and her stomach suddenly flatten itself whenever she thought of him (his short red hair, his broad taurine body, his sudden grin and the deep inside laughter like a bear's growl)—this someone was dead.

The second thing she had discovered (she had been working on it for half her stay at the University and nine tenths of the time that she was supposed to be spending on the government project she had joined right after she received her degree) was inverse sub-trigonometric functions and their application to random spatial co-ordinates. The result was a paper presented to the University and then again before a select board of government councilors. The conclusion still threaded through her mind: ". . . and so, gentlemen, it is more than conceivable that by converting the already extant transit-ribbon, we may send between two hundred and three hundred pounds of matter anywhere on the globe with the pin-point accuracy of microns." Anywhere! Anywhere at all!

The third thing that she had discovered—

—But something first about her mind. It was a hard, brilliantly honed mathematical mind. Once she, along with fifty other mathematicians and physicists, had been handed three pages of radiation data in order to discover a way over, under, or around it. She had looked at it for three minutes (after having put off picking it up for over three days while she scribbled in her notebook on her own pet project) and announced that the radiation was artificial, generated by a single projector that could be destroyed, and thus solved the problem. In short, it was a mind that cut through information to the correct answer even when the incorrect question had been asked—

—She had discovered the third thing when she had been assigned to work on a small section of a top secret government project after the presentation of her paper on sub-trigonometric functions. She was not told what the project was nor the significance of her part, but her mind, working from her section, had carved and carved at the mystery. It was part of some immensely complex computer, whose purpose, apparently, must be—must be— Her body jerked upright



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on the bed, the sheets falling from her breasts, and she was breathing very fast in the darkness.

When she made this discovery, she disappeared. The easiest part of that was the trivial disguise of her name. The hardest was convincing her father to let her take this apartment. Between the two was the careful destruction of some government records; all copies of her contracts to work for the crystallizing war effort, and the record of her retina pattern on file from her birth. She banked on the general war confusion to keep them from searching her out. After she was established in her two small rooms, she methodically began to dull the edge of her amazing mind.

She went for longer and longer periods away from her books, tried to ignore the war propaganda that flooded the city, made as few decisions as possible, and if she did not succeed in actually blunting her mind, she sufficiently blurred her perception of its keenness to accomplish the same end.

She thought a lot about the person who had died, less about sub-trigonometric functions, and when she came anywhere near the third thing, she would think immediately about something else, about not screaming, not screaming, keeping silent and still.

Crumpled on her desk was a poster she had once peeled from a board fence. Across its green surface, scarlet letters proclaimed:

*We have an enemy beyond the barrier*

Clea put on her bathrobe, walked to the desk, and started to reach for the poster. Suddenly she turned around, and went into the front room without turning on the light. Her clothes were over the back of a chair. Quietly she put them on. Then she went to the door, stepped into the hall, and went to the stairs. Blue-grey dust wedged into the corners.

At the front door she saw Dr. Wental trying to get in. When she opened it for him, he grinned at her, scratched his thin, wrapping paper colored hair, and crashed into the door-jamb.

"Dr. Wental!" Clea said. "Are you all right?"

Still smiling, the doctor nodded vigorously. "Spirits . . ." he

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said. "You be quiet, now. We have to get upstairs quietly so my wife won't—" His Adam's apple gave a little leap and he tapped his lips gently with his fist, looking guilty. "—won't know. Quietly." His extended arm landed on Clea's shoulder and he sagged against her as his knees gave in different directions. "Beautiful green spirits, Miss Rahsok. If you will excuse a terrible pun, I am in really fine . . ." But he hiccupped again. "But many too many, much too much. Will you help me upstairs, Miss Rahsok, quietly?"

Clea sighed, and supported Dr. Wental along the hall. "So my wife won't know," he said again. "Oh, this war is a dreadful thing. We have an enemy beyond the barrier, but what it's doing to us back here, in Toromon . . ." He shook his head. "You have to work to get ahead and get the better things in life. But it's hard." He paused to shake his head again. "Occasionally you just have to let go . . ." At the word "go" he slipped back down two of the six steps they had negotiated. Clea whispered, "Damn" and clutched the handrail. "You know," continued Dr. Wental, "all this increased production, of all sorts of equipment? And a good civilian just can't get a hold of any of it. I've got a man coming to me tomorrow with a case of lupus erythematosus. He was recommended to me by a specialist. I did some research in it a few years ago, and I came up with a few things too. But how can you treat lupus erythematosus without adrenocorticotrophic hormone. You look in the General Medical Catalogue and there should be enough around to treat an army. But try to get some and somebody in a white smock tells you, 'I'm sorry. Private doctors can only get minimum rations during this period.' What am I going to tell this man. Go away? I can't treat you? I can't get the drug? And he has as much money as the sea has salt. I'm an honest man, Miss Rahsok, just tring to get the better things for my family. That's all, really." They had reached the doctor's door when suddenly the doctor fell against the wall. The forefinger of his left hand pressed against his lips for quiet, while he tried to put his thumb into the print lock.

As Clea went down the hall again, she heard the raspy whisper behind her, "Quietly, quietly, so my wife won't know."



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Outside the breeze from the sea lapped the houses and wedged into the streets. Her black dress was buttoned tight around her neck, and her black hair (once it had been braided with a silver chain, and she had danced in a white dress with a man who had short red hair, whose shoulders were box broad, whose words were quietly wise, whose laugh was like a bear's growl, who wore a military uniform—and was dead—her black hair was tight back in a bun that took her fifteen minutes each morning to brush, comb, and roll up straight and lacquer stiff.

Carefully, so carefully she unhooked the top of her collar, and as the flap fell open, she sucked coolness into her chest, past her stomach, deep against her diaphragm. She walked on more easily.

"Hey, lady."

She jumped, but it was a policeman. As he approached, his uniform changed from the dull color of the undersides of maple leaves to bright olive as he stepped into the ring of light from the street lamp.

"Isn't it sort of late for you to be wandering the streets like this? Malis from over in the Pot beat up a man and near killed him last night just six blocks from here. You'd better go on home."

"Yes sir," Clea said.

The officer walked on, but Clea stood a moment. Then she turned and started away. When she had gone twenty steps, she glanced back, perhaps to see if the officer were watching.

Under the street lamp where she had been a minute before was a girl with silken white hair. Clea frowned just as the girl dodged to the side—and vanished!

Clea opened her mouth. The moment the girl had stepped out of the direct beam of the lamp, she had disappeared, gone out like a candle flame. Clea blinked. Then she turned and hurried toward home.

Halfway she stopped. About three blocks down, she recalled, was an all-night bar with a monumental array of pin-ball, slot, and bowling machines.

She came home at six o'clock the next morning. The bar-

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tender for the last two hours had simply leaned on the counter and watched the woman with the tight bun and the high black dress who drank only soft drinks and amassed phenomenal scores on the gaming machines.

A woman with a scarf around her head was setting out a garbage can in front of the building.

"Up bright and early, Miss Rahsok?" asked the woman, wiping her hands on her checked housedress. "It's good to get up early and take a walk. Shows a proper attitude. With this war on it's so hard to stay cheerful. I just wish we could send letters to our boys, or hear what it was like, or send packages. Then it would be so much easier. Sometimes I just think, 'Oh, Jommy! Jommy! If you could just be here for a . . .' But it's so hard. Now you take my oldest daughter, Renna. You'd think she would appreciate how hard it is. What with all the really eligible young men off beyond the barrier a girl has to be particularly careful about who she knows, and whom she goes with. I keep trying to introduce her to nice boys, but she will just pick up with anybody. Oh, it's awful. If a girl's going to get ahead, she's got to be careful. Renna is seeing some dreadful boy named Nonik. Vol Nonik. And do you know where his parents live?" She pointed toward the Pot. "And he doesn't even live with them—"

"Excuse me," Clea interrupted. "I—I have some work to do and I've got to get upstairs. Excuse me."

"Oh, of course, of course," said the woman, stepping back from the doorway. "But you know a girl can't be too careful."

Inside the apartment, Clea stood by the closed door, thinking, 'His arms were strong. He caught me in his arms once when we were walking single file along the stone wall by the wharf. His laugh was like a bear's growl; he laughed when we watched the two squirrels chattering at one another on the campus lawn the day he came to visit me at University Island, and his words were quiet and wise. He told me, 'You have to decide what you want.' And I said, 'I want to work on my project with the sub-trigonometric functions, and I want to be with you, but if this war . . .' And suddenly I realized how profound a thing he'd told me then and realized that having said what I wanted out loud, to him,



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they were so much easier to have, even though the war . . . the war! He's dead!"—and she stopped thinking.

On the desk she saw her slide rule and her notebook sticking out from under the crumpled poster, and she remembered, ". . . in brief, what all this mathematics boils down to, gentlemen, is that these inverse sub-trigonometric functions do apply to the random spatial co-ordinate system I've outlined and define it precisely; and so, gentlemen, it is more than conceivable that by converting the already extant transit-ribbon, we may send between two hundred and three hundred pounds of matter anywhere on the globe with a pin-point accuracy of microns." Anywhere! Anywhere at all!—and she stopped thinking.

She closed the window, lay down on the bed, and again memories flooded her mind. She had begun work on the computer not long after the paper. *Something for an input that will take information from one and a half to three and a quarter kilo-specs, and can handle at least forty thousand data; that's the first thing you can work on.* Quite idly she assumed that it must be an input that takes information directly from the human brain, seeing as the neo-Neanderthal's brain energy had just been measured at one and a half kilo-specs while the strange cortex of the brains of the forest guards produced up to three and a quarter. No, it was not an obvious correlation to make. But she had the information and made the connection as someone else might reason that a thermometer whose specifications stated that it read at least ten degrees higher than ninety-eight point six would be employed in taking abnormal human temperatures. Later on she saw on a colleague's desk a schematic for a switch-over circuit for the same voltage differential that would change an input to an output. She pondered the removing or establishing of up to forty thousand bits of information directly into a human mind. She solved the problem of the forty thousand data by getting tri-faceted tetron crystals to respond to a frequency/multi-frequency hum and coding the overtones. With ten crystals, each about the size of a pin-head, she achieved a sorting system that would handle sixty-seven thousand, one hundred and forty-nine data (three to the tenth power) and was quite

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proud of her margin. Once, while exploring the far wing of the building where she worked, she saw through an open door where an artist had left pinned to the wall several sketches of grotesque, imaginary marsh-scapes, and some structurally impossible anatomical dissections of hideous imaginary insects. Two weeks later rumor got around that two artists working in the building had undergone pre-frontal lobotomy at the insistence of the government psychiatrists. Some other tiny things: a messenger carrying those same sketches and a spool of magnetic tape into an office two flights down; what might have been the same spool changing hands between a white-smocked technician and a military official; her own inquiry after the pictures: "Oh those? They were burned. They weren't needed any more," said the violet-eyed lab technician; what seemed like the sudden disbandment of the entire project which resulted in her being set to something else; the first reports from the conversion of the transit-ribbon from wire- to wireless-matter transmitter; and then a conversation at lunch with an acquaintance from an entirely different department: "... doing work on a weird computer. It puts information right into the brain with tapes. I can't imagine what a human brain is going to do with sixty-seven thousand bits of information, but that's what its output is. Can you imagine?" Clea imagined. One or two other minor details came long. Then one day she was walking by the wharves late one evening when the sky was the hue of split sapphires between the long red clouds, when it hit her: one—he was dead! two—anywhere, anywhere at all! three— She stopped thinking. She was going to scream.

Think about something else, about not screaming, about being still, about nothing. . . . Slowly the tension eased from her throat, from her fists, from her calves, and she slept.

Late that afternoon she got up, washed her teeth, hands, wrists, neck, and face. She ate. Then she went out to buy the next day's food. Somewhere among all this she had worked out a novel way of calculating every other place of pi, but she had forgotten it by the time she again wandered along the evening streets with darkness rolling toward her.



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The first sound that jerked her mind to the surface was a cry to her left. There were footsteps in the alley beside her, a thud; another cry, then several sets of footsteps. At first she started to turn away, but something made her go forward.

She looked around the corner, then pressed back against the wall. Malis! Two men and then a woman ran forward to where an already indistinguishable number of number of people were brawling in the street. Someone jumped back, a man was kicked hard in the stomach and rolled over the pavement. A woman screamed, cursed, and staggered with hands over her eyes.

Someone broke loose from the fray, a girl—with silver-white hair!

Clea felt something catch in her stomach. The girl ran in a diagonal taking her vaguely in Clea's direction. Then two men were suddenly in front of her. Something fanned white sparks as one man raised his arm.

A fire-blade!

As the arm descended, Clea saw the reflection near her feet, a thin white line against a disk of water. She reached down, grabbed the bucket from beneath the rickety drain pipe at her side and dashed the contents over the figures. The power-blade shorted, steamed, and went out, falling harmlessly across the white-haired girl's arm.

But now her safe position behind the drain was known. The girl, dancing back, looked at Clea, and Clea looked back. Her eyes! She thought. Good lord, she has no eyes!

But someone was coming toward her now: the man with the fire-blade. Water shown on his face and his grin looked like the split rind of a rotten kharba fruit. She kicked at him and dodged, thinking (the way she would think of the fluctuation in the second derivative of a forth degree log function, sharply, coolly) of how he supported his weight mostly on his left foot and used his right to propel himself; and when she was about to be overtaken, she whirled to face him and brought the side of her shoe down hard on the top of his right foot—he was barefooted—at the same time jamming her elbow in the darkness that was his stomach.

As he went down under her double attack, she fled, hear-

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ing her own footsteps, then others in counterpoint, lighter, overtaking hers. Again she whirled, thinking, I will throw myself in whomever it is and bite for the neck; they won't expect that.

But she stopped when she turned, the ludicrous thought rising in her mind like a thin blade from beneath a smooth surface: but she does have eyes, bright blue eyes!

They were under a street lamp.

"Come on," the white-haired girl said. "Down this way. They're still coming!"

They turned the next corner, ran the block, dodged down two more alleys, then slowed.

Clea jerked the air into her lungs, trying to form the words, *All right, who are you*, her tongue working over them as over an anticipated taste, when the girl said.

"Hey, you fight well."

Surprised, Clea looked at the girl and said instead, "Thank you." Then she said. "Your arm! What's wrong with your arm?"

"Huh?" She was holding her left hand across her right shoulder. "Oh, nothing."

"You're hurt," Clea said. She looked up at the sign. "Look, I live eight blocks from here. Come on up and I'll put something on it," and, silently, she added, find out who you are.

"Sure, Dr. Koshar," the girl said. "Thanks."

Clea jumped, or something inside her did, but she started walking.

In front of her door, her finger poised before the print lock, Clea asked, "Who sent you after me? And call me by my first name."

"All right," the girl said.

The door swung in and Clea turned on the light. "What's your name?"

"Alter," said the girl.

"Sit down over there, Alter, and take your blouse off."

Clea went into the bathroom and returned with three small bottles, a roll of tape, and one of gauze. "You haven't



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told me who sent you yet. Ehhh—that looks like someone took a vegetable grater to your shoulder.”

“I guess you shorted the blade, but it was still a little hot.” She said. “You haven’t let me tell you yet.”

“I wonder where they get those weapons anyway? Only the guards and the military are supposed to have them.”

“From the guards and the military,” Alter said. She winced as transparent liquid flowed across the raw skin and relaxed as red liquid followed it. “Nobody sent me here, really.”

“Maybe I really don’t want to know.” Suddenly the brittle tone she was trying to maintain broke and warmth flooded from beneath. “What’s this?” she asked, fingering a loop of leather thongs from the girl’s neck on which were strung brightly polished shells of green, red, and golden browns.

“A boy gave it to me,” Alter said. “It’s just a necklace.”

“It’s been broken once,” Clea said. “But it’s been fixed.”

“That’s right,” Alter said. “How did you know?”

“Because there are cuts in the surface of the leather around the shells on the right hand side, as if something heavy came down on it and crunched the pieces on that side against the leather.”

Alter looked up, her wide eyes like turquoises behind her tanned face. “That’s right, someone stepped on it—once.” Then she asked, “Why did you tell me that?”

“Because I’m astute. And I want you to know it.” Criss-cross, criss-cross, four strips of tape went over the edges of gauze padding on Alter’s shoulder. Clea went to the freezer, took out some fresh fruit, and brought it to the table. “You hungry?”

“Un-huh,” Alter said, and fell on the fruit, looking up once to say a mouth-filled, “Thank you.” When she was about half finished, Clea said, “You see if the government sent you, there’s no reason for my even trying to get away. But if somebody else did, then. . . .”

“Your brother,” Alter said. “And Arkor, and the Duchess Petra.”

“What about my brother,” Clea said softly.

“He didn’t send me,” said Alter biting into the fruit, “Exactly. But they told me where you were, and so I decided to come around, and see what kind of person you were.”

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"What kind of person am I?"

"You fight well," Alter grinned.

Clea smiled back. "How's Jon?"

"Fine," said Alter. "All in one piece."

"In three years I only heard from him twice. Did he have a message?"

Alter shook her head.

"Well, I'm glad he's alive," said Clea, moving the bottles together on the table.

"What they're trying to do with the war . . ."

"I don't want to hear about it," Clea stood up, and took the bottles back in the bathroom. "I don't want to hear anything about the damned war." When she closed the medicine chest, she looked in the mirror for the length of a held breath.

When she came out, Alter had gone to the desk, pushed aside the crumpled poster, and was looking through the notebook. "What's all this?"

Clea shrugged.

"You invented the thing that sends you over the barrier, didn't you?" Alter asked after a moment.

Clea nodded.

"Is that what this is about?"

"That's just fooling around."

"Can you explain how the barrier thing works?"

"It would take me all night, Alter. And you wouldn't understand it anyway."

"Oh," Alter said. "I can't stay up all night because I have to see about a job tomorrow."

"Oh?" asked Clea. "Then I guess you can sleep here. What were those Malis after you for?"

"I was out," Alter said. "And so were they. That's how they work."

Clea frowned. "And you don't have any place else to stay?"

"There was a place I thought I could sleep at, an inn over in the Pot, but it's been torn down. So I was just wandering around. I've been away for a while."

"Away where?"

"Just away." Then she laughed. "You tell me about how



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that over the barrier thing works, and I'll tell you about where I was. Your brother was there."

"It's a deal," Clea said. "But in the morning."

Alter went over to the sofa and lay down with her face to the back so that her bandaged shoulder was up. Clea went to her own bed. Before she sat down, without turning, she said, "I thought I saw you following me last night."

"That's right," came the voice from the sofa.

"And suddenly you disappeared."

"That's right."

"Explain."

"Ever hear of viva-foam?"

"No."

"Neither had I until four days ago. And until this morning I never had my hands on any. It's a plastic pigmented spray with pores. I'm covered with it. Otherwise, in dim light you couldn't see me."

"You'll have to go into that in more detail tomorrow."

"Sure."

Clea sat down on the bed. "Those Malis were just out? Where do they come from? What do they want?"

"Aren't you sort of a Mali too?" Alter asked after a moment.

"How do you mean?"

"A malcontent," Alter said. "Why are you all holed up here, hiding from everybody like this? With some people it turns inward, with others it turns out, I guess."

"You know everything, don't you." She chuckled.

The sound of a yawn came from the sofa.

What am I doing, Clea wondered, and thought about that, instead of screaming.

Early morning light slapped a red-gold streak across the gray wall. Someone was in the bathroom. Water crashed against the porcelain washbowl.

Then Alter walked out of the bathroom. "Hi," she grinned.

"Where are you off to?"

"The circus," Alter said. "To get a job. Want to go with me?"

Clea frowned.

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"Come on," Alter said. "Getting out will do you good."

Clea stood up, went into the bathroom, washed her face, and came out coiling the hank of black hair laboriously into a tight, black bun.

"Braid it," Alter said from behind her.

"What?"

"Why don't you braid it? It'll take half the time and it won't look so—" She gave a nameless little shudder.

Clea let her hair fall to her shoulders again, then reached up and divided it into three.

When they came out on the street, Clea's collar was open and her hair hung in a thick black braid over her shoulder. She was smiling. Only a few people were out. The sun set crowns of light on the central towers of the city. Gold caught on a balcony railing, snagged on a bright window as the light descended to street level.

"Which direction?" Clea asked, pausing to look at the towers.

"This way."

They walked between the buildings toward the Devil's Pot.

In that crushed rim of the city a vacant lot was a rare thing. The Triton Extravaganza ("The Greatest Spectacle of Entertainment on Island, Sea, or Continent") had commandeered the one two-block area and set up its emporium. Criss-cross ropes webbed green and purple canvas against the sky. Cage upon cage lined one side of the lot: pumas, an eight-legged bison, a brown bear, a two-headed fox, a giant boar, and a five thousand gallon aquarium housed a quivering albino squid. In another, tiger sharks nosed the glass corners, while further on the octopus raveled and unraveled over blue sand.

A cove of aerial artists clad in bright tights, ran from one tent, and disappeared into another. "Who?" Clea began.

"Trapeze workers," Alter said. "They call themselves the Flying Fish. Corny. Come on. I've got to see Mr. Triton."

"What's over there?" Clea asked as they started toward a large wagon at the end of the lot with its great papier maché neptune-bearded, big-bellied, and beaming from the roof.

"Huh? That's the chow wagon. Hey, why don't you go over there and get something to eat while I see Mr. Triton. I'll



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join you later but I have to audition on an empty stomach, or there'll be hell to pay."

"Well, I—" But Alter was up the steps of the big wagon; and Clea was alone. The morning was noisy and cool.

She turned toward the cook-tent where a green and yellow awning spread over wooden tables. Hot grease sizzled on the grill. Clea sat down across from a man in a purple shirt sipping chowder from a terracotta mug. He gave her a grin that pulled the sudden net of wrinkles tight around his smoky eyes.

A waitress at her shoulder said, "What'll it be, come on now, I don't got all day, please?"

"Ah, what do you have?"

The waitress frowned. "Fried fish, boiled fish, broiled fish, fish roe, fish and chips—special is eggs and fried fish, fifty centunits."

"The special," Clea said.

"Fine," the waitress smiled. "You're in for a surprise. It's good today."

The man across the table grinned again and asked, "What sort of act do you do?"

Just then a woman in a brief spangled jumper sat down beside the man and said, "Is she one of the new auditioners?"

"I'm a clown," the man volunteered.

"Oh—I—a—don't have an act."

Both the man and woman laughed.

"I mean I don't have an act in the circus."

They laughed again and the woman nodded. "I just train seals, honey, so don't hassle."

Just then the waitress slipped her a plate of bursting white fillet and scrambled eggs with butter streaming through them, down to the white crock plate. She picked up the fork, and the clown said, "Honey, you enjoy eating, don't you."

Surprised, Clea looked at him, and then down at herself.

"No, I don't mean your weight. I mean the way you look at food. Someone who looks at food like that, like it was the very special experience it is, that sort of person never has to worry about his figure." He turned to the seal trainer. "You know what I mean? Another look, and you know why they're

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fat as a tug. Or if their eyes get slightly narrow and their mouths purse in, then you've got the reason for their rail thin bodies. But the look you gave—" he said, turning back to Clea.

"Oh, shut up," the seal trainer said. "You start talking and we'll be here all day." Clea and the two circus folk laughed. Then the clown said, "Hey," and was looking over Clea's shoulder and far behind her.

She turned.

Across the lot someone had set up a trampoline. In evenly paced leaps, a white-haired figure vaulted and spun against the blue sky: back triple somersault, front triple somersault, half gainer, recovery, full gainer, recovery, jack-knife opening backwards to a reverse swan, triple back, then triple front again.

"She's good!" the clown said.

The seal trainer nodded.

Triple forward, triple forward, swan, triple back. Then a straight candle through a quadruple back into a full gainer, closing with a double forward before she hit the elastic for the last time.

People over the entire lot had stopped to look. Now roustabouts, rubes, sidewalls, and performers set up a scattering of applause.

Then Alter was coming toward the cook tent. Beside her, a man had his arm around her shoulder. He was elderly, rotund, and a great cotton-ball beard fluffed across his chest.

Clea rose to make room for them at the table, then saw to her surprise that everybody else at the table was standing too. There was a sudden, uneven, but cheerful chorus of, "Hello, Mr. Triton. Good morning Mr. Triton."

"Sit down, sit down," proclaimed Triton expansively, and chairs slid back into place. Now he continued talking to Alter. "So you'll join us the day after tomorrow. Very fine. Very fine. Do you have a place to stay, because you're perfectly welcome to sleep on the lot."

"Thank you," Alter said. "Oh, this is the friend that I was telling you about."

Surprise pulled down the corners of Clea's mouth before she caught it back up in a defensive smile.



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"You're an accountant, right? Well, I could use somebody to get the books in order. And we will be doing quite a business on the mainland tour. Be here with the kid—"

"But I—" Clea began, looking to Alter who was grinning again.

"—the day after tomorrow," finished Mr. Triton, "and the job's yours. Good morning, everybody. Good morning." Then he paused, looked hard at Clea, and said, "You know, I like the way you look. I mean the way you look *at* things." Then he called again, "Good morning."

"See, what did I tell you," said the clown to the seal trainer on the other side of the table.

"But I—" Clea repeated. Mr. Triton was walking away. "—I don't want a job—I don't think."

Alter was shaking hands with the seal trainer, the clown, and even the waitress who were congratulating her on her audition. A moment later she looked around to say something to Clea, but the black-haired woman was gone.

Clea walked, looking neither at the smoky faces of the clapboard buildings on her left, nor the screaming boy hurling chunks of pavement at a three-legged dog to her right. She looked neither at the littered gutters nor at the pale towers that rose in the center of the city. She walked straight ahead until she reached her apartment building.

"Oh, Miss Ralsok, there you are. Out early as usual." It was not yet eight-thirty.

"Oh—eh—hello."

"Like I always say," said the woman, adjusting her head scarf, "it's always good to get out bright and early." Suddenly the expression on the woman's face reversed itself, and she repeated. "Speaking of bright and early, do you know what my daughter Renna—well, she snuck out of here at sunrise this morning, and I know she's run off to spend the day with that Vol Nonik character. We were arguing about him last night. What are his prospects? I asked her. After all, I'm a reasonable woman. What does he intend to do with himself? And do you know what she told me? He writes poems! And that's all! Well, I had to laugh. I have a surprise for her though, that I'm sure will drive this Nonik in-

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dividual out of her head. I got an invitation for her to the Victory League Ball. I had to wrangle with Mrs. Mulqueen for half an hour. But if Renna goes she'll meet some nice young man and forget this idiot boy and his idiot poems. Why isn't a young man like that off in the army anyway? We have an enemy beyond the barrier, and I ask you—"

"Excuse me," Clea said. "Excuse me, please."

"Oh, of course. I didn't mean to keep you. Good morning."

But Clea had already pushed past and was walking up the stairs. We have an enemy beyond the barrier. She thought of the poster crumpled on her desk, and like the stimulus of a conditioned reflex, it released.

His arms strong, confident around me as his laughter and wisdom were confident, his bright eyes blinking in sudden sunlight, and the bear growl tenderness—he's dead. . . .

We may send between two hundred and three hundred pounds of matter anywhere on the globe with a pin-point accuracy . . . Anywhere at all. . . .

That computer, what else could they use it for, that insanely programed, crazy, random. . . .

Then she had slammed the door behind her, razoring through the thought she had been thinking and the scream that had been building in her throat. She leaned against the door and bit into the breath that plunged again and again into her lungs so hard they hurt.

She did not go out again all day. It was not until midnight that she managed to make herself leave the room for a walk. But as she reached the stairs, she heard a crash. Someone had just crumpled at the foot of them.

Frowning, she hurried quickly down. Then the someone uncrumpled slowly, grinned sheepishly at her, and put a finger to his lips. "Shhhh. Please, shhhh. So my wife won't know."

"Are you all right, Doctor Wental?"

"Of course I'm all right." Then his Adam's apple lunged upward. "Oh, excuse me. I'm perfectly all right. Really in very fine—"

"So I gather. Just a moment. Here you go."

They started up the stairs, the doctor chuckling. "Oh, the trials and tribulations that a man must go through. Oh, the



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trials." He gave another burp. "Got that poor old lupus erythematosis case in this afternoon. Did I say poor? Excuse me. I meant 'bloody rich.' In a month he'll be swollen as a blowfish. But what can you do when General Medical won't give out any adrenocorticotrophic hormone? Gave him a shot of good old saline solution with a bit of food coloring. It certainly won't hurt him and I charged him fifty units. He'll be back tomorrow. Maybe I'll be able to get some by then. But it's terribly hard, Miss Rahsok. I could almost cry."

As they reached the door, Dr. Wental motioned for silence a final time. She left him fumbling for the print lock. When she reached the front door, she stopped.

This time she did not think of her three discoveries. She thought instead, very briefly, about Renna's mother, Renna, and Vol Nonik. She thought about Dr. Wental, Dr. Wental's patient, and Dr. Wental's wife. Outside inky blackness pressed against the glass door, but beyond she could just hear the last faint tinkle of the calliope from the circus blocks away. She turned, and went back up to her room.

The next morning, her hair in a braid, her collar opened back from her throat, she walked along the deserted street toward the circus lot. Morning chill cooled the shadowed half of her face while the sun stroked the other with yellow fingers. The sea smell came in strongly from the wharves, and she was smiling.

As she walked by the fence that rimmed the already bustling lot, she saw someone coming toward her. A flash of silver white hair, and Alter, laughing, ran toward her and caught her hand. "Gee, I'm glad you came back."

"Why shouldn't I?" Clea said. "Though it was touch-and-go for a while. Why didn't you come back to my place? You could have stayed there. You had me worried."

Alter looked down. "Oh," she said. "I thought you might be angry. That job business was sort of a funny thing for me to pull." With one hand Alter was fumbling with her necklace.

"What possessed you to tell Mr. Triton I wanted a job?"

"It just hit me that it might be fun. And maybe you would get a kick out of it."

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"Well thanks. Hey, I hope your friend who gave you that necklace comes around some day. Did he put them at logarithmically increasing distances on purpose?"

"Huh?" asked Alter. "Oh, no, I don't think so. He's off in the war now. Hey, did I say something?"

"The war? No—he can't—"

"What is it?"

"Nothing," Clea said. Suddenly she put her arm around Alter's shoulder and gave a friendly squeeze.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

Clea took a breath and let her arm fall away. "I'm sure," she said.

They walked together into the lot.

## IV

THE NEXT DAY Tel began basic training.

"All right, you guys. Split up into your respective groups and report to your instruction rooms."

He came into a large classroom the far wall of which was covered with charts of machinery. There were no labels on the charts. Across the front wall stretched a full-color unappetizing swamp-scape, wreathed in mist and spiked with serpentine, leafless vegetation. A loudspeaker in the front of the room suddenly announced in a friendly voice (friendly, though oddly sexless, he noticed) "Take your seats everyone. We are beginning your basic training."

The recruits shuffled to their places at the metal desks.

"You are in the wrong seat, Private Rogers," said the loudspeaker affably. "Two to your left."

A baffled blond boy looked up, then dutifully moved two seats over.

"I am going to read a list of names out loud," continued the speaker. "Every one whose name I call must leave here and report to room 46-A. That is two flights up and along the corridor to your right. Now, Malcon 831 BQ-N, Motlon 601 R-F, Orley 015 CT-F . . ." Everyone looked a little puzzled, but the named recruits rose and went out the door.



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When nearly half the room was emptied, the loudspeaker said. "Now, those of you who are left take your earphones and put them on. Now look into your vision-hoods."

Tel slipped his earphones over his ears and rested his forehead on the support above the masked hood on the table. The magnified screen before him flickered with merging lights, misty and indistinct, mostly blues and greens, faint red blushes here and there, a tide drifting slowly, almost too slowly.

Windy music came through the phones. Then a gruff but pleasant masculine voice began: "We have an enemy beyond the barrier. We have been able to reach past the radiation barrier only a few years, but already we have discovered a menace of such inhuman and malignant design . . ."

The voice droned and the colors coalesced, forming at last a recognizable beach. White sand arched away to the horizon, blue waves broke into white froth that scudded over the beach. A girl with a remarkable figure wearing a very skimpy bathing suit came to the water's edge, touched her toe to the foam, then suddenly turned, seemed to see him, and began to run, laughing, toward him. The breeze tossed her auburn hair. Her lips parted and he could hear the waves.

Dr-r-r-r-r-r. . . .

Tel jumped back from the masked screen, slamming his spine into the back of the chair. He tore the earphones from his head. The relief as they clattered to the desk was as if two needles of pure sound had been ripped from his ear. His eyes still flickered with the after image of the blinding white light that had suddenly flooded the screen. Around him the room was in confusion, and somewhere a woman was laughing.

The laugh articulated itself, became a voice. "All right. All right. Resume your seats in an orderly manner. Resume your seats." Many of the soldiers had apparently leaped from their chairs.

The feminine voice continued over the loudspeaker. "Your reaction to that last problem was not what we hope it will be at the end of your six week course. You men who just came in"—Tel now realized that a group of completely bewildered

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recruits who had just come in were standing by the door—"did they look to you like anyone ready to fight the enemy beyond the barrier?"

Tel looked around feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable.

"All during your basic training," continued the lilting alto, "you will be presented with problems of this nature. We want calmness, alertness, and quick reactions; not confusion and disorder. Now sometimes the problems may not be as obvious as that, but watch for them. Remember, we want calmness, alertness, and quick reactions. Will you recruits who have just arrived please take your seats. Everyone regard your screens and place your head phones on."

Tel noted as he bent forward that the half of the class who had been in the room the whole period were a lot slower in putting on their earphones than the newcomers.

On the magnified screen an explanation was in progress concerning a piece of equipment called 606-B. He was shown in detail how to take it apart, put it together, and keep its numerous parts, mechanical and electronic, in smooth order. But somehow (perhaps he missed it during the twenty seconds at the beginning when he'd hesitated over the earphones) no matter how hard he concentrated, he hadn't the faintest idea what 606-B was used for. But by the time the film had continued for forty minutes he was sure he could have put one of the damn things together in his sleep.

A very gentle bell signaled the end of the period, and everyone raised his head. Tel checked his program card for his next room and got up to go. Apparently all the newcomers were assigned to stay in the same room.

"Hey," someone whispered, and Tel turned at the door. In the corner seat among the remaining recruits sat Shrimp. Tel nodded to him, but Shrimp looked perplexed. "Hey," he whispered again. So Tel went over to him. "What the hell did they do to you when we came in? You guys looked like—"

"No talking back there!" The voice from the loudspeaker this time was definitely masculine. "You in the back there, get a move on. Proceed quietly and quickly to your next class."

Tel left the room quickly.



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Two flights up he entered a room nearly identical to the one he'd left. Again the walls were covered with charts of nameless machines. The Marsh-scape spread across the front of the room. He was looking for the 606-B when a fatherly, middle-aged voice announced from the loudspeaker: "Everyone sit down. I am going to read a list of names out loud. All those I call will please report to room 51-D. Now, Ritter 67 N-T, Ptorn 047 AA-F, Tynan 811 NA-T . . ."

Tel hadn't even realized Ptorn was in the same room with him.

After lights-out they talked for a while in the dark.

Shrimp: "Hey, Lug, what did you learn today?"

Lug (grunting from the bunk beneath): "To put it together, take it apart, keep the central shaft vertical. Aw, go to sleep."

Tel: "Hey, was that the 606-B?"

Lug: "Seven thirty something or other. Go to sleep. I'm tired."

Shrimp (calling upward to Ptorn): "What did you big boys learn about today?"

Ptorn: "Not enough to talk about now. We've got to be up at six tomorrow. We have an enemy beyond the barrier, remember?"

Shrimp: "Yeah, I remember. G'night."

Ptorn: "Night."

"Tel: "Hey Lug, what's the seven thirty something used for, huh?"

Lug: (A yawn from the lower berth; then snoring.)

There is the gentle sound of breathing. someone coughs. Someone turns over and the snoring stops. Then silence, as Tel's ears filled with sleep.

The next week the platoon was shown a documentary film on Ketrall. The men filed into the auditorium and took their seats. A few put their knees up against the backs of the chairs in front of them; others puffed on the plankton cigarettes they had been issued. Tel had never found the taste of these particularly pleasant. They contained some mildly tranquilizing drug that only made him dizzy. The

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lights darkened; the screen flickered, and without titles the movie began.

The opening shot Tel recognized as a foggy swamp-scape similar to the ones at the head of so many of the class rooms. Green mud sucked and bubbled around the stalks of twining plants. Mist scarfed over the silt and writhed about. The camera shifted to a more solid stretch of land, passed by a boulder, a depression in the ground, a fragment of machinery. Was it the 606-B? The camera moved too quickly for him to be certain. At last it stopped in front of the ruins of an army barracks. One of the walls was burned away and the roof sagged. Slowly the camera dollied through the charred opening into the hut.

A man sits in a chair, most of his intestines hanging over the arm. He has no head. Several bunk beds are overturned in the corner. On a crumpled mound of bedding is a pile of six corpses. The camera dollies out of the shack. Propped against the outside wall, his legs at insane angles is a grinning soldier. His eyes are dark holes, and a black insect scurries over his lower lip and down his chin.

The camera moves on past a wall composed of burlap gravel bags. Through the thickening mist Tel can make out barbed wire strung across the wall. Fog closes across the camera lens. Then the scene cuts.

Through the haze Tel can make out a row of huts similar to the gutted one in the previous scene. A few men are walking around.

Close-up shot of a young soldier in need of a shave. He smiles at the camera, blinks, and rubs his chin with greasy fingers. Full shot of the same soldier. He is standing beside a complicated looking machine (That certainly wasn't the 606-B, Tel thought. Or was it?) He scratches his chest, looks embarrassed, then goes back to fixing the machine.

Cut to shot of barracks building. A group of men have spread boards over the muddy ground. They squat or sit cross-legged on the boards in an irregular circle. Close-up shot of the center of the circle. Someone is setting up a square of fifteen centiunit pieces with the corner missing. (There is relieved laughter through the auditorium. "Two and six," someone calls out. Tel laughs too). Suddenly, at



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some signal which the audience cannot hear, the men look up from their game. Someone scrapes the coins into his palm, and they quickly run off. Shot of the men running across the clearing before the shacks. Shots of men climbing into squat, caterpillar-tread tanks. Shot of tank's plastic observation bubble as driver takes his seat inside. Shot of four tanks starting one after another. Shot of tanks rolling away through the mist, which closes slowly behind them.

Around the twining plants the green mud bubbles occasionally. The barracks shacks are empty. The clearing is deserted.

Then a tank stops in the middle of a thickly overgrown section of swamp, one corner sunk in the mud. Twenty feet away another tank is lying on its side. The camera approaches the first tank. The observation dome has been smashed in. One metal side plate has been twisted away like lead foil. The camera dollies toward the ominous rent to peer inside the gutted interior where torn and broken—

The screen flickered. The lights went on. Though they had seen nothing through the black gash, Tel found when he released the armrests of the auditorium chair that his palms were running with sweat. The seat of his pants and backs of his thighs were also damp.

"All right," came the loudspeaker's voice, "report to your assigned workshops."

Ten minutes later Tel was disassembling a machine very like the one the young soldier had been fixing in the film. He removed an oily plate, wiped it on his apron, and looked at it in the bluish light from the spiral fixture poking from the ceiling. In the right-hand corner neatly inscribed was: 605-B.,.

He looked at the machine, then he looked up, coughed, and said, "Eh—I think there's been a mistake." He felt uncomfortable addressing the thin air. When others asked, they received answers less than half the time.

But the loudspeaker clicked and a man's voice asked, "What is it, Private Tel 211 BQ-T?"

"Wasn't I supposed to be working on 606?"

There was a long silence. Then a woman's contralto said, "The correction will be made when and if necessary."

Suddenly he felt confusion as a dozen ideas that he was

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trying to set straight all knotted together like snarled fishing lines. The confusion became rage which immediately retracted into fear. What were they trying to do to him? What was the damn machine used for anyway? And if he didn't know, how could he fight the enemy beyond the . . .

Dr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r . . .

They flung their hands over their eyes at the blinding flash that came from the blue fixtures. Before the buzzing stopped the words had leaped into his mind so clearly that at first he thought they came from the speakers: calmness, alertness, quick reaction. He froze, beating back the question that tried to squirm up into his mind, "Quick reaction to what?"

Slowly he relaxed. He was calm. He was alert. Two or three people in the shop had already gone back to work, so he picked up a connective bar from the parts rack on the table. For one sudden moment he wanted to heave it at something. But instead he fitted it carefully between the plates and twisted the helical pin into place.

That evening some of them went out on the rampway and set up a game of randy.

Shrimp: "O.K. big boy, I'll take my chances with you. Come on, hunker down here, and play me a round."

Ptorn (shaking his head): "I'm just watching."

Shrimp: "Say, how come you big guys have all been so quiet for the last couple of days? What gives up there in your superior noggins?"

Ptorn: "I'll just watch."

"Waggon: "Come on. I got money to loose."

Curley: "Play him, Shrimp. The ape's gotten better. Won fifteen units off me yesterday—before I won back twenty."

Tel: "Hey, Ptorn, why have you guys been so quiet?"

Ptorn (shrugging): "I don't know." (He pauses). "What do you think the enemy beyond the barrier looks like?"

Lug (leaning against the railing, now looks up and scratches his head): "You know, I never thought of that before."

Tel watches the guard and the Neanderthal looking across



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the railing over the city. Far away the meaningless lights blink off, and off, and off.

The third week they put him in a dark room.

"What's your name and number?"

"Tel 211 BQ-T."

Dr-r-r-r-r-r-r-

He staggered back and covered his eyes. But there had been no flash, he realized a moment later. Calmness, alertness, quick reaction.

"Turn around."

He turned.

"Walk forward."

He walked. He walked a long time, figuring at last that he must have entered a tunnel.

Dr-r-r-r-r-r-r-

Calmness, alertness, quick reaction; he kept walking, though the tension in his back and shoulders almost made them hurt. And there had been a flash, this time. But it was green and not that bright. He had glimpsed mist, and sharp plants without leaves, and mud was bubbling someplace. No, that was in the front of the room where he had his classes. Or was it someplace else, with the strange machine. . . .

"What is your name and number?"

"Eh—Tel 211 B—eh—BQ-T."

"Describe what you see."

"Eh—where?"

"Describe what you see in front of you. Keep walking."

There was another green flash. "I think—the sea?" He said. "Yes, the sea, and there are waves breaking over the yellow sand, and the little boat . . ."

Dr-r-r-r-r-r-r-

"Describe what you see." The light flashed again.

"No. I mean the 605-B, or maybe the 606-B, I'm not sure—I have to put it together. I can put both of them together. That's right. Either one. They're almost the same, but they're different down in the drive box. I fix them so—" And a sudden thought welled warmly and comfortably into his

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mind, and with it an amazing relief that started in his shoulders and washed down to his feet. "—so we can use it against the enemy beyond the barrier. That's what it's for. It must be. It's the 606-B, and I can take it apart and put it together, take it apart and put it—"

There was another green flash.

"That's Ketrall, yes, the mud, and the plants that don't have any leaves on them, all the mud, and it's foggy. And those are pebbles over there. No, they aren't pebbles. No, they're shells, very pretty, red and brown and milky shells, like somebody polished them for a long—"

Dr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-

Dr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-

Dr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-

The pain that built in his back, his thighs, his arms, nearly made him collapse before he knew it was there. At last he stopped talking, staggered back, and put his hands over his eyes, though again there had been no flash.

"What is your name and number?"

"Eh—Tel—My name is Tel 60—5—6—Tel—"

"What is your name and number."

Something gripping at the back of his throat suddenly released and a scream let loose that had been lodged somewhere in his stomach, "606-B! 605-B! I don't know! I don't know They wouldn't tell me which one! They wouldn't tell me!"

"Wat is your name and number."

"Eh—eh—Tel 211 BQ-T."

"Describe what you see."

"I see—I see the mud, and the plants, and the shacks where the soldiers are. They are sitting in front of the shacks, playing randy. I have to fix it while they play with the coins because—the enemy—yes, the—" and beyond the mist, something was moving across the mud, something was knocking aside the twining plants; at first he thought it might be one of the tanks returning, only it wasn't. No! "No!" he cried, "it isn't fixed yet! The 606-B, I haven't fixed it yet, and it's coming. Oh Lord, it's—"

Dr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-

Afterward, when they took him out of the room, the loud-



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speaker told him (a soothing female voice) "You did very well. Very well indeed. You will be an asset against our enemy beyond the barrier." Already he wasn't sure what had happened in the room. But he had done well, and that made him feel very good.

That evening, however, the apes played randomax by themselves. Everyone else only sat on their bunks and watched the clumsy games of the Neanderthals, speaking very little.

### V

JON KOSHAR walked down one of the radial streets of Toron, past the merchants' mansions, past the hive houses, into the sprawling rim of the Devil's Pot, past the lot where the Triton Extravaganza was folding its tents to begin its mainland tour, past the wharves where the Shuttle Boat was pulling in with its load of workers from the Hydroponics Gardens. A breeze caught in his black hair, and his black eyes were calm as he moved through the surge of men and women erupting from the launch pier. Further down were the private yachts. He walked to the royal pier where the sun across the water snagged on the polished chains. The orange-hulled boat with the double molusk shell, insignia of the Duchess Petra, dipped in the water. A long shadow fell across the dock as Arkor appeared at the railing.

"Hi," Jon called. "What's the news from the University?"

He stepped over the chain and walked to the end of the gangplank.

"I've spoken to Catham," Arkor said, coming down to meet him. "He was a bit surprised to see me, I think. You give me the news here and I'll give you mine."

"Apparently Alter is with my sister, so the Duchess's secret service reports. And Tel finally went into the army, off to fight the enemy beyond the barrier."

"Catham simply says to find the Lord of the Flames and expel him as fast as possible. Then ask questions."



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"Why?"

"He says it's a historical necessity. If Chargill hadn't been assassinated already, we could conceivably spend more time figuring this thing out."

"Sounds reasonable."

They left the pier and started up the waterfront street.

After a few minutes of silence, Jon asked, "Arkor?"

"Yes?"

"What do you hear?"

"With my mind?"

"Yes."

"In you?"

"Around me, and in me too."

Arkor smiled. "You must think that's very important, you who can't see what I see, hear what I hear. It isn't though."

He paused. "I can sense—that's a better word than hear—about a block in every direction, at least clearly." They rounded a corner. "There's a worker who's remembering how her brother died eating poisoned fish. In that building over there a man who runs with a Mali gang is having a nightmare about someone he beat up two nights ago . . . There, now he's dreaming about food and has turned over and closed his teeth on the pillow. Over there is a guy sitting at a wobbly table in the corner room of the top floor. The late sun through the window strikes his bare chest. He's trying to write a poem about a girl and runs his fingers over the paper. He glances at a sketch of him the girl drew in red chalk and hung on the wall behind him, then writes: *Renna, her brown eyes opening on ocean light* . . . Somewhere in the circus lot I sense a woman with a mind like polished boron going swiftly through the account books of the Triton Extravaganza . . ." Suddenly he smiled. "It's your sister, Jon." As suddenly a frown replaced it. "Something's wrong."

"What is it," Jon asked, "Is she all right?"

"Yes, but it's something—in her mind. It's down very deep." Arkor's frown increased. Then he shook his head. "No, I can't sense it. It's almost as if she's hiding it behind something else. I can see the pattern, hear the sound of it, but it's too deep to sense the meaning."



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"What do you sense in my mind?" Joh asked when they had gone a few steps further.

"A cry," said Arkor, "sharp as a blade thrust up from under a pool of dark waters."

"A cry for what?"

"For—a recognition; a recognition of what you call freedom."

Jon smiled. "I'm glad it's still there. You know, Arkor, I'm committed to do as much as possible to end this war. But I didn't exactly choose to become an agent of the Triple Being. It was a choice of dying in the radiation fields after my escape, or joining them. That's no choice, and I won't be free until they leave us."

"Another thing I hear both in your mind and your voice is how much you want me to believe you—"

"But it's the truth. Go ahead, read my mind."

"I already have," Arkor said. "I wish you could understand this, Jon. You think the main difference between you and me is that I know what you're thinking while you don't what I think. That's not it. It's far more a difference in perception that exists between all you men and all us guards. The difference between men and guards is the difference between blind men and men who can see. While the difference between the guards who can read minds and the guards who can't is the difference between normal and color-blind vision."

"Which is to say?"

Arkor sighed. "Which means that what I hear is not important. And how I hear it—which is—you can't understand."

They moved among the better apartment buildings in the center ring of the City. The eastern sky was shadowed. Once they paused. "The Lord of the Flames," Jon said.

"Even you can feel it."

Jon nodded. "Can you spot exactly where he is or who he's inhabiting?"

"Not yet."

They moved further through the growing buildings.

"What do you hear now?" Jon asked.

"I hear an Executive Supervisor of one of your father's plants wondering if the assassination of Prime Minister Char-

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gill will eventually effect his salary. He's talking to his wife about it. In the basement of their house is a drunken old woman who has wandered through their cellar door which was accidentally left open. She is hiding in the corner from what she calls the "jibbies" which are actually memories of the beatings her mother gave her when she was a little girl on the mainland. Neither the supervisor nor the old woman is aware of the other's existence. And even if he were to go into his basement, find her, and drive her out, or if she were to pick up the length of metal pipe in the corner, climb the stairs, wander into the living room and bash both his and his wife's brains out—and she has killed two people in her life already—there would still be no awareness exchanged."

"The Lord of the Flames," Jon said again.

"We're closer by a good deal."

"Can you see what he's doing now?"

"Not yet," Arkor said. "But in front of the military ministry a policeman is standing, waiting for his platoon and darkness. They are going to make a raid on a bar in the Devil's Pot where a Mali gang is supposed to hang out." Now they passed by a mansion familiar to Jon. "There's your father," Arkor said. "He's thinking of calling in his secretary and writing a letter to the supply commandant at Telphar expressing his good faith in the war effort with a pledge for half a million units. What will the publicity value of that be he wonders."

"Does he think about either me or my sister?"

Arkor shook his head. They passed on making their way closer and closer to the Royal Place of Toron. "The Lord of the Flames," said Arkor.

As night closed finally between the palace towers they turned down the deserted avenue of the Oyster. At last they walked under a stone arch and Jon opened the lock with his thumb print on the round silver plate. The Duchess had ordered it keyed to her guests. In the corridor they passed a niched statue of the late King Alsen, and turned up a broad flight of marble steps. They reached the fifth floor of the living tower and stopped before the gold doors of the Duchess's suit. For these inner doors Jon produced a black



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metal key, twisted in the lock, and the doors swung inward over the purple carpet. Petra was standing by the curtained window, fingering a smoky crystal set in a silver chain at her neck and gazing down over the night lit city. She turned to them as they entered. "You're back," she said, no smile on her face. "The Lord of the Flames, I can feel him as though he were in the room."

"He's in the palace," Arkor said.

"That close?" the Duchess asked. "Arkor, can you tell what he's done this time. I've been dissecting government reports for a week and I can't see any place where he might have stuck his finger in."

"Nothing comes through that clearly yet. Maybe he had something to do with Chargill's assassination?"

"It's possible," said Petra. "I can't throw any light on that either."

"You said he's in the palace," Jon said. "Which direction?"

Arkor paused another moment. "There," he pointed.

They went to the door, turned down the hall past the now unoccupied rooms of the Queen Mother and past the other empty chambers for royal guests. Finally they mounted a short flight of stairs to a hallway lined on both sides with flood lit statues.

"We're going toward the throne room," Petra said.

"That's right," nodded Arkor.

The hall opened into one of the alcoves of the dark throne room. Heavy draperies sagged toward one another at the fifteen foot windows. From the pale night lights of the city, slender isosceles triangles lapped the polished blue floor where the illumination slipped between the drawn curtains.

"Wait," whispered Arkor, and in the three-quarter darkness Jon and the Duchess saw his forehead crease. He pointed diagonally across the hall toward one of the many other shadowed alcoves.

"We'll spread out," whispered the Duchess. "Remember all we have to do is see him all together."

Petra moved off behind the columns to the left and Jon started to the right. Keeping in the shadows of the rippling tapestries he worked his way along the hall toward the empty throne platform.

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Then a voice came, hollow, from across the floor. "What is it! Who's there?"

His eyes froze fast to the alcove.

"Who's there? I'll call the guards." A white-cloaked figure moved into one of the spears of light, turning uncertainly and calling, "Who's there?"

The King! Jon felt a twinge of recognition and moved away from the tapestries. At the same time Arkor and the Duchess stepped out of hiding. At first the king only saw the Duchess and said, "Petra. You gave me quite a scare. For a moment I thought that you. . . ."

And then:

The green of beetles' wings—the red of polished carbuncle—a web of silver fire. Lightning split Jon's eyes apart and he plunged into blue smoke.

Then he saw gray, great strips of gray, some tinged with lavender, some with red, others faintly yellow or orange. It took him a moment to recognize that he was on a desert, a strange gray desert under dim, gray sky. A wind pulsed and the tints of sand shifted; orange glistened green, red lightened to yellow, and the bluish color to his left deepened. And the gray gauzed over all, endless and rippling.

He raised his tentacles slithering up his trunk. His roots stretched far into this gray sand, far down to a stream of pure hydrofluoric acid nourishing and cool. But here at the surface the thin atmosphere was cold, dry, and gray.

Three heat sensitive slits in his husk registered the presence of two other tentacles cactuses near him. He rustled his feelers again and they rustled back to him. *Watch out*, rustled one cactus (that was Arkor), *the Lord of the Flames* . . .

Another cactus (that was Petra) swayed gently forward, tendrils lipping over the sand.

Something raised its head behind a near sand dune. Three opalescent eyes blinked and drew back.

Jon let his feelers hang very still.

Now the whole head, onyx black was raised once more, and again the three eyes blinked at them. The lizard hissed; needle-teeth rimmed a spongy pink gum. It hissed again, and glowing sand swirled before its mouth. On six black



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legs it climbed the dune, heading in Jon's direction. *The Lord of the Flames . . .*

Suddenly he lashed out and caught the beast around the neck. Rasping, it pulled back, but the tall plant that was Arkor bent forward suddenly and three lanky tendrils circled the reptilian body. The Duchess snared two beating legs, and together as they all strained back, the hissing turned into a scream in the thin cold air. The shiny black skin parted and thick blue oozed over the broken limbs, then darkened the sand.

The scream sounded once more, then stopped as the throat caved in beneath crushing pressure. *There, there, there . . .*

It was dark. Moist warm dirt slipped by Jon's rough skin as his long boneless body muscled down through the earth. There was a vibration to one side and above. (Yes, it was the Duchess of Petra's). He angled his burrowing until he broke through the ground separating them and was burrowing beside her, their flanks in rippling contact.

*Where's Arkor?* Jon asked.

*He's gone ahead to the temple.*

*Is he back in good grace with the priestess?*

*Apparently. She sent a summons for him a heat cycle ago.*

*His offense was very great, and perhaps she has not forgiven him yet. I wonder if she suspects what part we played in the scheme.*

There was a shudder along the length of the great worm beside him. *I hope not*, she vibrated nervously. *Then we'll be in for it. All we can do is attend the end-of-cycle prayers and hope she makes no denouncement of us.*

Now, except for their identifying vibrations, they were silent as they pushed toward the temple and the end-of-cycle ceremony.

It was a pocket of soft mud kept moist by perfumed liquids siphoned from every corner of the subterranean empire. Jon could sense the exotic odors even before the texture of the earth changed and he suddenly broke into the luxuriant perfumed silt. They coiled near the back, waiting while the other worms joined them, waiting for the prayers to begin.

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At last, when the mud-trap was filled, the familiar vibrations of the priestess reached through the temple. She communicated to her congregation through an ingenious amplifying system composed of a pair of metal rings that circled the mud-trap, and when she curled around them and spoke, her words carried over the entire volume.

*Hail to the great Earth Goddess in whose food track we reside*, she began the invocation. *May the mud be pliable always.*

*May none under her protection bifurcate until he chooses*, responded the congregation, and the prayers began.

At last the rituals ended and the priestess began the announcements: *We have good news for you, my fellows. A member of our herd who previously incurred our displeasure is with us once more.*

Jon felt among the vibrations a new, but familiar pattern. (Arkor, he realized, must have just entered the temple). But at the same time he realized there was something else present, something that had been there much longer, but was suddenly pressing in on his awareness. With a shudder the length of his entire coiled intestinal track he realized it was the Lord of the Flames. The Duchess twisted apprehensively beside him. *The Lord of the Flames*, she whispered, touching her flank to his. *It's the priestess!*

*I know*, he whispered back, as the priestess continued.

*This apostate, again with us engaged, in a plot to end the custom of our cyclic sacrifice to the Earth Goddess of eleven newly bifurcated children, claiming that to drive them down into the earth until their bodies were shriveled by the Great Central Heat was beneath our wormlike dignity. But he has come back*, said the priestess warmly, *and for his crime of subversion he has agreed to sacrifice himself at the beginning of the next heat cycle, and with him will be sacrificed his two co-conspiritors in the plot. . . .*

They didn't even wait for their identification vibrations to be sounded over the ring-amplifier. Both leaped forward, slipping between the other worshippers, sliding through the temple mud. When they reached the priestess, however, the temple was already in chaos. Jon bumped into a sluggish body that was sending out Arkor's identity vibrations;



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but the form was limp and flaccid. Of course, he must have been drugged and carried here against his will. But the Lord of the Flames. . . . Jon leapt for the priestess and coiled around her body only to find she and Petra were already grappling. With his nether end he dragged Arkor toward them. The movement revived the giant worm a bit, but someone had coiled about the speaker rings and was crying, *Help! Help! The priestess is being murdered!*

Other muscular lengths fell into the struggle, but the Lord of the Flames: *There, there, there . . .*

Cataracts of blue gushed from the rocks. Geysers of orange billowed over the burning stones, whipping against the sky. The fire was beautiful, and the only other light came from the three dim ivory moons in their shifting triangle on the black night.

Jon soared above the fire, feeling exaltation in the great contracting muscles of his breast, in the air beating through his waxed feathers, and his whistling wing-tips that arced the night again and again as he rose higher and higher. Heat fanned his soft underfeathers. Opening his beak, his breath over his taut larynx quivered a warbling song. *Arkor*, he called, *Petra, where do you fly . . .*

Even before he had completed his question, Petra's voice sang, *I fly over the green flames where the copper burns, now to the yellow where sodium flames . . .*

From further away a third voice joined them, *Hydrocarbons lapping blue currents through orange tides . . .*

From the hundreds of birds around him, two joined him, and together they rose through the thickening smoke until the air cooled their wings, beating like hearts, without stop, without rest. The music blended, melodies wove and unwove with one another.

Then a sudden cawing cut the smoky air.

Dark wings flapped among the golden. Viciously it tore up at quickly passing under-feathers with a purple beak; swooping down, its scarlet talon struck at a momentarily up-turned eye. As it beat through the cloud of birds, gold feathers fell,

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were caught up on an occasional warm breeze, then dropped again, singeing, charring, at last bursting into white fire.

*Follow*, cried Petra.

*We follow*, cried Jon and Arkor.

Jon whirled and arrowed toward the dark beating. His beak plunged among black feathers as talons meshed with his own. Arkor was close above him, and the terrible flapping of Petra's wings hammered from below. Then a beak jabbed into a glittering eye, and the great wings shook, then relaxed. They were so entangled that at first they were pulled down nearly a hundred feet before their frantic flapping caught the air. For one moment they held the limp body in dusty heat. One wing still shivered uselessly. Then Jon released his hold at the same time as Petra and Arkor, and as they rose up, the whirling body fell. They watched the shadow bust into livid fire which turned golden as the conflagration dropped.

*The Lord of the Flames*, they sang, *there, there, there*, as, from the glowing hulk fast smoldering on the rocks, a final burst of fire leaped forth. Then Jon caught one glimpse of movement, soaring anew from the ashes, heard one bright explosion of melody as this newcomer ascended toward the flock, before blue smoke washed into his eyes, only to be swept away by sudden lightning. He was bound in a web of silver fire, he was lost in the red of polished carbuncle, and before his eyes was the fading green of flickering beetles' wings.

Jon stood in the throne room, blinking. To his left, he saw Petra and Arkor in the dim light. To his right, at the foot of the throne, one hand clutching the fluke of the gilded dolphin, was the white-cloaked figure of the king sprawled on the polished steps. The other hand still moved over the blue tile. Jon ran up to him and stooped beside him. "He's alive," he called back.

There was a clattering of footsteps, and he looked up to see guards all around him, their fire-blades poised. Someone turned on the throne room lights and he saw that Arkor



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and Petra were among the guards. "All right, what happened to His Majesty?"

Jon was flustered, but the Duchess began quickly, "We're not sure. We heard him call out as we were coming toward the throne room. Then suddenly he ran across the floor and collapsed."

"He's alive," Jon repeated. "But you'd better get a doctor to him."

"Move away," the guard said, and Jon stepped back. "Who are you?" the guard demanded as the others surrounded the King.

"I'm the King's cousin," the Duchess said, "and these are my guests."

The guard frowned, but contented himself with, "Well, you better return to your suite, Your Grace. And stay there till we get this straightened out."

Just then another guard came from across the room. "Yes sir, he did get a chance to trip the cameras before anything happened."

"Fine," said the chief guard. He glanced from Petra to Jon and Arkor. "This place is combed with cameras, you know, that can be tripped from half a dozen places." He waited for some reaction, but there was none. "Well, we'll develop these and see what happened. Please go to your rooms."

Jon, Arkor, and the Duchess left the throne room. As they reached the hall, Jon released a breath that he had been holding since his last. *He's alive.*

In their suite, the Duchess dropped into the chair with the wooden back carved like a coiled shell, and ran the fingers of both hands through her fiery hair. "I suppose where they have cameras, they have microphones," she said, glancing around the room. Arkor walked to one wall on which was an underwater sea-scape in muted tones of orange and sienna. Casually he leaned his palm against the right eye of a stylized octopus in battle with an equally stylized whale. "No they don't," he said. "Or at least they can't hear anything out of it. Though actually they haven't even put a monitor on it yet."

"Those cameras almost messed us up once before when

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we kidnaped Prince Let. Thank God this time there won't be anything to see." She turned to the giant now. "Arkor, did you get a chance to see what the Lord of the Flames did on this visit?"

"It was more difficult this time," Arkor said. "Human beings' minds are a bit harder to ferret things out of than the neo-Neanderthals where he was hiding before."

"Well, could you tell anything?"

"I can tell who murdered Chargill."

"Who?"

"His Majesty himself."

"Do you know why?"

"That I'm not sure. But there was something else in his mind, something that—" Suddenly he turned to face the other man. "Jon, do you remember when we were coming here, I caught your sister's thoughts, and I said that something seemed to be wrong? I said there was some kaleidoscopic image that I could get the pattern of but not the meaning? Well that same pattern, that same image was in King Uske's mind too!"

They were silent a moment.

Then Jon asked, "What exactly does the similarity mean?"

"It means that they both know something, the same thing, and even feel the same way about it. But it's hidden down deep, like something you learn and then try immediately to forget. It was a lot stronger in Uske's mind, but it was there in both. And it may have something to do with the Lord of the Flames."

"Well then what is it doing in both of their minds?" asked the Duchess.

"That's a good question," Arkor said.

"We'll try it on Catham to see what he comes up with—along with about umpteen others."

There was a knock on the door. At the Duchess's nod Jon opened it. The chief guard stepped in. "Your Grace, gentlemen, the films have been developed. You are free to go and come as you like, but you may be questioned later on."

"Has His Majesty said anything yet?" Petra asked.

The guard looked from under lowered brows. "His Ma-



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jesty is dead." He turned abruptly, and Jon closed the door slowly after him.

"I guess," said Petra, "that dislodging the Lord of the Flames was more of a jolt than he could take."

"It's all a healthy man could stand," said Arkor, "and the king was sickly all his life."

Petra placed her long finger-tips together. "Chargill dead at the King's instigation. Now the King dead through . . ." She didn't finish. "With all this war business streaming about like flood water, the government is going to go through quite a contortion. All the little factions will start to wiggle and squirm."

"Do you think anyone will try to use the Queen Mother as a rallying point?" asked Jon.

"I doubt it," Petra said. "She's safe in her padded room at the General Medical psycho-ward. Probably fairly happy, too. It's a shame she cracked up last year. I remember her from years ago as a pretty powerful personality that might well have done the empire some good."

It was Arkor who said, "This means it's time for Prince Let to come back."

The Duchess nodded.

"Just who is in line for the throne, I mean after Let?" Jon wanted to know.

"I am," Petra said, shortly. "You and Arkor must start out to the mainland forests this evening and bring him back as fast as possible."

"If we can find him in the forest," said Jon.

"We'll find him," Arkor said.

Jon pulled back the curtain at the window and looked over the lights of the city, out to where the sea spread like black cloth to a moonlit horizon. Away from the palace threaded the transit-ribbon, its top streaked with moon-silver, supported by its mammoth pylons, a two hundred and twenty-five mile antenna beaming matter around the earth. "I don't know," he said. "I wonder now if this is getting out of hand. No one meant to kill—or at least I certainly didn't mean to kill—the King."

"Are you suggesting that I did?" asked Petra quietly. "Ask Arkor if that was my intention."

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"No, I won't ask," Jon said. "When I was in prison, I wanted . . ." He stopped.

"Jon, who was responsible for your going to prison?"

"Three years ago I would have said King Uske. But both of us were only children in school when it happened. Yes, something very twisted and sadistic made him dare me to break into the palace and steal the Royal Herald. But something equally foolish and headstrong made me go along with it, frightened me so much I actually killed a guard who was trying to stop me. But when I found out the King was dead just now, I waited for the feeling inside me, wondering whether it would be a sense of completed revenge, relief, or freedom. And it was nothing. I'm still not free, not just of the Triple-Being, but of something in myself."

"Every one has that," Petra began. Then she added more softly, "Perhaps you have it more than most, Jon Koshar."

Without turning from the window, Jon asked, "All right Arkor, you can sense it. Tell me what it is."

Arkor's voice, though not sad, came with a grave emotion Jon had not heard in his voice before: "I can't, Jon Koshar. It's another buried mask I can't pierce. It's easily the most familiar pattern that I see in all men's minds, almost the identifying mark of a human."

Jon turned from the window, sharply. "Guilt?" he asked. "Is that what it seems to you? Well now I perceive something very finely, and it's not guilt, Arkor. It's something—else."

The giant's eyes narrowed in momentary concentration, and when he spoke this time, it was with an uncertainty as new in his voice as the previous grave emotion: "No—it is not guilt."

Jon turned to the window again. "I don't understand," he said. "Perhaps Catham was right. Every time we exorcise the Lord of the Flames and suddenly go hopping around the universe, I wonder—"

"Wonder what?" asked the Duchess.

"I wonder whether this whole thing isn't a psychotic fantasy after all."

The Duchess drew in a breath, giving her mind time to ponder Jon's words. "I only know," she said, "that whatever



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this means, we can only act as we see. And we must return Prince Let to Toron as soon as possible."

Jon turned back to the room. "All right. Then we will go to the forest and bring him back."

"Shall we leave tonight?" asked Arkor.

"Yes," said the Duchess. "I will try to get the council's ear and see if I can waylay some of the confusion that is going to result."

Jon and Arkor started for the door. A moment before they closed it, Jon repeated, with puzzlement in his voice, "A psychotic fantasy."

The Duchess looked up from the report she had begun.

"You have no time to worry about that," Arkor said to him briskly. "You only have enough to think of it once, or perhaps twice, to convince yourself that it is not."

## VI

HIS BOOT SOLES hit the mud, and he was in Ketrall. He hugged his arms tightly around his chest and pulled against himself to release the excitement that quivered in his wrists and shoulders. The ground was as soft here as the swampy pools made by the sea's backwash in those winding inlets. The mist in front of him was as dense and damp as the autumn fogs that used to wrap his boat in the mornings. The air held October chill. And the sky, beyond the mist glowed faintly like the polished surfaces of well rubbed shells.

No. Something wouldn't let him think that. *You shouldn't think of that*, he thought to himself. Tel walked forward, trying to see. He felt vaguely unsteady, like the time when he had been lost for six hours in the dinghy that foggy morning when the oar had slipped. For a moment the mist gave way and he glimpsed the barracks to which he was to report.

He ducked forward, noticing that the ground was firmer, and at last stepped through the door of the shack. "Hello," he called. There were no lights. He sniffed the fog floating in the darkness. It had the faint odor of seaweed. The familiar-

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ity made everything more real, vivid. Yet he was somewhere in a half dead blister of the irradiated earth, on some protected scab on the wrecked crust of the planet. "Hello," he called again.

"Hello yourself," came back a familiar voice. A face rose, came forward, its features materializing through the haze. "So you made it out here," Ptoron said scratching his bald head. The black eyes smiled down at him. "Good for you. Quite a trip, eh?"

"Yeah," said Tel. "You can say that again."

"I think that's your bed over there."

Tel moved inside. Along the wall he could just make out a row of beds. "Hey, where's the enemy in relation to us?" he asked. "And where's everybody else?"

"We're pretty well behind the line of fire," said Ptoron. "And the others will be here soon."

"Sure as hell can't see anything around here," Tel said, squinting toward the door again. "Some of them damn Ketrall might be hanging around, just sneak up behind you, and burn you out. How are you gonna know?"

Ptoron shrugged.

"Hey, boy!" A shadow filled the doorway.

"Hi," Tel said, not sure if he recognized the newcomer, even though the voice was familiar.

"Glad to see you made it too."

"Certainly looks like you came through all right," Tel said, still unsure of whom it was. "Shrimp? Oh, I thought it was you. How do you feel?"

"Damp," Shrimp said. "Smells like the inside of an old lobster pot."

"Just like home," Tel joked back.

Another shadow darkened the door. "Uggg. Can't see nothing up here."

"There's nothing to see, ape," Shrimp shot back across his shoulder as he went to his bed. He dropped himself on his back across the mattress. "That transit jump sure takes a hell of a lot out of you." He stretched himself, arched his back, and then dropped back to the bed. Springs squeaked. "Like rocks," Shrimp mumbled, closing his eyes.



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"Any of them ketzis come around, wake me up. But not for anything else."

"Hey, Tel," said Lug, stepping into the shack, "I'll play you a game of randy."

"I'll beat you," Tel warned him.

"I don't care," the Neanderthal said, "I just want to play. Over here."

"All right," said Tel. "A couple of rounds."

Lug went to the doorway where the light was bright enough to see and spread a handful of centi-units on the worn boards. Tel, leaning against the jamb, crouched also and started arranging the coins in the randomax square.

Darkness slipped across his hands, and he and the Neanderthal looked up. An unfamiliar forest guard stood before them. Tel squinted through the mist. He could make out nothing distinctive about the features, but the hair was light and the guard was particularly tall.

"Move. I want to get inside." The voice was cold. *"If sound could have color, thought Tel, then this voice would have the faint blue sheen of oiled steel."*

"Can't you step over?" Lug asked affably. "We just got them set."

Suddenly the booted foot shot out, Lug and Tel snapped their hands back in time, but the coins went skittering.

"What the—" began Lug. "Hey," he called into the cabin after the guard. "You don't have no manners, you know that? If you were my size, I'd bust you."

"Keep quiet, Lug," Tel said. Something in the guard's voice suggested a tautness that he would rather not cross. Remembering what Ptorn had said about perception, he wondered whether or not Lug had felt it too.

The Neanderthal was gathering up the coins. "He acts just like an ape that ought to be pounded around a little," Lug continued. Then he made a disgusted sucking sound.

"Hey, you guys are new up here, right?"

The squat hulk of a Neanderthal stepped into the doorway now. Lug blinked.

"You guys are new?" he asked again.

"That's right," said Ptorn from inside.

"Then come on. I have to show you something."

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Ptorn joined Lug and Tel at the door and they followed the other man out. "My name is Illu," he introduced himself as he led them over the soft ground outside the cabin.

"What do you want to show us?" Tel asked.

"You'll see," said Illu. "We show it to everybody who comes here. It makes them feel better. Some of them, anyway."

"What is it?" It was Lug who asked now.

"You'll see," repeated Illu.

Tel glimpsed the shadows of other cabins in the mist as they entered the clearing. In the middle was a pole stuck in the ground. As they approached, Tel saw that there were two signs pointing in different directions. One jutted off toward the gray headquarters building and said: "*Tranu—2,068 miles*. The other, pointing some sixty degrees away, read: "*Toron—9,740 miles*."

"The Scout put this up," Illu said.

"The Scout?" asked Tel. "What's that?"

"He's in our cabin," Illu said, surprised that Tel did not know. "He's the guy who came in just before I did." He looked back at the sign. "Doesn't this make you feel better?"

Tel was puzzled. But Lug put his ham-like hands against the post and growled with satisfaction. "Ummm," he said, looking from Tel to Ptorn. "Now we know where we are. That makes me feel better."

Illu grinned. "I told you. We show it to all you new people."

"How long have you been out here?" Lug asked.

"Aw too long." Illu spat in the mud. "You tell me what's happening back home."

"It's all crazy," Lug said. "All everybody talks about is the war. Nothing but war."

"Um," said Illu. "And now you're in it yourself."

The two Neanderthals had struck up a friendship and wandered off together, leaving Ptorn and Tel.

"I wonder how he figured it out?" Tel said, looking at the sign up close.

"He must know his math," Ptorn said.

The split plank that formed the post was gray and



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weathered, and the grain was separating. The nails had rusted quickly in the damp air leaving faint brown rings around the deep-set heads, like the ancient nails in the weather-beaten boards of his father's old boathouse. He was about to say something, but before the words formed in his mouth, Ptoron nodded his head and said, "Yes, it does."

When they got back to the barracks, most of the beds were taken with soldiers already in the regiment. In the lightless cabin, the figures looked like shadows through the thick mist hanging even on the inside. Tel went to his bed. As he sat down, the figure on the bed next to him suddenly rolled over and said, "Hey, you're one of the new guys that's come to fill up the holes."

"What holes?" asked Tel.

"You know, replacements."

Tel couldn't make out the face and for a passing moment was reminded of one of the many featureless voices that had spoken from the loudspeaker during his basic training.

"What happened to the others, the ones we're replacing?" Tel asked warily.

"You really want to know?" responded the shadowed voice.

"Not really." Tel ran his palm across the blanket, trying to detect the texture of the invisible weave. "Do your eyes ever get accustomed to all this fog?"

"No. But you do."

"How?"

"After a while you get used to being half-blind."

"Oh. Just exactly what do you guys do here?" Tel wanted to know.

"Well," mused the bulky shadow, "it depends on what you've been trained for."

"I'm a maintenance mechanic for the 606-B. And I know the 605 pretty well too."

"Oh, then you won't have any problem here with finding something to do."

Tel grinned through the fog and felt a surprising glow of usefulness, a warm reassurance.

"I gotta get some sleep," the shadow said.

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"Hey, just one more question." Tel lowered his voice. "What's with that big blond forest guard?"

"You mean the Scout?" the voice came back.

"Yeah, the one who put up the sign-post."

"How do you mean 'what's with' him?"

"Well," said Tel, "he's sort of a funny character."

"Sure he is," replied the voice. "He's the Scout. You'd be funny too if you had to do what he does." The springs squeaked again as the figure turned over. "Look, talk to me some other time about it, soldier. I gotta get some sleep."

"Oh, yeah," said Tel. "Good night." He sat back on his cot, alone, looking this way and that through the murky cabin. He wondered what the Scout's function was, and then he wondered what he was a replacement for. Maybe he should have asked what happened to the person he was replacing, but . . . He was glad there was work for a 606-B repair man, very glad, because he could take it apart, put it together, replace any worn part, tell when the slip plates had too much oil, or when the plumb coils were about to give. If only he knew what—if he knew what it was. No. He mustn't think that. Instead he thought about how good it made him feel.

A few hours later, when Tel was wandering outside the barracks, he stopped, bent down, and looked at his boots. They were coated with mud halfway to his ankles. As he stood up, sucking breath between his teeth, someone called, "Who's that?"

"Eh—Tel 211 BQ-T."

"Oh, hi. It's me, Lug."

"Hey there, ape. I thought you were a sergeant or something."

"Hell no," Lug said, solidifying in the mist as he came forward. "You surprised me too." He came only a bit above Tel's shoulder, but his smile shone up through the haze.

"Did your friend Illu tell you anything about what's going on?"

Lug scratched his head and fell into step beside Tel. "I don't know if I understand it."

"What did he say?"



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Lug brought his hands together in concentration and his craggy face furrowed deeper. "At first he says we're in front of the main line of ketzi forces. We're part of a string of bases thirty miles in front of that line. But what Illu said is that they're afraid they'll circle us and attack from behind." He looked up puzzled at Tel.

"What don't you understand?"

"How can they attack us from behind if they're in front of a string, a line of bases?"

"Simple," Tel began. Then he paused, remembering what Ptor had told him about perception. "Look, Lug, how long is a string?"

"Huh? I don't know."

"How far does a string run?"

"From one end to the other," said Lug, shrugging. "How long is that?"

"That's as long as it needs to be: from one end to the other. Now suppose the ketzis come around the ends of the string. Won't they be behind us then?"

Lug pondered a moment. "Oh. I guess they will. I hadn't thought of going around." They went on a few more steps. "That means we're in some danger, or we may be, huh?"

"I guess so," said Tel, feeling at once apprehensive, and at the same time affably superior at having solved Lug's minor topological conundrum. Perhaps that was what Ptor felt like toward him, he reflected. Examining his own feeling, he was relieved to find in it nothing that the ape might resent. "Just by being on Ketrall, we're in danger, Lug."

"Yeah. We have an enemy beyond the barrier," Lug quoted. "Only now we're beyond the barrier too."

They were nearing a rise in the ground.

"Hey, rocks," said Lug, moving to place his hands on the rough, broken surface. "Makes me think of . . ." He did not finish his sentence, and Tel remembered his own first thoughts about the colors behind the mist, though putting them out of his mind as quickly as before. He folded his arms, leaned against the rocky wall, and gazed through the fog. "What do you think we're looking at?"

"Nothing," answered Lug.

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"Mist, fog, water vapor—nothing. Lug, what's it like where you come from?"

"You mean—" Tel could sense the words came from deep in Lug's mind, "home?"

"Yeah. What was your home like?"

"Home," mused Lug, "was—the place I lived." He turned to Tel and grinned. "Yeah," he said. "That was what was best about it. It was the place I lived!"

Tel laughed, and again wondered how his own insights seemed to Ptoron.

"And Mura," Lug's voice became quieter, "and Porm, and Kuag; those are the people I lived with. Porm," he explained, "was my daughter."

"You have a daughter?" He hoped his surprise did not come through the mist. "How old is she? How old are you?"

"She's four summers old," Lug said. "I'm nineteen winters."

From somewhere Tel remembered that the average age of the neo-Neanderthals was forty-five. Having such a short life must make things appear very different. Yet a daughter, a family. Some place in him, like an efflorescent crystal, he felt respect growing for this condensed, foreign image of himself. "What was your home like?" he asked again.

"It was beyond the first radiation barrier," Lug said, "the one that broke down just before anybody knew we were there."

"I know," said Tel.

"It was in a broken stone building, a 'ruin' they called it. All of us lived in the ruins. The big trees had pushed most of the buildings down, and there were stairs that led up and just stopped over open air. Children played with rocks and sticks on the stairs, and sometimes the wind came and we all went inside the stone buildings and stayed in the corner, and sometimes sang to the wind; or when the water fell from the sky, we sang to the water. When it was very hot, we danced for the sun." He stepped back and began to raise one foot and then the other with a little hop. "Like that, only with lots more people, and lots faster, with beating and shouting. Once a month we did that for the moon, only different. That's because the moon and the sun are alike, and not like rain and wind. You understand?"



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"I understand," Tel said.

"Sometimes we'd mend the leather over the hole in the sunward wall. But then you have to go out and catch a boar, and that's not home any more. That's—" He paused.

"The rest of the wide world," Tel supplied.

"Yes," said Lug, screwing up his eyebrows and nodding. "And it's very, very wide, you know. Very wide."

Now Tel nodded.

"The rest of the wide world," repeated Lug. "That's very different from home. That's something else entirely. Home . . ." He paused once more, and at last took refuge in his previous revelation. "Home is where I live." Suddenly Lug grinned slyly. "All you very tall, very wise men who can get around the ends of strings, you must think this is very silly. You must know where home is."

"Do you think it's silly?"

"No," said Lug, "but—"

"Then don't worry about it," said Tel. "It just may not be silly after all."

Lug pondered, then seemed satisfied. Now he moved back from the wall again and did his little dance. Then he stopped and looked up. "No sun," he said. "No moon. Home is where I live, and then there is the rest of the wide world. But where is this?" He gazed forward through the mist again. "No place," he answered himself.

Tel looked down at Lug's feet. "Don't your feet get muddy?" he asked. Because their big toes were comparatively opposable, the Neanderthals felt uncomfortably cramped in boots that prevented them from picking up things with their feet, and so had been issued open-toed boots.

"They get too muddy," Lug said, wriggling his toes in the soft, green earth. "I wash them."

"I guess that's the way it goes," Tel shrugged.

"What's your home like?" Lug asked. "Is it the place you live?"

"It isn't," Tel said. "At least I haven't lived there for a long time, almost three years. I left when I was fourteen and went to Toron."

"Some of my people go there," Lug said. "I don't know if

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they like it very much. Those that come back say it's very complicated."

"It is," Tel said.

"What did you do in the city?"

"Just knocked around," Tel answered evasively. "Got into trouble here, got out of it there, couldn't get a job because there weren't enough jobs to go around, and ended up in the army." They leaned back against the rocks once more. "Say, did Illu say anything to you about the Scout?"

"The guard who built the signpost?"

"That's right. And kicked up our game."

"Oh, him, the one with no manners. All I know is that he is a really important person around here. I don't know what he does, though."

"Maybe he goes out spying on the ketzis. That's what I'd guess from the name. I wonder if he knows what the ketzis look like."

"You know you're right," said Lug, his face furrowing. "How are we gonna fight them if we wouldn't even recognize one if it came up to us and said hello?"

"We'd recognize it."

"Yeah. I guess we would."

## VII

ABOVE THE YACHT the stars were still. Over the railing, water rushed the sides, whispering and lispings against the tapered hull. At the horizon the jeweled towers of Toron diminished and sank down.

"Do you think after these three years that you'd recognize the Prince if he came up to you right now and said hello?" Jon asked Arkor. The wind was like a cold palm against the side of his face, like cold fingers playing through his black hair.

"I don't know," Arkor said. "His mind will have changed and his body will have grown. At least it should have if the Duchess was right about sending him there in the first place."

Jon leaned into the wind, his eyes narrowing to pry be-



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tween the two sheets of blackness, sky and sea, that joined before them. Finally he stood up. "Perhaps we'd better get some sleep," he said. "We'll be there by dawn." Together Jon and Arkor turned from the rail.

Sun broke through one layer after another of the night, until at last it burst bloody over the gray water. Already the shore was in sight. This was one of the few places along the coast, away from the fishing villages, where the forest came near the beach. Once it had been an emigration spot from the mainland to the island city. Now a burned dock sagged like a blackened limb into the tide.

As Jon mounted the deck in the chill, he saw there were no other boats at the remaining piers. Overhead a thin whine razored down from the sky. Then he saw, high above him, the sudden gleam of short distance planes. They were army craft, carrying recruits from Toron to Telphar. The whine died, and he looked back toward the port which swung toward the boat through the brightening morning.

When Arkor joined him on deck, the wooden pilings were already thumping along the side of the boat. The motor cut, reversed, and the diminishing space between the bow and the shore suddenly flooded with foaming backwash.

A few dock-hands appeared to catch the hawser that the crewmen tossed. One boatman appeared by Arkor's side, but the giant had already picked up the huge coil of black rope. "I'll secure it," he said, dismissing the man, and flung the line across the closing slip of water.

They leaped aboard. Jon looked after Arkor when he started toward the boardwalk.

A half hour later they stood among great shadowed trees. Arkor was listening, one brown hand against a barrel-thick oak trunk.

"You're home now," Jon said. "What does it feel like?"

The giant shook his head. "Not what you think it should feel like." His eyes narrowed. "I don't hear anyone yet. Come on, let's go this way."

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With surprising rapidity they made their way for the next hour through the forest. Abruptly the trees thinned, and in front of them Jon caught a glittering that must have been sun on the sea. They reached a cliff where broken rock spilled to ledges below. Fifty feet down, still a hundred feet above the water, was a very large table of rock. The sun burned white across the whole lithic arena, and the small temple at the edge cast a sharp shadow.

"The priest is there," Arkor said. "Follow me down."

Before they reached the plateau, a man emerged from the door of the temple. Black robes caught the breeze that moved across the warm rock toward the sea. A trumpet shell hung by a leather strap over one of the man's shoulders. His face showed more age than any other guard Jon had ever seen.

"Why have you come back?" the priest asked.

"To take the young king to reign in Toron. His brother, King Uske, is dead." They spoke in another language, but Arkor opened his mind to Jon who then found the strange syllables easily comprehensible.

"There are no kings in the forest," the priest said. "You have left us, why do you come back?"

Arkor was silent a moment. Then he said, "Three years ago, a young, light-haired boy came into the forest. He was the King's younger brother, and since the King is dead, he must rule now."

Jon noted that the priest was not marked with the triple scars of the telepath.

"Do you wish anything of him? Are you going to take anything from his mind? You know that is not allowed."

"I will take nothing from his mind," Arkor said. "His consent will be given, not taken."

"He is not of the forest people?"

"No," answered Arkor. "He came here and chose to avail himself of our people's hospitality. It is his right to choose to leave. May I have permission to search for him?"

The priest was silent while two waves broke on the crumbling rocks a hundred feet below. "You may search for him according to your own ways," the priest said, and turned back into the temple.



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Jon and Arkor walked back to the trail that led up into the forest. "What was that all about?"

"How much of it did you understand?" Arkor asked. "I don't mean the words, but what was going on?"

"You were asking him for permission to look for Prince Let and telling him why you came."

"Yes, but I was doing a lot more." The giant hoisted himself up around a leaning sapling. "I was—how would you say it—acknowledging an unpleasant situation."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like this," Arkor said as they gained level ground again. "Among the forest guards, the telepaths are in an ambiguous and very uncomfortable position. In fact that was why I left. You see they are thought superior and, at the same time, feared. It is understood that nature is aiming for the time when all guards will be born telepathic, yet the non-telepaths know that they are threatened by this growing minority. So the telepaths must be marked on discovery and must acknowledge the nominal sovereignty of the non-telepathic priest. It keeps peace and allows nature to go on."

"I hate to think what would happen if telepaths started appearing among us men," Jon said. "There wouldn't be peace for long."

Arkor nodded. "That's why we keep the knowledge of our powers from you as much as possible."

"Occasionally I wish I could hear into other men's minds myself," said Jon.

Arkor laughed. "As I said before it would be like suddenly giving color vision to a man still incapable of distinguishing one shape from another and who could not even judge distances. It might be fun like a game at first, but finally it would become a meaningless, annoying hindrance."

Jon shrugged. "Where do we begin to look for Let? It's your territory."

"First we find some people and check their minds for any knowledge of the boy."

"Is that what the priest meant when he said you could search according to your own ways?"

"That's right."

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"Maybe your people *are* more civilized than we are," Jon said.

At that Arkor laughed.

Like a net of capillaries, paths threaded the body of the forest. They had crossed nearly half a dozen before Jon recognized the scattering of crushed leaves on the black earth, the broken twigs, the slight compactness of the earth that marked them.

"Over there," said Arkor, "two women are napping on a cape of moss by the side of a fallen maple log. One of them has seen the strange light-haired boy with the limp who is not of the forest people." He looked at Jon. "It sounds like Let."

"Where did he get the limp from?" Jon wanted to know.

Arkor shrugged. A bit later he paused again. "There is a man passing by over there who once hunted with the light-haired boy. They made a moose trap together six months ago."

Jon strained to see through the trees in the direction Arkor pointed, but he didn't even hear a rustle. "In six months, Arkor, he could have wandered anywhere."

"True," said the giant. Suddenly he stopped short, and Jon drew up still beside him.

A moment later the leaves before them were pushed aside and a tall guard with a shock of white hair running through the black at his temple stepped forward. Three scars ran down the left side of cheek and neck.

"You have come for the young stranger," said the guard (and again Jon understood.)

"You know where he moves now," Arkor said. "You know that he walks by the high rocks, stops now, leans against the stick he is carrying and squints up at the sky through the leaves that glitter like pale blue chips."

"You will follow the webbing of thought that holds him in the center," said the guard with the white struck hair. Then, without further interchange, Arkor continued walking in his direction and the other guard passed on in his.



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"Now you know where Let is?" Jon asked.

Arkor nodded.

After a moment Jon said, "Why did you speak out loud?"

"We were being polite."

"You talk out loud when you want to be polite to each other?"

Arkor glanced down at Jon. "We were being polite to you."

The light that lapped among the green leaves grew yellower as day turned toward noon. Once they heard an animal screech in the distance, and once they walked over a damp stretch of ground through which a mazy stream delved in a rocky cleft. "You know, there's something wrong," said Arkor after a bit.

"With the Prince?"

"No, not with Let, but with the thought pattern I'm following."

"What is the thought pattern?"

"It's like a radar net that all the telepaths, or most of them, maintain for directions, for information. You have to ask permission to use it. But there's something wrong with it, something down at the very end, dark, and unclear." He stopped and looked at Jon, his eyebrows pulling together. "And Jon, it looks for all the world like the pattern I saw in your sister and in the King."

"What's it doing here in the forest," Jon asked. "Can you tell what it means now?"

Arkor shook his head. "The prince is through those trees," he said. "Perhaps you better speak to him first alone. It will recall things to him more quickly if a man presents them to him."

"Doesn't he remember?" Jon asked.

"It's been a long time, and he's young."

Jon nodded and stepped forward through the curtain of branches.

The figure turned abruptly and the light eyes narrowed behind the dark face.

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"Your Majesty?" Jon said.

The hair was long, naturally fair, but sun bleached in uneven streaks.

"Your name is Let? You are the heir to the throne of Toromon?"

The figure stood very still. He held a staff in one brown hand and wore the garb of the forest guards, makeshift leather pants, a pelt across one shoulder for a cape, his feet bare.

"Your Majesty?" Jon asked again.

The eyes widened now, extraordinarily bright in the browned face. "Excuse—excuse me," the voice sounded strangely rough, yet strangely youthful, "if my speech is—slow. I haven't spoken your language for a long time."

Jon smiled. "Do you remember me? I and a friend brought you here three years ago. Now we are here to take you back with us. Do you remember? You were sent here by the Duchess of Petra?"

"Petra?" He paused, looking up now as if some answer would come from the trees. "My—cousin, with red hair. The one who told me the story, about the prisoner who tried to escape. Only it wasn't a story, it was real."

"That's right," Jon said. "I'm that prisoner."

"Why have you come?" the young man asked again.

"Your brother is dead. You must take over the throne."

"Did you know my brother?"

"Only a long time ago, before I went to prison." Jon paused. "I was just about as old as you are now."

"Oh," said the Prince. He took a few steps forward, and Jon noticed the slight limp. "There is a war on," said the Prince, marshaling what information he had into this new language. "I hear them talk about it sometimes when they come to take people from the forest to fight the—enemy beyond the barrier. I will have to learn a lot, and there will be a lot to do. I remember more of it, now." As they went through the trees to where Arkor was waiting, Jon wondered at the speed with which the youth was adjusting to this new situation. Arkor met them on the other side of the trees.



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They had nearly reached the shore when Arkor suddenly stopped. "The boat!" he said.

"What is it?" Jon asked. They were still in the woods.

"It's the Malis," Arkor said, "at the docks, trying to sink the ship!"

"Out here, on the shore?" Jon asked. "For what? I thought there were just Malis in the city."

"Gangs have sprung up all over Toromon. There's a forest guard with them, and the—the pattern I saw!"

"Why are they wrecking it?" Jon asked. "Can you get any reason?"

Arkor shook his head. "The crewmen are fighting. One of them tries to start the motor, but a fire-blade slashes across his back and his scream goes all liquid and gurgly before he slumps over the control panel. Fire glints in the eyes of one frozen-faced man who suddenly jumps backwards from the tilting deck as water sloshes across the boards and hisses against the flame. Smoke obscures the wheel house where the crewman lies." Arkor breathed heavily.

"Why?" Jon asked. "Why? Were they sent? Did they have a plan?"

"The Malis," Arkor said softly, "the malcontents. No, or at least I couldn't detect any."

"What do we do now?" Let asked.

"We've got to get back some way," Jon said. "I guess we go in another direction."

The strain left the giant's face and he turned with them and nodded. They began to walk again, this time perpendicular to their original route. "We might be able to get back to the Island from one of the fishing villages," Arkor said, "or perhaps catch a tetron tramp taking ore from the mines back to Toron."

Once they came to a field in which a deserted farm house sagged into the slow breeze that waved across the riotous grain. Back in the woods, night flooded the trees until the moon rose and silvered the leaves around them. They came to another clearing where a great strut-work pylon soared into the air and a black band of metal—the transit-ribbon—made a mark like a pen line across the lightened night sky.

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They slept some at the edge of the clearing, and at dawn they continued.

In the brightening woods, Arkor heard the sound first. Then the two others stopped and listened. Beyond the dewy trees, the tin-can wail of a calliope sounded thinly through the morning. . . .

### VIII

"THEN THE ketzis started to fire on us from the left. We scrambled back behind those rock bags like frightened cuttlefish. We must have splattered mud all the way back to Toromon. They have something that flames like the sun almighty and makes the fog look like powdered fire where it hits. A couple of times I've been to advanced platoons that have gone out to try and establish the beginnings of a permanent encampment but got messed up by the ketzis. It's pretty horrible what they do; nothing but pieces of guys all over the place. They'd told us this particular capture was going to be easy as cutting a melon. They'd told us there probably wouldn't be a shot fired. Well I didn't want to end up like one of those gutted platoons and I swear I was about to take off over the rock bags and just beat it as fast as I could. Suddenly, though, there was a scrambling in the confusion of guys about twenty feet down the line. I remember I heard a rock bag fall, so I took a breath and figured—really sort of calm when you think how much sweating I was doing— 'Well, they've finally broken into the fortress, and I guess I can expect to be dead in just about six seconds.' But I was wrong. The excitement down the line was growing. Apparently somebody from our side had scrambled back over the wall. Then someone turned on a hand-flood, and for a moment I saw a tall silhouette against the fog. The Scout had gotten back!

"I was down there in no seconds flat. Everybody else was crowding around too, trying to hear what he was saying. He



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squatted down in the mud and pulled the guy with the hand-flood down beside him. 'Shine it over here,' he whispered. We were all crouching to see. He began sketching in the soft mud, and you could just see where his finger scarred the ground what with the dark and the mist. 'This is our wall,' he said. 'There's a ketzi encampment here, and here. But each one has got two heat throwers so they can hit us in four places along the wall at once. But remember, it's only two encampments. If you make a beeline fifteen degrees off twelve o'clock, you'll bypass both of them, and they won't be looking for you there. You've got about ten minutes before their next barrage. Now get going.' He pointed over the wall. 'In that direction. It'll take you straight back to the base.' And before we could ask any questions, he was over the wall himself and gone in black fog. The next thing I knew I was over the rocks running after the footsteps of the guy in front of me."

"That was me," Illu grunted. "Running after, hell, you ran me over."

The others laughed. They were sitting on a pile of boards that had been laid outside the barracks across the mud. Tel sat crosslegged, his back against the shack wall. Now he leaned forward on his knees to hear the rest of the storyteller's tale.

The fire had removed the immediate sense of mist, but along the curved shacks he could see other blurred orange fires curving away through the fog.

"That Scout," the narrator concluded from his seat atop the empty machinery crate, "he's a pretty good guy." Now he looked at Tel. "So don't mess with him too much. Yeah, he's a little strange, but . . ." The soldier shrugged. Someone else had asked the question, but Tel inside the cabin, hearing it start, had come out to listen.

Just then a darkness passed the fire near them in the haze. Then firelight touched the long neck, the open collar, the knife-like cheekbones, and the pale hair of the guard. His black eyes swept across them and he went straight into the shack. Shrimp, who was standing in the doorway, quietly moved aside. A moment later there was a creaking of bed springs.

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"That's him," the storyteller said.

"He's really seen the ketzis close up?" somebody asked.

The raconteur motioned for him to keep his voice down and answered softly, "Well, if anybody has, it's him." He dropped his hands to his knees, leaned back in the darkness and yawned. "I'm turning in," he said. "It's just as hard to get up in the morning here as it is in Toromon."

Tel watched the group break up as some of the men from other barracks who had wandered over started back in the darkness. "Officers will be shooing us inside in a minute anyway," Illu grunted down to Tel.

"Guess so," Tel answered, stretched, and stood up on the boards.

He was just about to go inside when he heard a sound which was something like chirping or cheeping, with a twitching melody underneath. It was coming from the other side of the barracks.

Tel stopped, glanced around the corner and held his breath. Something was beating the mud. Quickly Tel ducked back around the corner and grabbed the shoulder of the first person he saw still outside the hut. "Hey," he whispered. "There's something back there! You can hear it!"

"Probably a spy for the ketzis." Then there was a laugh and the shoulder shook beneath Tel's hand. "Forget it, soldier. It's just one of the flip-flops that come around sometimes." Now Tel recognized the voice as belonging to the person who had the cot beside his.

"What are they?"

"Who knows. They're animals, I think. But they could be plants. They don't bother the ketzis and except for making noise don't bother us."

"Oh," Tel said. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

The sound came again, a distinct flapping sound, irregular, stuttering; then the chirping melody.

Tel went inside the barracks, pulling his shirt out of his pants. He shrugged it down his arms, and sat on the edge of his bed. The sagging springs were tight against his buttocks, the air moist on his skin. He'd almost gotten used to



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the vegetative odor, but if he took the air deeply into his lungs, he could feel the rank smell far back on his pallet.

He pulled the blanket up from the mattress and slipped into the dark envelope with the warm spot where he'd been sitting, listening to the sound the material made coming loose from its well tucked edging, bringing a warmth to the surface of his mind because of its familiarity. With his cheek pressed against his forearm now, he squinted and listened. Outside in the mud he heard the flapping again, a sound like a loose canvas sail beating against a mast, like the slap of his mother's hand-loom when the treadles struck the leather stops and the threads shifted up and down, like his father's hand beating the water from his slicker as he strode up from the boathouse, like his father's belt beating. . . .

Flop-flip, flup-flep, flap-flop; he opened his eyes. The mist was bluish between him and the barracks ceiling. He was lying on his back. It was very early in the morning. Flop-flap. The sound was just outside the door.

Suddenly Tel sat up, stuck his feet in his boots (the leather was damp) and stood up in his underwear. The mist was lighter now and the shadows on the beds were still. He went to the door and narrowed his eyes against the blue morning. Flip-flup. Last night's fire had died quickly without tending, and the ashes and half-burnt boards lay a few feet away. A very neurotic quail was walking among the ashes.

Or maybe it was an extraordinarily self-composed feather duster. It was exploring the remains of the fire on three large webbed feet. It poked at a bit of charcoal, circled it three times, then stood over it, squatted, and—injected it!

At first Tel thought he glimpsed a head or a tail, but no, the body was a shapeless ball of feathers. It flapped around another piece of charcoal, then changed its mind and sounded its chirping, whistling chuckle. Tel stooped at the doorway to look more closely. Perhaps the creature noticed him, because it cocked its head (body?), took six flop-flop steps toward him, then leaned its body (head?) the other way and did a couple of demi-pliés.

Tel laughed and the flup-flip twittered.

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"Hey, what's that?" someone asked above him.

Tel looked up and saw Lug leaning against the doorjamb, clawing at his hairy stomach where his undershirt didn't reach his underpants. Tel shrugged.

"He's sort of cute," Lug said. Then he coughed and ground his fist into first one eye then the other. "Damn mist," he muttered and spat across Tel into the mud. The flap-flip stepped back, then carefully waddled closer to the door. Tel held out his hand and made a rapid snapping sound with his fingers.

"Does it bite?" Lug asked.

"I'll find out in a minute."

At the sound the flop-flop leaped ten inches backwards, nearly lost its balance and began to plié again.

"Reveille hasn't rung yet. Why are you up?"

Both Tel and Lug turned quickly at the steel-glinting voice behind them. The Scout had come to the door. As he stepped forward, the bluish light slowly defined his equine features.

"Either shut up or go outside," the Scout said. "Men are trying to sleep in here. One or two of them even worked hard enough to deserve it." He stepped through the door, then looked back over his shoulder. "Go on. Get out of there if you're going to jabber." Then he glanced down and saw the flip-flap.

Tel and Lug had stepped outside and were standing uncomfortably by the wall when the Scout looked back at them, smiling. Tel met the smile with a puzzled frown.

The Scout pointed to the flop-flop who was now doing an arabesque with two of its legs now, and perhaps listening. "Is that a friend of yours?"

"Huh?"

"Do you want a pet?"

Tel shrugged.

The Scout bent down, picked up a piece of charcoal and held it toward the flop-flop. The creature lowered its feet, scurried to the Scout's hand, straddled it, and squatted. Then it quietly wrapped its flippers around the Scout's wrist. As the Scout stood up, the flap-flop sagged over and dangled from his forearm like a feather handbag.



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"Hold out your arm," the Scout said.

Tel extended his arm alongside the Scout's and the forest guard began to flex his fist. The flep-flip suddenly got nervous and, one flipper at a time, went on Tel's arm.

"He likes charcoal and he likes warmth," the Scout said. "Give him both and he'll stay with you." Then he turned and strode off through the mist, buttoning his shirt.

"I wonder if he's going out to sneak a look at some ketzi encampment," Lug said. "What are you gonna do with that thing?"

Tel looked at the flip-flep. Then the flop-flap did something. It opened an eye and looked back at Tel. The boy laughed out loud.

The eye was the milky hue of a polished shell, streaked with veins of gold. Another eye opened to reveal mother of pearl. Then a third (as the other two closed) shone through the feather, streaked, like the first, but with red. "Will you look at that?" Tel said.

The third eye closed.

"At what?"

"Aw, it just stopped."

Lug yawned. "Let me get back inside and catch my last five minutes," he said. "I just got up to see what you were looking at anyway." He went back to the door and made his way to bed.

Tel raised the flop-flap and stared at it. Seven eyes appeared in the feathers; without pupils, their muted silver surfaces swirled with pastel lusters. A warm feeling uncoiled through him, fighting the coolness of the mist. He was in Ketrall, gazing into friendly, familiar—so familiar pastel eyes.

That afternoon he checked over the 606-B. The asbestos washer on one clutch plate had worn way down, so he peeled it off as neatly as the rubber stripping would allow and took it to the quarter-master's station. He got a new one in less than thirty seconds which was a relief after the time it took to get practice replacement parts on the training base back in Telphar. Once the flup-flup tipped the lubri-

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cant can and black oil spilled onto his arm and got all over his hand; even after washing it off at the spigot, he just resigned himself to having black-rimmed nails for a while.

Once a tank rolled by close enough to see Shrimp riding in the open bubble. "How's it going?" Tel hailed him.

"I can almost turn this thing on a deci-unit," Shrimp called back.

"Good for you," Tel called.

"Hey, guess where I saw Curly—" But the tank swerved away and the mist closed behind.

It was not until after the knock-off whistle pierced the fog that Tel realized the flup-flup had left its perch on top of the assembly rack. Quickly he looked around.

Flap-flup, came from somewhere behind him. He wiped his hands on the seat of his pants, turned, and started off through the mud. Once he hit a pot-hole, staggered, and nearly fell. When he got his balance he was just outside the semi-circle of cabins.

He listened and heard a twittering from the left. He turned and followed it. He had climbed over a three-foot wall of rock before it occurred to him that maybe it wasn't his flep-flop he was following. He stooped down and made the snapping sound with his fingers. Instantly the twittering began again, but still too far away for him to see. He took a few running steps forward and heard the sound of paddle feet receding. "Hey, come on," he said out loud. "Come back and stay with me." Maybe he should have brought some charcoal. He'd put some in his pocket that morning, occasionally feeding the animal all afternoon. But now when he ran his hand into the envelope of his back pocket, the cloth was just gritty. "Come on back here," he called again.

Flep-flop, flip-flip, flop-flep.

He ran forward ten, fifteen, twenty steps. When he stopped, the flup-flap stopped too and chuckled. "Oh, the hell with you," Tel said and turned around.

He walked maybe half a dozen long strides through the thicker mud before he slowed down and a frown worked over his face. He turned right, took five steps, and stopped when a clump of leafless trees appeared before him. He frowned again and walked in the other direction. Five minutes



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later he noticed that the ground was extremely firm under his feet. He didn't remember crossing any ground of this consistency.

To his right the mist was bluer. He tried to recall from which side night had approached the encampment. There was the gray afternoon, meeting all the guys in the barracks. Then there was the night, sitting around the fire, listening to the stories the soldiers told. But how did the change go between them?

He had started walking again when something brushed his cheek. He jumped back and saw that he had walked blindly into another grove of spiky, shadowless trees. The twig that had brushed his cheek had not been sharp and scratchy but rather wet, and it bent like rubber. He rubbed his cheek, then reached out to touch the branch again.

Just then the idea of what being lost meant slipped into his brain and galvanized his spinal column, as smoothly as a hot wire plunged through his vertebrae. His hand drew back, and the rear of his thighs, his neck, and the small of his back felt like crinkled foil pulled slowly taut. He backed away from the skeletal trees, his legs feeling soft, his joints all awash on one another. The mist was thick and very close . . .

Something twittered on his left. Violently he turned right and ran. The mud splashed, and it was darker to his left—no, right. The ground was hard, then soft under his shoes. He ran. The mist clawed into his lungs and made the inside of his nostrils sting. He ran.

Then his hands snapped up just in time to keep him from crashing face first into a sudden rise of rock. He kept his cheek pressed against the veined stone gasping with tiny, terrified breaths for nearly three minutes, before he realized that he was at the bottom of a cliff. The rock disappeared above him and faded away to the right and left. He turned his back to the wall at last and tried both to keep his eyes closed and not to think; but they kept on opening and darting about of their own volition. Hysterically they tried to fix on some form in the dark haze. Yet he was afraid to take his hands away from the rock behind him (where he had nearly rasped away his finger tips) and look at them

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for fear he wouldn't see then even if he held them in front of his eyes.

And something was coming toward him.

He mashed the air out his lungs with one breath, his ribs as taut as crushed springs. *Mother*, he thought, waiting for white fire to turn him into glowing smoke. *Oh, mother, father . . .*

"You pick a hell of a time to go off on a stroll," the Scout said, and as Tel nearly collapsed from the wall, the forest guard's big hand struck his chest sharply. "Breathe," the Scout said.

Tel began to breathe. He wanted to cry, but choking down the rank damp air was more important. He peeled himself from the rock. The back of his shirt and pants were soaked.

"Don't fall down," the Scout said, "because I won't carry you."

Tel didn't fall.

"Come on," the Scout said. "We don't have all night."

His legs didn't want to walk and his first steps were irregular. "Where—where are we?"

"About forty yards from a ketzi nest," came the slow voice.

That stopped Tel. "Wait a minute—" he managed to pant. "I thought they were—were thirty miles away. I couldn't have come that far."

"They don't wait for us to come to them," the Scout said. "Get a move on. We're nowhere near safe."

"Wait a minute." Tel managed to say again. "You mean the ketzis are really camped only—I mean you've seen them, really looked at them? You could take me close enough so I could look?"

"In this light with this mist," the Scout's cold, polished voice came back, "you'd have to get awfully close to see anything." Then, with the same amusement of his voice as when he'd shown Tel how to coax the flap-flap, he said, "Do you want to go over and take a look?"

Tel had to clamp his jaw to keep from making the hysterical noise that ached and flooded up behind the prison of his teeth. All he did was shake his head. Whether the Scout sensed his answer, or actually saw his wagging head in the last twilight, his only words were, "Let's get going." And then,



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after five minutes of silence, with odd humility he added, "I've never seen them either."

Finally the camp-fire glow pierced the mist ahead of them. Chills still raced down Tel's back but he said, "Eh—thanks. What—brought you out after me?"

"You're a good mechanic, and the 606-B is a pretty important baby."

"Yeah," said Tel. "I guess so."

As they passed the sign-post, there was a twittering chuckle, then a whistling chirp. Something went flep-flup by his left boot.

"It's been wandering around here all night trying to figure out where you were," the Scout said. "It's been lonesome."

"Huh?" said Tel. He stood still and blinked. Then he let his body drop to a stoop and extended his arm. The flip-flop's paddle-feet wrapped trustingly about his wrist.

"You mean to tell me you've been waiting here all this time? You mean you're just going to hang there and blink at me with those pretty eyes of yours and tell me you were here all along, while I was out running around in that—You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Why you ought to be ashamed!"

Like pure relief, like the sudden upward thrust at the removal of great pressure, the affectionate admonishing baby talk welled from him. And there were tears running down his cheek when he looked up.

The Scout had disappeared into the fog.

The nightly game of randy was breaking up when he got to the barracks. He fished a piece of warm charcoal out of the fire, fed the flop-flip, and set it to warm itself by the embers. "Man," said Illu when he saw Tel, "we thought you'd had it. What were you out looking for?"

"Just exploring," said Tel.

"Just don't explore yourself right into a nest of ketzis. You know they've moved closer."

"Yeah," said Tel. "So I heard."

When Tel got into bed, he was just about to go off to

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sleep when the soldier next to him raised up on his elbow and whispered, "You back alive?"

Tel laughed. "I guess I am."

The shadowed figure whistled. "I'm surprised, I admit it. You hear about the ketzis moving in?"

"I know they moved."

"There may be a major blast pretty soon."

"You mean a battle?"

"I don't mean a game of randy. I was in Tranu in Company Forty-four when we took it." He let out another whistle. "But that was nothing to these ketzis. Compared to Ketrall, Tranu was just a little baby experiment." Tel heard his head drop back to the pillow. "Well, good night soldier. And I am glad to see you back, kid."

"Thanks," Tel told him, and rolled over. Outside, once, he heard the tiny whistling, chirping chuckle before exhaustion struck him into the dark pool of slumber.

## IX

FLAP-FLAP, flap-flap, flap-flap; in the breeze from across the meadow, the canvas cover that she had pushed from the calliope beat against the back of the keyboard console. Her notebook was open on the music rack and a strange graph of multiple lines wove over the page, cut here and there by single, double, and triple dashes. She struck a fourth, then an augmented fifth. On the lower right hand corner of the page was a meticulous pencil drawing of a leaf. The model for the drawing had blown across the field and settled on top of the calliope bench for the eight minutes she had needed to trace its serrated edge and fine veining, then tilted away on another gust.

She struck a third chord.

"What are you scribbling at?"

Clea turned and smiled. "Hello, Mr. Triton."

The rotund, bearded gentleman looked back over the tents, wagons, mobile ariel rides, and metal runways that ran between them. "Not too much business this afternoon. I remember when we'd travel through the farm lands here



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and have more yokels out than you could shake a stick at. When it came time for the Big Show you'd have to turn them away." He made a clicking sound with his teeth. "This war is a bad business. Still, we have an enemy beyond the barrier. What's all that scratching you're making?"

"It's a new and totally useless method of musical notation. It's much too complicated for sight reading, though it's able to catch a lot more nuances in the music than the present system."

"I see," said Mr. Triton. With one hand he began an arpeggio over the tinny notes. "I started out playing one of these things twenty-seven years ago." He took his hand from the keys and made a gesture over the entire park. "Now I own the whole thing myself." Then he let his arm fall and a disappointed look darkened the wrinkles already there. "This slack we're in, though; we've had slack seasons before, but never quite like this. We'll be heading back to Toron before the end of this week. At least there we'll be sure of a steady crowd."

Just then Clea looked over the top of a calliope wagon at the grassy meadow. Then she stood up.

"What is it?" Mr. Triton asked. "Who are they?"

Clea slipped out from behind the bench, jumped from the platform and began to run across the field, the warm stems brushing her legs. As she ran across a clearing in the grain twenty locusts snapped up before her from the yellow stubble. "Jon!" she cried as the stalks flicked her forearms.

"Clea!" He caught his sister in his arms and whirled her once around.

"Jon, what are you doing here?"

He sat her down between them. Arkor and Let stood back.

"We came to pay you a visit. Now, what are you doing?"

"So many things I couldn't begin to tell you. I've discovered a new overtone in the tetron vibration series. And did you know that the density of leaf veins, as they get further away from the stem is a constant, and a different constant for each leaf? You can put that in your useless information file. Then I'm working on something a lot bigger than all that, but I can't really go into yet. Oh, and in the morning I do the accounting." As they began to walk back

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toward the calliope wagon, she asked, "Who are your friends?"

"Arkor, this is my sister, Dr. Koshar. And this is—"

"Excuse me," Clea interrupted. "I'm traveling under an alias. They know me as Clea Rahsok."

Jon laughed. "We've got a small secret of our own. Clea, this is His Royal Highness, Prince Let. We're trying to get him back to Toron to take over the throne."

Clea stopped and looked hard at Let. "It's possible," she said. "But I thought he was dead. At least that's the official information the News Service let out when he was kidnaped. You're still working with the Duchess Petra?"

"That's right."

"Oh," she said. "Well, come on and I'll introduce you to Mr. Triton."

"What sort of show have you got?"

"A good one," Clea said. "But no business, though." It was not until they had passed into the deep shadow of the calliope wagon that Clea stopped again and looked from Jon to Arkor. "Your eyes," she said. "Jon, can I talk to you later and ask some questions?" Then the volume of her voice raised as she looked up to the platform. "Mr. Triton, this is my brother Jon and two friends of his."

"Really?" asked Mr. Triton. "You don't say."

"We're traveling back to Toron along your route. We saw your posters up at the fishing village and decided to come by," Arkor volunteered. "It's a fine poster, too. It really catches your eye. Who designed it?"

Mr. Triton folded his hands over his belly, beamed, and said, "Why, I did it myself. You like it? I even designed the masthead for the wagons back there. It's my circus from toupee to toenail."

"Would you show us around?" suggested Arkor.

"Well," said Mr. Triton, "well. I believe I will. Come along, I believe I'll just do that." The jolly impresario climbed down the wagon steps and led them toward the tents, past the various stands and along the metal walk-ways.

A tongue of sunlight fell between the tent flaps. Jon stood



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just inside the door, breathing the warm odor of sawdust. Clea leaned against the dressing table.

"That isn't all your stuff, is it, Sis?" He pointed to the open wardrobe.

"I share this dressing room with a friend of yours," she told him. "Now just what's going on, brother of mine?"

"I'll show you," he said, grabbing a piece of skin at his neck. He twisted it, and suddenly it seemed to tear loose. He peeled it upwards, and his jaw and half his neck and cheek came away. "You mean the acrobat. She's a good kid, Clea." He peeled away another slab of his face so that only the mouth and one eye socket were left. There was nothing underneath.

"I know she is," Clea said. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for her. I asked her to tell me what was going on, once, but she said that the more people who knew, the more people who would be in danger. So I've let it lie. But I'm still curious."

The rest of Jon's face disappeared. "She was in a group, Clea, that today would go by the name of Malis. I was a member too, you might say. Unfortunately we were marked, just like the forest guards you see with their triple scars. Our mark, though, was that we disappeared in dim light—like creatures of the imagination, if you will." He ran his fingers roughly through his hair which vanished as though a hanging wig had been rubbed away. "Like psychotic fantasies," the headless voice came from above the empty collar.

Then his hand reached into his pocket, brought out a tiny capsule, and held it up to where his face should have been. The thumb pressed a tiny stud on one end and a fan of spray jetted out and caught the form of his skull, a transparent face, then swiftly opaque again.

"But there's a solution to everything." His face, though still wet, was almost complete again. "Now the job is to get a king back on the throne as soon as possible, and to end this war." The other end of the capsule produced a black spray which covered his hair. "Will you help us, Clea?"

"I'm impressed," she said. "Maybe you can do an act in the side show. Doesn't that stuff clog your pores?"

"No," explained Jon. "When it dries, it perforates and

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allows air and sweat to get through. We've got to get him back, Clea!"

"Which faction are you working for?" she asked. "Or has the Duchess got her hand in for the throne herself?"

Jon shook his head. "Clea, it's bigger than any of this political hassling. It's even bigger than our enemy beyond the barrier; because we may have an ally among the stars."

Necklaces of light loop by tent and gambling stand. Couples stroll eating fried fish from paper bags. A wonder-wheel rings the darkness and children scuttle under the rope-railing of the walks. At the bottom of the glass walled aquarium wagon, the octopus stretches over green rocks, and the calliope hails brittle notes against the neon night.

Alter came out the rear exit of the big tent, lifting her white hair from the back of her neck with both hands. The breeze was cool across her nape and under her arms. She still felt slightly light-headed from her bout on the trampoline before the applauding crowd as she moved out of the passageway thick with clowns and sawdust.

She stopped when she saw the scarred giant. "Arkor?" she smiled. "How've you been? How's the Duchess, and Jon. And is there any word from Tel?"

"No word," he said. "But everybody's alive and kicking. Jon is here with me. So is Prince Let."

"You're taking him back to claim the throne? Good. What are you looking so hard at?"

"I'm listening," he said. They had started walking beside the tent, Alter ducking under the slanting guy ropes, Arkor stepping around them. "Alter, there's something in your friend Clea's mind that I can't quite understand. It was the thing that was keeping her to herself. It was the thing that somehow you helped to break through. But I can't see it enough to understand it."

"It's Tomar," Alter said. "He was a soldier that she was engaged to at the very beginning of the war. And he died. She told me about just before she got to work on this new



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big project of her's. She says this one should be even more important than the matter-transmission projection."

Arkor shook his head. "It's not that, Alter. It's something much further down. It was something she figured out once, and it was so terrible, she uses Tomar's death to avoid remembering the other thing. It has something to do with the Lord of the Flames, too."

"Clea?" asked Alter in surprise.

"As I said, I still don't know exactly what it is. But for one thing, all the telepathic forest guards also know about it, and they're using their combined forces to keep it away from me. They apparently know about my contact with the Triple Being and they're unsure of what to do about it. The information is in the minds of all the important councilmen, but the guards are protecting it in their minds. Clea seems to have figured it out all by herself, and then rejected it as too unbelievable. Alter, just listen to anything she has to say and see if something pops up."

"I thought I'd retired from this intrigue business," Alter said. "But I'll listen." Her fingers had strayed to her throat, where they played with the leather necklace strung with polished shells.

Chains of lights dangle between tent and gambling stand. Couples stroll, crumpling their greasy-paper bags. A merry-go-round whirls light across the enameled hides of sea-horses and polished porpoises, and the children crawl from under the tent flaps again and scurry back to the walk-ways. Dolphins nose the corners of the aquarium wagons and the calliope increases its tempo.

"How do you like it, son?" Mr. Triton came up behind the dark boy in forest dress who was leaning against a stay and looking up at the glittering trapeze act.

"It's fine," Let said. "I've never seen anything like that before."

"Never?" Mr. Triton ran his eyes over the boy's erect figure. From his height, though, he certainly wasn't a guard. "Well,

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then I guess it must be quite a sight for you." Beside them in the stands, the audience applauded.

"It must be hard to do that up there," said Let.

"It certainly is. But you know what the hardest thing of all is? It's managing all these people, all who do their own individual act."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I've done just about everything in this business, from play the damn calliope to training wild sharks." He paused and looked up at figures spinning in the ariel spot. "Come to think of it, I never was anything where I had to stay up in the air too long." Applause swept the dark tent once more. "But the hardest thing I ever did was trying to get them all to work together. You've got to listen to everybody's say, and try to keep everybody happy and alive at the same time."

"How do you do it?"

"You don't. At least never as well as you want to," Mr. Triton said. "You hold votes, sometimes; or sometimes you look ahead and put your foot down hard when there's disagreement. And when you're wrong, you admit it as fast as possible, and change it to right if you can."

"Then what?" Let asked.

"Then you hope everything goes all right and that you'll be around next season to present your show."

The Prince looked up at the spinning figures. "They're beautiful," he said. "All that strength and delicacy at once; it's worth trying to keep that up there, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Mr. Triton, folding his hands over his stomach.

"Yes, it certainly is. You'd make a good circus person, boy."

Some of the lights have winked out by the side-show tent. The fried-fish wagon and the gambling stand, however, are still going strong. Couples stroll, arm pressed closely against arm, hand in hand, head against shoulder. The kiddy-cars on the wooden arena still roar against the darkness, and the children stand on the walk-ways, knuckling their eyes and yawning. The manta-ray ruffles the blue sand at the bottom of the aquarium tanks, and the calliope player



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has stepped down from the wagon to get a bowl of chowder.

Clea decided to walk once more around the circus grounds before she went to bed. She passed the darkened side show tent and was going toward the wonder-wheel when she caught a look, or a feeling, she wasn't sure. Anyway, she turned her head and saw the giant forest guard who had come with her brother looking at her from about fifty feet away.

He looks like he's trying to see inside of my head, she thought. Then she shook the thought away. Under it, under everything she had been thinking of recently, was her new project. It was an amazingly beautiful, subtle, and profound unified field theory. It was far neater than Derek's, or would be when she finished it, and it contained towers of thought and logical processes, plumbed oceans of reverberating overtones among syllogistic rhythms, and encompassed all her previous work on random spatial co-ordinates—  
*. . . . gentlemen, it is more than conceivable that by converting the already extant transit-ribbon, we may send between two hundred and three hundred pounds of matter anywhere on the globe with a pinpoint accuracy of microns.*

No, don't think about it. Brush that thought away with the other. But you haven't thought about it for so long, so long . . .

And then she remembered his quiet smile, his broad, bull-like body, the brush of red hair, his sudden wide grin, and the deep inside laughter like a bear's growl. And then she stood, stunned, surprised, because the memory was so much clearer in her mind, now, so that she did what she had never let herself do before, and whispered his name, "Tomar . . ." and waited for the great wave of pain, that should come; only it didn't, and realized that sometime in the last few months the wound inside her had healed, and in healing he had not slipped away, but come closer, if only because she was in the world of life where he had lived, instead of the retreat world of death that was her own invention.

And as she stood shocked motionless by the surprise of the discovery, something from the depths of her mind began

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to boil, to surge upward toward her consciousness, like a pattern clearing, a kaleidoscopic chaos resolving into a recognizable, meaningful thought. . . .

No! She threw herself upon it, grappled with it, struggled to keep it out of her mind. No! No! Oh, please help me. No! Somehow, oblivion received it again.

She was panting, and the wonder-wheel, rimmed with lights, made a meaningless circle against the black. The calliope was playing again. She blinked, and looked back to where Arkor was standing. She saw him frown once, shake his head slightly, and turn away.

The light bulbs were black beads along the wires that dangled from tent to gambling stand. The last couple threw a crumpled bag into a trash receptacle. The late moon lined shadows from the rope railings against the metal walks and lay out a templet of the wonder-wheel and the merry-go-round across the crumpled grass. The octopus, the porpoises, and the manta-ray had settled on the bottom of the tanks. The calliope was still.

They met by the darkened wonder-wheel, and the late moon turned her white hair silver. Their eyes were hollow darkneses.

Jon smiled. "How do you like normal life now that you've lived it again for a bit?"

"You call a circus normal?" She smiled back. "How's it coming with the war? Will you stop it?"

"We've made another try at it. We chased the Lord of the Flames out of King Uske of all people."

"The last time he'd closed the artificial radiation barrier that kept us away from the neo-Neanderthals. What had he done this time?"

"We don't know yet," Jon said. "Clea knows, at least Arkor thinks she does. But it's too deep in her mind."

"That must be what he meant when he was talking to me earlier," said Alter. "How could Clea know, Jon?"

He shrugged. "It's not exactly 'know'; it's that she seems to



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have some obscure information that coincides with something that was in King Uske's mind when the Lord of the Flames left him."

"I see," she said. "You know, it's funny, I mean Tel and me. We're the only people in Toromon who know anything about what you're really doing. And both of us have just sort of drifted away from it all. He's in the army and I'm in the circus. He's off in the war you're trying to end, and I'm—well, I'm here." She dropped her hand and then raised it again. "I hope he gets back soon. Jon, have you gotten your own thing straightened out, that search for freedom that you used to talk about?"

"I won't have it until the war is over and I'm free of these Triple Beings. Or so I tell myself. In prison I learned to wait pretty well. That's what I'm doing now. And being able to walk about makes waiting a lot easier. And I'm learning too, things that will probably be useful to me when it's all over. But sometimes I envy you kids, I really do. I hope the both of you have a lot of good luck."

"Thanks, Jon."

Before dawn, the strings of lights were wound around wooden spools. The level beams of the new sun caught the ballooning tents as they collapsed and were folded and stained the stacked sides of the dismantled gambling stand pale copper. A few children had gotten up to watch the wonder-wheel, the merry-go-round, and the kiddy-car arena disassembled. By six-thirty, the circus carts were rolling toward the shore and the docks where the great red and gold ship, *The Triton*, would take them back to Toron.

### X

THAT MORNING reveille sounded early. Tel gave the 606-B a good going over before it was hauled off into the tank, and though the mist lay thick, the weather was warm.

"The King is dead."

"Huh?"

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"In Toron, King Uske died at the palace. The report came through this morning!"

"Do you think it was an assassination?"

"I don't know. I didn't see the report."

The rumor washed over the camp like a wave. Though no one could be sure, it was assumed that the King's death had something to do with this sudden move they were making. And it was comforting, if only because it established some reason.

Tel was coming from the supply cabin with a number three plumbing coil for the 605 (nobody had ordered him to, but he'd checked it on his own and found the number three nearly burned through) when he saw Illu carrying something over his shoulder. "What's that?" he hailed the Neanderthal.

"It's the sign-post," Illu said. "I asked the Scout if he was taking it with us, and he said, 'What for,' and walked away. So I'm bringing it."

"Good for you," Tel said.

When he got back to the 605, he had to argue with the two guys who had just come to take it away and who didn't want to give him time to fix the coil. But then one of them saw the flup-flep and said, "Hey, you must be the fellow that they been talking about that's got one of them things for a pet." And during the time they were fooling around with the feathery animal, Tel got the coil in place. Then they went off, wheeling the 605 in front of them on a bearing-dolly.

When he was on his way back to the barracks, he passed Ptorn and another guard at the corner of the cabin. "Perhaps this battle will be the final one," Ptorn said. "You mentioned there was talk of a truce?"

"Of a victory or a truce," said the other, "now that the King is dead."

Inside the shack, Tel was reaching under his bed for his rucksack when someone said, "Well, it looks like this is it."

"Huh?" said Tel, looking up.

The mist hid the man sitting on the next bed.

"Oh, how are you," Tel grinned. "I guess there's no way to know where we'll be assigned in our next camp. I wish we'd gotten a chance to talk some." Tel gave an embarrassed chuckle which the other man returned.



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"You heard anything about his battle?" the man asked.

"Just rumors. Do you think they'll end the war?"

The man shrugged.

"Well, I have to get to my departure detail. I hope we run into each other again some day." He picked up his sack and slogged out into the mud. He could hear the wheezing tanks lining up at the other end of the encampment. His order-plate said he should report to tank number three.

He was wondering if there would be any problem taking flap-flep along when a familiar voice called, "Hey." Shrimp solidified in front of him. "Tel? Yah, I thought it was you." There was someone else with him. "Tel, here's Curly. How do you like that?"

"Oh, hi," Tel said shaking hands with the taller man.

"How've you been?" Curly asked. "I'm over in Camp D-2. You guys working any good randy deals?"

"Hell no," Shrimp interjected. "Everybody in this camp's honest." He shifted his weight. "Hey, Tel, we were having a little argument about you. And we wondered if you'd help straighten it out for us; if you don't mind."

"Sure," Tel said. "What is it?"

"Now just exactly what color are your eyes?"

Tel drew his eyebrows together and shifted uncomfortably. "Green," he said. "Why?" And then wished he hadn't.

"Can we take a look?"

"I—I guess so."

Shrimp came very close to him and Curly looked over his shoulder.

"See, I told you," Shrimp said. "They're green, just like mine. That's cause we both come from the shore. On the shore almost everybody's eyes are green."

"No, that's not what I meant," said Curly. "What I'm talking about only happened when it was darker, and not as much light as now. Come on, let's get in the shade."

"Hey, look," said Tel, "I gotta get going. I'm supposed to be at my tank and ready to pull out."

"What tank do you take?"

"Eh—three."

"Good. That's the one I'm driving. Come on," Shrimp said. Tel jutted his mind out in five different directions for escape

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but struck brick at the end of each; so he walked with them through the fog toward the dark row of tanks.

"Here's my baby," said, Shrimp, whacking the black metal hull. It rang hollowly as they went around to the side.

"Inside'll do it," Curly said, opening the door. The ladder dropped its rubber casters slowly into the mud. "Now I'll show you what I mean."

Tel mounted to the tank behind Shrimp and in front of Curly.

"No, don't turn on the light. That's the whole point."

In the three-quarter dark tank whose only illumination came from the pilot bubble at the other end, Tel stood against the wall while Shrimp and Curly peered into his face. Tel's heart was going like snapped fingers.

"All right," Shrimp said. "Now what color does that look like to you?"

Curly frowned. "I don't understand it," he said. "Back in basic training, whenever it was half dark, they always used to look like they just weren't there."

"But—but my eyes are green," Tel said. Something was turning inside him, like a smoky crystal full of memories he could not see. "My eyes are green."

"Of course his eyes are green," Shrimp said. "What other color would the eyes of a fisherman be, or the eyes of the son of a fisherman?"

"Yeah. I guess so," Curly said. He looked again. "They're green all right. Maybe I'm crazy."

Yes, thought Tel, my eyes are green, always have been, and always will, and wondered why he had felt so nervous when they had asked to look, why should they be any other color, he wondered. Why?

"The King is really dead back home?"

"Yeah. I heard it at the report office. Do you think that means the war may be over soon?"

"Who knows? They say this is going to be the big battle. Maybe this will decide it."

"I hope so. I'd give my eyeteeth to get back to Toron; hell, just to see what it looks like."



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"Me too."

As the tank whined through the mud, the mist struck in gusts against the oval portals. Tel sat at the end of the bench. In the bubbleseat at the front, Shrimp jogged right and left, his hand on the steering rod, his head and shoulder in silhouette on gray fog. They had been going for an hour when there was a sudden burst of sound to their left, like rocks smashing.

The men looked at each other. "What was that?" someone called up to the driver.

Shrimp shrugged.

The rising and falling of the tetron motor sizzled beneath them. Tel leaned his head back on the metal wall, and the vibrations had nearly put him to sleep when there was another crash. He came awake in time to see light flare through the right window.

"What the hell was that?" somebody bellowed. "Are we under attack?"

"Shut up," Shrimp called from the driver's seat. "Shut up back there."

Then, through the instruction speaker in the corner, a voice came: "Be calm, alert. Remember your training. Drivers proceed as scheduled. Stand by for orders."

Tel waited, desperately trying to pull down the beating blood that filled his body. The tank rolled forward.

A half an hour later someone said, "This is a hell of a way to fight a battle, all trapped up in a damned clam-crate."

"Shut up," the officer with them said.

The flep-flap was sitting quietly under the bench. Now Tel reached down and gave it a piece of charcoal. As he bent forward and his cuff pulled up, cool feather brushed his wrist.

The next time he looked at the oval windows, it was getting dark. They had been going a long time.

"All drivers halt," said the speaker.

Shrimp's shoulder jerked forward as he jammed on the

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break stick. The tank lurched. No order came to move. Tel reached under the bench and sat the bundle feathers in his lap. All its eyes were tightly closed.

The men began to scrape their boots back and forth over the floor and the benches squeaked. "Come on, relax," the officer said. "You guys'll get your chance."

"Convoy disembark," came through the speaker.

The men stood up, stretched their legs, and punched at the ceiling to stretch their arms.

The door clinked open, the ladder dropped down, and Tel, in his turn, climbed out. Except that the mist was darker and thicker, it might have been the same place that they had climbed in. As the group at the foot of the ladder grew, Tel noticed that the ground was perhaps a little firmer. Just then there was a crashing noise through the evening.

Their eyes snapped left; and fire, fifty feet away, rose white and billowing through the mist. A momentary silhouette showed a grove of spidery trees between them and the hit.

Suddenly there were orders breaking in the air all around them. "Tank-four to your left." "Dispatch convoy report to Major Stanton." "Convoy from tank-three follow me."

Tel followed at a half run as they left the tank. Two men joined them from another platoon. Suddenly they were stopped, split in half, and Tel's group was led to the left while the others went right.

They had just passed another group of squat, black tanks when there was a second hit, this time on the far side. Eyes narrowed, heads turned as the deep blue evening flamed white, then darkened. "Throw those rock bags up!" someone was calling. "Throw those rock bags up!"

Tel turned in time as a heavy burlap sack scraped into his palms, yanking from the shoulders, nearly pulling him to the ground. A man on the other side was waiting for it, and he tossed it on, turned back, and caught a second bag. They were making a chain of rocks across the area.

"You and you—" (neither one was Tel, but the order made him turn his head and almost miss a rock bag) "—climb that rise back there and report to D-T platoon."

Something metallic rattled to his left.



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"Watch out! It's sharp!"

Three men were unrolling a coil of barbed wire in front of the rock-bag wall. The coils ranged over the burlap ends. The flip-flop jumped back just in time to avoid being stepped on and the coil unspiraled along the wall.

"Hey, you. They need you down the line about fifty feet."

Tel turned and sprinted off. A handful of men, apparently heading for the same destination, had just joined him when there was thunder and another flash. He clamped his eyes shut and nearly tripped over something. Someone steadied him, and as he looked up a voice said, "Hold on there, Green-eyes."

Curly was one of the men who had joined him.

They stopped together and were stuck after one another at a new section of the rock-bag wall brigade. The rhythm was working its way into his shoulders, his body: steady yourself, catch, swing around, and toss.

Splat! He'd been too self-confident. He was bending down to pick up the bag when somebody yelled, "Get down!" He went onto his knees in the mud and clutched the sack. His eyelids turned orange in front of his pupils and he felt heat all along his right side. When it went away, he staggered up, and nearly tripped over Curly.

Curly grabbed his arm and together they went as fast as they could back up along the wall. Suddenly Curly grabbed him again and pulled him down into a depression in front of the rocks. The flop-flop rolled in after them and twittered. The fog was deep blue, but through it Tel saw the sweat on Curly's face. They were both panting.

Behind them was the whine of a tank shifting position, a coughing stutter, a sizzling hiss of tetron units, then silence. Twenty feet away from their little depression there was some confusion.

"Is that the 606-B they're setting up?" Curly asked. "I thought I heard it humming. That's your machine, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," said Tel, trying to catch his breath. "But I don't think I could tell a tank from an electric razor right now." Another hit caught them to the left. They ducked, and

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then Curly raised his head and peered around. "Looks like they're giving us hell."

"What are you looking for?" Tel asked. "I can't see a thing."

Curly went back down in the pit. "Just to see if anybody's real close." His voice was suddenly grave. "Hey, I—I want to explain something, well, I mean something about me. To you."

"Huh?" said Tel.

"I felt sort of funny with that business about your eyes today. So, I got to thinking. And I figured I might as well tell this to you, about me, like an apology."

His first surprise and repulsion turned over in his belly, and though unsure of what was on the other side, he said, "Yeah, I see."

Curly smeared a muddy hand across his forehead. "Damn," he said, and gave an embarrassed laugh. "There used to be this guy, in the Mali gang I ran with back in Toron. He wrote these real strange poems. His name was Vol Nonik, a sort of funny guy. Anyway, I wish I was showing this to him, because then he'd make a poem out of it. But he couldn't get into the army because there was something funny with his back. So I guess you'll have to do." He laughed again, then looked down at his hands. "You've never seen anybody do this before, have you?"

"Do what?"

"Look," Curly said. "At my hands. Look."

"I don't under—"

"We may not get out of this thing alive," Curly said. "So look at my hands!"

Tel gazed at the soldier's muddy cupped fingers.

They began to glow.

Faintly blue at first, through the fog, the blue became red, a red fire flickering in his hands, a ball of red fire glittering just above his palms, shot with green, then suddenly yellow. "Look," Curly breathed. "You see." The ball of light lengthened, became more slender, bifurcating at the bottom and top. The waist thinned, the head raised, fingers articulated themselves at the ends of tiny, feminine, flaming hands. She bent, miniature, and swayed on tiptoe, wavering in his cupped hands. Blue, bronze, and golden flames like pin-



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points raced her body. A breeze came (Tel felt it on the back of his neck) and her hair, a bell of blue sparks, shimmered behind her. She raised her arms and whispered (a voice like a whisper of water over sand: "Curly, I love you. I love you, Curly, I love you.")

"Isn't she—beautiful?" Curly's own whisper came like two number ten rasps against one another over the faint message of the miniscule homuncula. He breathed deeply now, and she faded.

When Tel looked up from the muddy fingers, Curly was staring at him intensely. "You ever see anyone do that before?"

Tel shook his head. "How—how do you do it?"

"I don't know," Curly said. "I—just do. I used to dream about her, before I came to Ketrall. But once, I thought about what it would be like if I just made her happen. And there she was, as you saw, in my hands. I never showed anyone else. But with all this—" He made a motion around them. "—I thought I ought to show it to someone. That's all." Suddenly he seemed embarrassed. "Well," he grunted.

Tel glanced at his pet; the flup-flip's polished eyes were open, and he wondered if it too had seen the flaming girl, so vivid, so sparkling, so real.

The familiar whine of a tank motor was growing behind him. Suddenly he whirled in the mud, and saw the looming shadow. "Get out of here," he cried to Curly who looked flustered and then dove to the right. Tel scrambled to the left. The tank careened toward him, passed him within inches, as he whirled to stare at the moving side and staggered backwards; for one moment he was close enough to see through the bubble dome on top, the tall, light-haired figure of the Scout at the steering rod. Then the tank was past him, crashed through the rock wall, and the fog closed behind the black bulk and swirled into the gap left in the rocks.

*What the hell's going on?* Tel wondered. A whole bunch of people were running toward the gap. Then an officer's voice stopped them. "Get the hell on down the line! Are you waiting for the ketzis to come in after you?"

And he was running again when the next hit came—not

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close enough to blind him, but not far enough away to ignore. He caught himself short in the middle of a breath. In the harsh light, he saw against the wall, tangled in the barbed wire, Shrimp, his whole left side was charred black. The wet mud had kept the rest of his uniform from burning. There was very little of his left leg, only the burnt stick of his left arm, and one cheek looked like crinkled carbon paper, though the remainder of his face was vividly recognizable. Aflame and panicked in a former hit, he must have tried to climb the wall, forgetting where he was going, and fallen back into the tangles of . . .

Then the light went out, and Tel was still running. He wasn't breathing; perhaps his heart had stopped; but his feet kept beating down into the mud. It was too dark to see anything now, but on the screen of night before him, blinking on and off, was the after image of the glittering flakes of burnt uniform, the red of drying blood, and a net of iron wire.

They did a lot of fighting after that. During one dark lull, the first stories began to trickle back.

"Did you hear what happened about the Scout?"

"What?"

"He was in that tank."

"The one that went berserk and busted the damned blockade?"

"Yeah. And they found him. He'd driven the thing smack through our wall into a nest of ketzis. He just crushed the whole installation."

"What about him?"

"They said the tank exploded when it hit. Somehow he knew that nest was there and that it would get us if it wasn't gotten rid of somehow."

"He sure picked a hell of a way to get rid of them. Where's the Scout now?"

"Are you kidding? They found pieces of that tank over half a mile radius."

In the darkness Tel pressed his cheek against the wet burlap of the rock-bag siding, feeling the gravel through the cloth, and listening to the men talking beside him. His fingers moved through the flap-flip's feathers, their softness tickling



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the tender skin on the inside of his knuckles. He was still, thinking about the Scout, and Shrimp, and wondering why . . .

### XI

"MISS RAHSOK! Where in the world have you been?" The woman with the kerchief set down her garbage pail beside the stoop. "I'm so glad to see you. Isn't it all terribly exciting, the coronation and everything? You'll never know what I've been going through. Actually I'm so upset I don't know what to do. You know how concerned I am about my daughter, Renna. I don't even know how to begin telling you—"

"Excuse me," Clea said, "I'm in an awful rush."

"What happened is I actually managed to get a ticket to the pre-victory ball the council gave last week in memory of His Majesty. That was just before Prince Let had been found. I had to lie myself perfectly green to that atrocious woman on the committee about why my daughter hadn't been sent a ticket through the regular debutante channels. But I got it, and we made the most beautiful dress, all white and silver. What girl wouldn't love a white and silver dress. The design was simply gorgeous. Well, you would have thought she was going to a funeral, the way she moped around. Renna does a little drawing, nothing great, mind you, but suddenly her pictures turned completely morbid, skulls lying in the branches of trees, dead birds, and one perfectly hideous little boy crouched on the beach about to be swept away by a wave. I should have known something was wrong right then. She kept on saying she didn't really want to go to the ball, that she wasn't interested. Go for your mother's sake, I told her. You may meet some dashing Duke or Lord, and, who knows? Well, she thought that was silly, and laughed. But anyway, at four o'clock in the morning, she set off in her beautiful white and silver dress. Oh, she looked so beautiful, Miss Rahsok, I nearly cried. In fact I did cry, after she was gone. Because she never came home. That evening I got a letter that she had gotten

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married to that awful boy I told you about who writes poems and lives in the Devil's Pot. She invited me to visit them, but I just couldn't go. She said that she would tell me about the ball, and that it hadn't been so bad after all. Imagine, a pre-victory ball, not so bad! Isn't it awful? Isn't it terrible?" The woman drew up her shoulders. "But then you take my younger daughter . . ."

"Excuse me," Clea said. "I'm really sorry, but I've got to get upstairs and get some things. Excuse me." She hurried past the woman into the hall.

She opened the thumb-print lock and stepped into the dark apartment. The window shades were drawn.

It's like a little cave, she thought, where I spent so much time. There's not enough room for an acrobat to turn a cart-wheel. It's too dim to see the grease paint on a clown's face even if he were standing just across the room, and you can't hear any—any calliope music.

She had come back to pick up her notebook with the odd radical formulas she'd never thought she'd look at again. But then I never thought I would want to look at anything again, she reflected. She went to the desk, remembering Alter, Mr. Triton, and the great tide of red and gold that was the circus. As she opened the drawer, she rested her other hand on the desk top, and her fingers touched a crumpled piece of paper. She frowned, stood up, and spread out the sheet. Bright red letters blazed across a green field:

*We have an enemy beyond the barrier.*

Viciously she tore the paper across, then tore it across again. She jammed the pieces deep into the waste basket, snatched up her notebook from the opened drawer, and left the apartment.

Around the corner of the hall from her, something crashed to the floor, bringing her up from the pit of unformulated anger into which she had plunged. She ran forward to see what it was.

"Oh—eh—good morning Miss Rahsok."



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"Dr. Wental, it's three o'clock in the afternoon!" exclaimed Clea. "Isn't it sort of early to be—in this condition?"

The Doctor raised his finger to his mouth. "Shhhh. I don't want my wife to know. I'm celebrating."

"What in the world are you celebrating?"

"The King's coronation. What else?" As he tried to get to his feet, Clea took his arm. "Oh, the bars are filled to bur—(urp)—sting. Everyone's celebrating! The war will be over! The war will be over and all the boys will be back. Hold on a minute there, will you?"

The doctor shook his head and steadied himself against the wall. "A new king, and a new age, I tell you. You have no idea how good an age it will be. But then, you have no idea how good an age it has been. Who knows where I'll go, what heights I'll have scaled."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"My medical practice," said the doctor, and chuckled. "I get new recommendations every day, every day."

"Your lupus erythematosis patient got better?"

"Eh—which one?"

"The first one, the one you had difficulty getting the medicine for."

"Him? Oh, him. He died. There was a very small stink about it; someone accused me of cutting the medicine with something. But they couldn't prove a thing. I have acquaintances on the Council and they couldn't prove a thing. The important part is that people heard about the recommendation, and every day, every day . . ."

"I think you can make it the rest of the way by yourself, Dr. Wental," said Clea.

"Oh, yes, of course. But when things go so well, sometimes you just have to break out and celebrate."

"Not that door," Clea said. "The next one."

"Oh, thank you." He moved unsteadily to the next apartment entrance. "Yes, thank you so much. But be very quiet now, because I don't want my wife . . ."

Clea left him fumbling at the thumb-print lock.

The royal entertainment, supplied by Mr. Triton, was

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waiting in the palace garden for the festivities to start. Clea entered the broad plot of grass cut by stone walks with granite benches. Vari-colored canvas had been stretched over slanting tent poles, and the circus people strolled back and forth in their spangled costumes, talking quietly.

"Dr. Koshar?"

Clea turned to see Arkor. "What is it?"

"We need your help."

"What do you want?"

"Some information." He paused for a moment. "Will you come with me?"

Warily she nodded.

"I don't want to frighten you," Arkor said. "And some of what I want to talk about will be frightening." They walked into the palace entrance. "Will you help us?"

"What do you want the information for? So far, I haven't any idea what you're talking about."

"You do have some idea," Arkor corrected her. "Why else did you quit your government job three years ago, and shut yourself up since then?"

"Because I was unhappy, and confused."

"I know why you were unhappy," Arkor said. "But why were you confused?"

"I don't think I understand your distinction."

"The distinction was yours," Arkor said. "You have a very precise mind, and you usually mean what you say. I ask again, why were you confused?"

"You haven't answered my question," Clea said. "Why do you want this information?"

"Fair enough," Arkor said. "It's a piece of information that a number of people have, among them most of the council, and the late King Uske. Many of the people of the forest have it also. Yet it is being protected very well. You are the only person we have found who possesses this information who is outside this protection."

"You are being very imprecise," said Clea. "You're going to have to be honest with me if you want my help."

"I said it would be frightening."

"Go on."

"First of all I can read your mind." He waited for a moment



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and then went on. "There are many telepaths among the forest guards. They have a constant mental net that spreads all over Toromon. Now though I can read minds, I have been excluded from this net. I assumed it was because I was somewhat of an apostate; my interests were not theirs, and among the telepaths there is little—I suppose you would call it nosiness. This piece of information I'm looking for concerns the war, and is perhaps the most important thing about it, maybe the secret of ending it, or winning it, or losing. The first thing that conceals it in most minds is an incredible layer of guilt, and I should have been able to break through that, but I can't. It is under the further protection of the telepathic net I spoke of. I tried to get some explanation from the net, but though I was not discouraged from seeking along my own ways, I was given no clue. You are the only person in whom I can detect this information who is not under the protection of the net. That's because you figured it out yourself where as these others have all been informed of it by one another, and have had to deal with it somehow on official level. The guilt is there even more strongly in you, but the pattern is still there, glowing beneath the surface of your mind, recognizable, but indistinct." Arkor paused one final time. "Incidentally, the last person we tried to explain any of this to insisted it was a psychotic fantasy. But he agreed to help us as though it were a hypothetical problem. So you have a positive precedent even if you don't believe me."

They turned down the hall.

"If I'm not being protected," Clea asked, "why haven't you dug it out of my mind already?"

"You're working on a unified field theory," Arkor said, "that you believe might be the greatest discovery man has yet made; and I have a great deal of respect for your opinions, Dr. Koshar. If I dug it out, it would leave your mind terribly shaken, and some of your creative faculties might be impaired. You'll have to fish it out yourself, with just a little prodding from me with perhaps some verbal assistance as well."

"As a hypothetical problem," Clea said, smiling, "I'm game."

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"Fine," said Arkor. "Now, as I said before, don't be frightened. But about an hour ago you tore up a piece of paper and threw it away, very angrily. Why?"

"How did you—I didn't tear—" The confusion that struck her came with complete surprise. "Oh you mean—well, it was a stupid war poster, and I suppose—"

"Why are you upset now?"

"I'm not—I mean I just wondered how you knew I tore it—the paper, the poster up. I was in my apartment with the door locked and the shades down."

"That's not what upset you. Why did you bring the poster into your home in the first place?"

"Because—because I just don't like this whole war business in the first place. I don't like the idea of our people dying beyond the barrier for—" She stopped.

"For no reason?"

"No." She took two breaths. "For something I did, something I discovered."

"I see," Arkor said. "And that's why you quit your job?"

"I—yes. I felt responsible."

"Then why did you bring the poster into your house in the first place. And why did you wait all this time, until you were about to leave that house for good, to tear it up?"

"I don't know. I was—"

"Confused, yes. Now what were you confused about?"

"I was confused because I felt guilty. I felt somehow responsible for . . ."

"For the war? But we have an enemy beyond the barrier, Dr. Koshar. You mean that you personally felt responsible for this whole governmental and economic flux that produced the war? You must know that there were many more factors at work than just your discovery."

"For a personal reason, then."

"You mean the death of your fiancé, Major Tomar?"

"I mean for the death of my fiancé Major Tomar in the war!"

Arkor waited a moment. Then he said, "I don't believe you."

Clea looked up at him. "That's your privilege."

"Shall I tell you why?"



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"I don't know whether I want to hear."

"When did Major Tomar die?"

"I don't think I want to talk about it!"

"He died in the late spring three years ago on a mission to wreck the radiation generators just beyond Telphar. You didn't make your discovery of the inverse sub-trigonometric functions and their application to random spatial coordinates until three months after he was dead. Major Tomar didn't die off in Tranu or Ketrall, he died in military service here in Toromon. Now how could your discovery have had anything to do with his death?"

"But I was working for the government . . ."

"Dr. Koshar, if you were half a dozen other people—even other brilliant people—you might be capable of falling into that sort of sentimentality. But you have a hard, resilient, supremely logical mind. You know that's not why you feel guilty."

"I don't *know* why I feel guilty then!"

"Then answer these: why did you bring the poster into your house if you didn't want to be reminded of the war? And if you were angry, if you disagreed with this 'whole war business,' why didn't you tear the poster up the day you peeled it so carefully from the board fence. Why did you leave it crumpled up on your desk for nearly a year and a half. What *were* you trying to remind yourself of something you had discovered but couldn't and wouldn't believe; something that today you thought you wouldn't have to remind yourself of again, tear it up, jam it into the wastebasket, push it out of your mind."

"But there won't be any war now," she interrupted him. "Remind myself! There's a new King now! Remind myself? But there'll be a truce declared, they'll all come back, and there won't be any . . ." She was talking very loudly, very fast, and they had nearly reached the throne room though there was nobody in the hall.

Down an adjoining corridor swept the two diplomatic ambassadors from Tranu, six-legged mutant spindled armed insects with blue cloaks billowing behind their thoral mandibles. By chance, Arkor glanced at them, and suddenly he stopped, listening, sensing, as the creatures walked past.

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Clea turned too, surprised. Something had been prying at her mind, she realized now that it was gone. She had been resisting, pulling down, but now that the pressure was lifted for a moment, her mind relaxed.

Then it happened. It surged up from the bottom of her mind like a tide, a water spout, erupting into her consciousness as an undersea volcano throws off mud, sand, and steam. She fell against the wall and whispered, "The war . . ."

But Arkor had taken a step forward, after the ambassadors. "Those creatures," he cried, "from Tranu. No, we *won* the war against Tranu, they said! But we *won* the war . . .!" He nearly screamed it.

And from the wall behind him, Clea shrieked back, "What war! Oh, don't you see! *What war . . .!*"

## XII

IN THE MIDDLE of the soldiers, Illu pounded the sign post into the muddy earth. "How do you know if the arms are pointing right?" someone asked.

Illu shrugged. "It don't really make much difference, does it."

Tel turned away now with Ptorn beside him. The new barrack cabins sat at the edge of the new encampment, dim and distant through writhing fog.

"It's good to be camped again."

Tel looked around at the vague shapes in the mist. "Yeah," he said. "Makes you feel like you've got your feet on the—" He pulled his boot from a deeper puddle of mud. "—ground again."

Ptorn laughed.

"You know, I've been thinking. I've been thinking about it a long time, too."

"About what?" asked the guard.

"About the Scout."

"You and a lot of other people," Ptorn said, gesturing back to where the group of soldiers were breaking up around the sign. "What's your particular thought?"



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"I want to know why."

"I can think of six whys I'd like the answer to," said Ptorn. "Which one's yours?"

"Just why he did what he did. Why he smashed that tank into the ketzi nest to save us."

"That's a pretty good one. Maybe he figured that if somebody didn't do it, we'd all go up in flames."

"Maybe." Tel hunched his shoulder. "You know, I suppose I could understand it better if the whole regiment were made up of forest guards. But it wasn't."

Ptorn laughed. "Look," he said, "we're all the same phylum, same genus, same species. That's not the part to wonder over."

"Well, I do," Tel said. "You guards, I know, have a different language that you speak in the forest. What about the Neanderthals? How did they learn our language so fast?"

"I believe their home language is a lot closer to the official language of Toron than ours is. After all, our language was an artificial one we invented ourselves, hundreds of years ago. It's a great deal more compressed than yours. Have you asked any of the apes about it?"

"I guess I will," Tel said. After they had walked on a few more steps, he said again, "But I still don't know why."

Someone was running toward them through the fog. He nearly bumped into them, steadied himself on Tel's shoulder, and cried: "The truce! Did you hear? They're crowning the new King and there's going to be a truce! We'll all be going home! We'll all be going back to Toromon!"

Then he took off in another direction toward a group of soldiers standing around the barracks' entrance. Tel and Ptorn looked at one another. The forest guard grinned. "We'll go back," he said. "We'll go back."

They were called in later, and as they stood around the little room, the speaker was announcing to them through the misty atmosphere:

"—does not go into effect until six o'clock this evening. Until then we are still at war. We are quite near a ketzi encampment. There will be no wandering off the base.

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Until the truce is actually consummated, the ketzis' defenses will be tripled. Anyone who strays beyond the encampment limit will be considered guilty of aggressive action. When the truce conditions are concluded, we will begin preparations for decamping."

First whispers, then talk, then laughter spread through the men. Then they burst out the door into the camp clearing. Somebody took his shirt off, knotted it in a ball, and flung it into the air. Somebody else fell down in the mud, laughing hysterically. There was a lot of running around, and more laughing, and some crying. Tel saw Lug coming out of the barracks toward them.

"What is it?" the Neanderthal called. "Huh? What's the matter?"

"What do you mean what's the matter?" Tel called back.

Lug came up rubbing his eyes. "What's everybody shouting about?"

"Where were you?" Tel asked. "Weren't you there for the announcement?"

"I was—" Lug rubbed his eyes again and looked—expressing himself in the way he hunched his shoulders a little—embarrassed. "I was asleep."

"They signed the truce!" Tel explained, getting excited all over again.

"Huh?" His fists fell slowly from his face. He shook his head. "Huh?"

"Lug, they signed the truce! The war's over!" He gave the Neanderthal a playful whack. "Ape, how do you manage to sleep through something like that?"

"I was tired," Lug said. He looked up at Tel and drew in the thick ropes of his brow. "The war's over?"

Tel nodded vigorously. "Finished, over, ended, done with; don't you see everybody cheering and jumping around?"

Lug looked around at the rollicking men. "That means we can go home?"

"That's right. Home."

Lug smiled and yawned. "That's good," he said with his eyes still closed. "That's good."

"Lug, what are you going to do when you get home?"

Lug shrugged his shoulder up; then, as they began to go



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down, Tel saw an idea suddenly flood up behind his broad face and burst out in words: "I know. I'm going to teach."

"Teach?" Tel asked.

"That's right," Lug said, excitement animating his heavy features. "I'm going to teach them things."

"You mean your people in the ruins?"

"That's right. I learned a lot of things just coming here that they should know. Like how to write down talking. The Scout taught me to do that, before he—well, he taught me, and to read it too."

"The Scout taught you to read and write?" Tel asked in amazement.

"That's right," Lug said. "And I could teach my woman, and my girl child, and the others. And we could plant kharba fruits in rows where the land was clear instead of picking them wild. You can take care of them better and can have a lot more of them that way. I was talking to a guy who lives on one of the coastal farms and he said that's the way they do it there. I've learned a lot of things. And if I teach them, then everything will be better for us. Right?"

"Sure," said Tel.

"Hey," asked Lug, looking down at Tel's feathery, flipped pet that was slapping back and forth and twittering a few feet away, "will they let you take that thing back with you?"

"I don't know," Tel said. "I hadn't thought about it."

"Do you think he'd be happy back in Toromon? It isn't very muddy back there is it?"

"No, it isn't. I'd like to take him, though. I've gotten sort of fond of him."

Lug squatted down and made the snapping sound with his fingers. The flep-flep waddled over and climbed onto his hand. Lug stroked the feathers and chuckled. "Maybe if you had two flips-flaps to keep each other company, it wouldn't be so bad. But one by itself would get lonely."

"I'd like to keep him around up until I go, anyway, even if I couldn't take him back. He can sort of wave good-bye to me just as I leave."

"That would be nice."

"Oh, I wanted to ask you something," said Tel.

"What is it?"

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"How come you apes who live further away from Toron than the forest guards speak the same language we do when the guards have another?"

Lug thought a minute. "Well, it's not exactly the same," he said. "We have some different words for things. But they're mostly for food and stuff like that, things you use in the house."

"Oh," Tel said. "I see."

"And we pick up your words fast. That's another thing I want to teach when I get back. I asked the Scout about it once, and he said the forest language is a made-up language, from years ago. It speaks a lot faster, and so many of them have forgotten the old language now unless they have a lot to do with you men."

"I see," Tel repeated.

Lug laughed. "Then I even teach you something. I'll be a good teacher because I can explain well."

"Sure," said Tel. "You want to look after the animal for a bit? I'm going to check my tools and see if they're all ready to give back. It'll take me about a half an hour to run through them all."

"I'll watch him," Lug said, and Tel walked off toward one of the barracks' cabins, calling back over his shoulder:

"Thanks a lot."

Tel had been blundering under what he'd thought was his bed for five minutes when it dawned on him he'd probably wandered into the wrong cabin. The arrangement of the barracks was a little different from the old camp and he still hadn't gotten it down right. As he got up, he nearly bumped into the figure of another soldier about to sit down on the next bed. "Oh, hey, I'm sorry," Tel began.

"That's okay pal," the other soldier said, "Say, aren't you the guy who used to be in my cabin back in the old camp?"

Then Tel recognized the voice. "Yeah, that's right. I'm glad to run into you again. I thought you'd been transferred to another encampment. How've things been treating you since the battle?"

The figure shrugged.



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In the darkened cabin they sat now on opposite beds. The fog had thickened, and the soldier was still a blank shadow in Tel's eyes.

"Fair, I guess." The shadow chuckled. "Life hasn't been too bad."

"I guess if you got through that damn thing you can't complain about too much. Isn't it great about the truce? What's the first thing you're gonna do after you get back to Toromon?"

The soldier let out a sigh. "I don't know if it's all that great. Maybe for you guys it is. But me? I really don't have anything to do when I get back. I was sort of hoping it would go on a little longer. I was at Tranu in Company Forty-four. That was a great company, it really was. Now I'm in Ketrall. I'd just as soon go someplace else after this and fight a little more. This ain't a bad life. It's just risky. And I guess for me the risks are just about over."

"Oh," Tel said, not quite understanding. "Well, what did you used to do back in Toromon?"

The shadowed head shook slowly. "You know, I don't even remember. I've been away so long, somehow I just don't even remember."

Tel frowned as the figure lay back on the bed. Then he stood up and went outside, stepping over the burned-out logs of last night's fire. He was just about to go into his own cabin, when somebody hailed him, "Hi there, Green-eyes?"

"Curly?"

"In person. Already to leave?"

"Just about. I still gotta check my tools. Hey, Curly, I wanted to ask you about that thing you showed me . . ."

"Shhhh." Curly's forefinger sprang to his lips. "Somebody might hear you talking about it."

"I just wanted," Tel lowered his voice, "to know how you did it."

"Have you tried it yet?"

"No, but—"

"Well, then don't bother me." Curly's annoyance got cut off when somebody cried out across the muddy flat: "Hey you, come back!" There was a distant, double flop-flup,

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flap-flop, one of tiny flippered feet, the other of open-toed Neanderthal boots.

"That's Lug!" Tel said. "He must be chasing my—"

The form was just discernable thirty feet away and moving further off.

"Well, where does he think he's chasing it?" said Curly.

"Oh hell," Tel said, "I forgot to tell him about the boundary." He took off across the mud shouting, "Come back here, you stupid ape! Get back here!"

He caught up to Lug some forty feet outside the camp limit, grabbed his shoulder and whirled him around.

Lug looked surprised. "It got away, and I just—" he began to explain.

"Just get back as fast as you can run."

"But the truce."

"It doesn't take effect until six o'clock and the ketzis have doubled their watch. Now get going." As they started back at a trot, Tel felt his first panic break and found relief in a flow of friendly abuse directed toward the Neanderthal's jogging back. "I used to wonder why the Scout would break his neck for us guys. Well, here I am and maybe I should know now, but I'm damned if I do. Come on, move." Lug speeded up, just as Tel heard the sound of flippers at his feet. He stopped and dropped to a crouching position. "Well, there you are!" He accosted his pet, held out his hand and snapped his fingers. "Come on, baby," Tel said, "you can have a nice piece of charcoal when we get back."

Lug who was already inside the boundary line turned around and called, "Hey, I thought you said run."

"Come on," Tel called once more at the flap-flop who opened four shell-polished, pastel eyes and blinked at him. "Come."

And that was the last sound he ever made.

Lug staggered backward from the rumble of miniature thunder, his lids cramped shut before the column of white fire that spurted up where a moment before Tel had been crouching.

"What the hell was that?" someone cried from across the



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flat. Ptorn ran up and grabbed the Neanderthal's arm. "Lug, what happened?"

"I don't know—I don't know—" His eyes were still closed and he was shaking his broad head back and forth.

One of the officers was shouting: "God damn it, this war isn't over yet. Now who was outside the boundary! Who was it?"

By one of the barracks, Curly looked up from his cupped hands in which a flaming woman danced over his dirty palms and frowned.

### XIII

"... PRONOUNCE you King Let of the Empire of Toromon."

Jon, standing in the first gallery below the raised throne, watched the chief councilman back away from the blond youth with the tan face who was now the King. There were not more than sixty persons in attendance: the twelve councilmen, members of the royal family, their guests, and several other important or highly honored state personages. Jon was there as Petra's guest. Among the others was the grotesquely imposing figure of Rolth Catham, the historian. The King paused while he looked over the people in the room, and then sat upon the throne.

Applause rippled among the participants.

Then a man in the back of the room looked over his shoulder at another noise, louder than the clapping coming from the ante-chamber. Someone else turned, then still more people. The sentries' attention was alerted by now. Jon and Petra both received mental nudges at the same time. "It's Arkor," Petra whispered, but Jon had already begun to make his way back to the ante-room. The Duchess paused just long enough to get Catham's attention, then followed.

When Jon pushed into the smaller chamber he saw confusion. Guards were holding Arkor, and others, were surrounding one of the ambassadors from Tranu. Clea was leaning against the wall. The body of the second ambassador was scattered, in pieces, over the floor.

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Akor was saying calmly but loudly, "No, I killed no one. They are not ambassadors, they're imposters. Will you just please look at the 'body.'"

The plastic rib cage had cracked open and the clock-work interior of the "ambassador" still hummed and quivered. One glass eye had rolled from its rubber socket across the tile.

"Can't you understand, they're robots!"

The sentries looked, the council members stared. A moment later Jon saw the King push through the door with a guard on either side. "Now what's going on," one of the guards was demanding.

It was Petra who suggested the private meeting in the council room. The members sat along one side. At the head of the room the young King was seated on a slightly raised platform. On the other side sat Jon, Petra, Arkor, Catham, and Clea. "Now what is it you want to say?"

The Duchess nodded to Arkor who stood up and faced the council. "I have somebody here who is going to tell you something that you all know, but have conveniently insulated yourselves from. Something you all did, then decided consciously that it was the only way out of a problem, but took the decision only at the assurance that you would not have to remember making it." He turned to Clea. "Now, will you tell the council what you were about to tell me, Dr. Koshar?"

Clea stood up. Her face was pale. "They won't believe it," she said. Then her voice grew firmer and she spoke directly to the council. "You won't believe it. But you know it anyway." She paused. "I spoke to many of you three years ago when I first made the discovery that enabled you to send people, equipment, and supplies off to this war of yours. You were incredulous then. And you will not believe this at all: there is no war."

The council members looked at one another and frowned. She repeated, "There is no war, and you know it."

"Well," spluttered one of the council members, "then what—I mean where—are all our soldiers?"

"They are sitting"—she took a breath—"in tiny metal



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cells stacked up like coffins in the vast section of Telphar where recruit soldiers are not allowed."

"And what are they doing there?" demanded another council member.

"They are dreaming your war, each one desperately trying to dream his way back to what he knows is reality, somewhere deep at the bottom of his mind. Sodium pentathol drugs keep them in a foggy, highly suggestive state; three years of constant propaganda keep their minds trained on the subject of war; six weeks of basic training formally designed to make a raving psychotic of the steadiest mind lends the final unquestionable patina of reality to the dream in which every sensation of the real world, the sound of wrinkling sheets, the glitter of sun or water, the feel of wet cloth, or the smell of old rotten wood, are fitted into a mosaic defined by whatever each one fears and loves most, and is called war. Finally, a computer with an information-sorting mechanism that can take whole sensory patterns from one brain and transpose them to another keeps all these dream co-ordinated with one another."

"Oh, that's ridiculous."

"It's impossible."

"I don't believe all this."

It was as if the doubt was a signal upon which a vast mental flood gate opened. Jon had felt something similar when Arkor had made him understand the language of the forest guards. But this was as though he had suddenly acquired another sense, sharp as sound or sight.

In terms of sight, it was like standing before a vast pattern of bright lights rising around him yet still before him. In terms of sound it was as if a symphony's opening phrase had begun and he was waiting for the cadence to resolve. In terms of touch, it was as if a storm of frozen and heated winds swirled toward him but had not yet struck. But it was neither sight, nor sound, nor feeling; because he still felt the ridged back of his chair, could hear the rustling of the councilor's robes, and could see their worried faces, their narrowing eyes and pursing lips.

Arkor addressed the vast mental pattern that they were

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all aware of now: "Why have you protected this secret in their minds?"

The answer came back like sparkling fire-works, chords of music, waves of tingling foam: "Because we did not know what else to do with it. It was an idea, this war, which sprouted in the late King's mind, yet the seeds of it are in every mind in Toromon. The one man who opposed the King, and that was even after the plan was well under way, was Prime Minister Chargill, who was assassinated. We felt we could neither help nor hinder you in your effort because we did not understand it. The government asked our help in obliterating the knowledge from the minds of those officially connected with the project, and since it was a solution to the economic problem, we consented; because we could not refuse."

Jon and Petra both stood now beside Arkor. "Then understand our effort now," Jon said.

"Our intent was to save our country," said Petra.

"And to salvage the freedom of each man in it," said Jon, "freedom from such oppressive-dreams!"

"Then what must we do?" asked the collective mentality of the telepathic guards.

"You must go into every mind in Toromon and release the knowledge of war. You must band them to one another for that moment, so that they both know themselves and each other, whether they be in the royal palace or the coffin-cells of Telphar, or the stone ruins beyond. Do that, and you will have served this breed of ape, man, and guard called Human."

"Some minds may not be ready."

"Do it."

There was a wave of consent.

And a doctor in the General Medical Building dropped his thermometer against the desk and realized, as the mercury beaded over the white plastic, that his anger at the head nurse, who always put the progress tags on backwards, was hiding his knowledge of war.

A woman drinking at the Devil's Pot bar ran her finger around the wet ring her glass had left on the stained wooden counter and saw that her frustration at being expelled from



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the University for cheating on an examination for which she had worked six hours arranging microfilm crib sheets, was hiding her knowledge of war.

Councilman Rilum, caught the thirty-year old memory that spun in his mind of the time that a clothing industry that he had been vice co-ordinator of had burned down, and realized his rage at the lax enforcement of fire regulations was hiding his knowledge of war.

A man who worked in the aquariums paused on his way across the wharves, took his hands out of his back pockets, looked at the scars beneath the faint haze of black hair on his forearm, and realized his fury at the woman who had whipped him with an iron rod when he had been a child on a mainland farm was hiding his knowledge of war.

Councilwoman Tilla caught a fold in her robe and squeezed it with her old fingers as she remembered the catastrophe at Letos Island where her father had been killed when she had gone to help him collect fossils as a girl, and realized that the child's fright had been hiding the adult's knowledge of war.

Captain Suptus stood on the bridge of a tetron-tramp that was pulling away from the dock and blinked his eyes against the bright sunset, remembering how a man with white hair had stood up behind a desk in the office of a shipping company (another company than the one he worked for now) and had sworn, "You'll never set foot on another ship as long as I am alive!" and suddenly understood his terror at that dozen-year dead man had hidden from him his knowledge of war.

A woman named Marla dove from the coastal rocks and felt purple waters close her in a fist of shadows. The rims of her goggles pushed against her face, and in the last light she tore the oyster from the shale and soared toward the surface again. Sitting on the rocks a moment later she worried her knife between the crusty valves. Crack, scrape, crackle; and the tongue of flesh, without pearl, shone wetly in the blue evening. And for a moment she remembered another, larger oyster in which had lain an immense, milky sphere, that had rolled away from her fingers, across the edge of the rock, and dropped with a miniscule splash twelve feet into

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the green water. And her stomach had caught in a furious knot, and in that knot was tied the anger and frustration hiding her knowledge of war.

A forest guard stopped by a tree and pressed his palm against the rough bark, and remembered the morning seven years ago when he and two others had been sent to catch a girl that was to be marked as a telepath, and how she had fought him with silent maniacal indignation, and how his momentary anger had risen, connecting with a score more of tiny streams of anger, and how that net of hostility even now was hiding his knowledge of war.

A prisoner stepping from the mineshaft-lift spat in the footsteps of an overseer who had turned his back and was walking out into the ferns, then frowned, remembering his older brother years ago walking away from him down a dark hallway, and there had been tears running down his own face as he crouched in the corner; and he suddenly understood that those tears had been a veil all this time obscuring his knowledge of war.

Councilman Servin pressed his heel hard against the leg of his chair, glancing from one face to the other in the council room and thought: *"Harsh, and uncomprehending, like my uncle's face the day he called me down from my room and, in front of the whole family, accused me of stealing wine from the green liquor stall in the pantry, and even though I had done nothing, I was so frightened, I couldn't speak, and was punished by being ignored completely by the whole family for a week and had to take my meals alone, and knew that what had kept him from speaking then, now hid from him his knowledge of war."*

Across Toromon, further than Telphar, beyond the seared plains and among the stone ruins, a military recruiting officer suddenly lifted his pen from his paper. At the same time, across the desk from him, the young Neanderthal who had been about to mark the application raised his broad head, and the two stared at one another, each recognizing his own knowledge of war.

And in the palace garden, among clowns and acrobats, Alter sat on the ground against a marble urn. Wind over the grass and through the leaves tugged at her white hair. She



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moved her fingers along the leather strands of her necklace, from the milky shell streaked with gold, to the one that was plain mother of pearl, then to the one with veins of red, and thought, *Oh, he tried, he tried to dream some fragment of me into that terrible dream, dream himself back into reality,* as another had dreamed his mother's face was always on the bottom of a certain kind of rock, as another had been able to converse with his dead father when the breeze made the leafless foliage shiver and speak to him, or as another had found all beauty and love in a flaming figure dancing on his fingers. *But he didn't know, he didn't know his own knowledge of war . . .*

"How did you know?" Jon asked.

Clea moved her hand over the polished table-top before she looked up at the council members. "Because I worked on the computer. Because I knew from the reports on the conversion of the transit ribbon that progress couldn't be going that fast. Because there was a minor mistake in calculation in the working condensation of the theory due to a typographical misprint that would have rendered the whole process invalid and that no one ever caught but me. Because I knew what the economic situation of Toromon was, and I knew it had gotten into that bind of great excess and little mobility which must mean war. Because of a dozen things which meant this was the only answer possible. Because it was assumed that war would become such a reality in everyone's mind that it would never be questioned; and because they did not realize that that reality must prove itself again and again to questioners, and that it is the fantasy which goes on without contradiction, without having to prove itself under logical rigor. The idea of asking questions was almost impossible; but only almost."

Here grotesque Catham stood up, sunset light from the window catching the plastic case of his skull. "I have one more question, Dr. Koshar. How do the soldiers die?"

"Do you really want to know?" Clea asked. "Do you know the game randomax that has become so popular recently? The computer has a selector that works on a similar principle

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only with a much larger matrix, singling out soldiers to be killed by random choice. Then, when the choice has been made, by controlled suggestion the soldier has a dream which maneuvered by the computer so that a situation will arise that will allow death. Then the cell in which the soldier is lying is electrified, his body is incinerated, and the cell is ready for another drugged madman who is prepared to fight the enemy beyond the barrier.

"Oh, the planning that must have gone into this," Clea said, "the probing and discovery. Tranu was just an experiment compared to Ketrall. In most peoples' minds Tranu is a number of battles, Mordor, Krothering Side, the Battle of the Trees; it is a record of carefully reported casualties, three thousand in the first month, the complete slaughter of heroic Company Forty-four with not one left alive, then the detailed report of the death of two men under the torture of the Transians; it is the detailed creation of a visible enemy, those plastic robot insects Arkor destroyed. But it was found that all this wasn't necessary. Simply turn them loose in the haze of their own injured brains with weapons and they will create their own enemy, greater and more malignant than any which carefully deluded psychologists could create for them, always hidden behind a fog of terror.

"They were stultified by their own horror, incapable of questioning law or reality, or any other facet of existence; because after this training, six weeks and before, no questions could be asked."

Catham raised his head slowly, and the young King stood up. "Perhaps, we will now," said the King, "have peace."

Later they filed from the chamber to attend the coronation festivities that were about to begin. Jon started to turn down the stairway that would take him back to the garden when someone touched his shoulder. It was Catham.

"Yes?"

"I have some questions that are not for the rest of the Council," the historian said. "They're about your Lord of the Flames."

"Our psychotic fantasy?"



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"If you will." The three-quarter smile formed on the human half of his face.

"Why don't you just rack him up to one of those elements of reality that must be questioned to prove the reality real."

Catham shrugged. "I already have. What I want to know is this: do you think the Lord of the Flames planted this monstrous idea of a war without an enemy in King Uske's mind?"

"Certainly not the idea," Jon said. "Perhaps the method for turning the idea into such a reality, though."

"I hope it worked the other way around," Catham said. "Why?"

"Because of what it says about mankind if the idea didn't come from something extra-human." Catham nodded, and walked on down the corridor. Jon watched him go, then continued down the steps.

The circus people were all filing into the entrance that would take them into the palace auditorium.

Across the garden he saw his sister with her arm around Alter's shoulder. They were walking quietly at the end of the line. He thought: *And what have I learned? Look, they all go softly into the dark doorway toward the bright but distant spotlights, even though they know now, the way they went before. Can I detect any difference in the way this one holds her shoulders up, or the way that one has two fingers beneath his belt, or the way the other fumbles with the gold braid on his shoulder? But what difference should there be? I have waited these years, and I have watched. And I will still go on pondering what I have learned. Watcher and prisoner, I wait for freedom. At least from all this, I know from which direction freedom will come, because, if for no other reason, I have lived with my observations, and can at last move in to see what effect the observations have had on me. What can I salvage? Whatever is not clumsy, and can face war and deny it.*

The garden was empty now. He stood by himself in the swelling darkness, fixed actor yet mobile observer in the strange matrix of matter and motivation.

And a universe away, a triple mind watched him, ordered its own knowledge of war, and made ready.

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