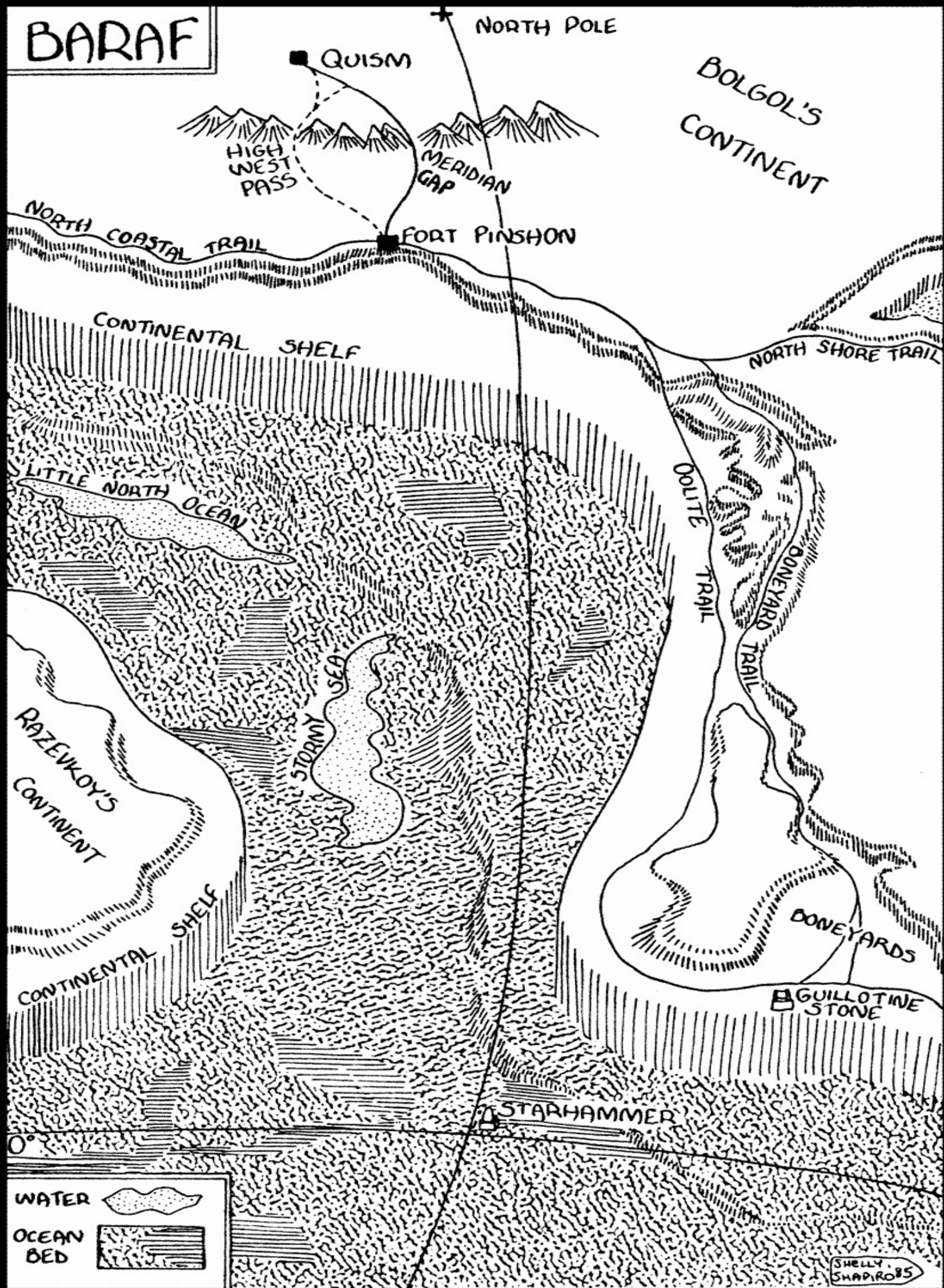


THE VANG 01

STARHAMMER
Christopher Rowley

STARHAMMER'S MAP

BARAF



CHAPTER ONE

The old planet had been a frozen wanderer for eons, but now it was dying, baked slowly by the young blue-white tyrant that had snagged it from the void. It turned sluggishly in its far distant orbit while on the ancient seabed the dust howled over the bare basalt, carrying forward the long moan of torment. Electrical energies sparked great lightning bursts against the purple skies.

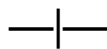
Out of a wall of dust came the great machine, crawling forward on treads a mile long. Beneath them, the rock powdered and joined the raging dust storm. Above, the vast edifice shuddered, shivered, and shifted forward another ten meters.

Invisible in the dust, the convoy machines called mournfully, great klaxons wailing. In response the great machine began to build up a refueling field.

In the basalt ocean floor, three hundred kilometers north and east, a cube almost four kilometers on a side began to shake. The vibration increased, built to a crescendo and then with a flash of was photons, a cubical pit appeared in the crust, four-kilometer-deep walls glowing white hot, incandescent vapor coiling over the bottom.

Energy receptors in the great machine came alive with power. Sparks leaped and sizzled for a moment and then hot, ionizing beams of energy stabbed briefly through the swirling murk to the convoy machines. They ground on, guarding flanks, guarding rear.

No reports came from higher command, no new targets were assigned. In the control center, the Keeper, a batrachianoid robot three meters tall, tried to call the crew once more. There was no reply. There had not been any reply in a billion years. It scanned the terrain ahead and readied the machines for the next lurch westward on the endless march. It knew nothing about the death of planets, it dealt simply with targets.



On terrestrial time scales it was generally regarded as the twenty-fifth century of spaceflight, the fifteenth century of the laowon tyranny and the worst of times for humanity.

From the fertile sector of the Milky Way encompassed by the sweep of the Orion arm, two splendidly similar space-traveling species had arisen. From great golden Lao had come the blue-skinned laowon, swift empire builders in Faster Than Light vessels. From humble Earth had come humanity, spreading out in cheerful anarchy on Not As Fast As Light drives.

When they met, the empire was seven kiloparsecs across on the long axis and the sphere of human exploration stretched perhaps one twentieth as far.

The meeting, therefore, produced profoundly contrary emotions in the two sides, while concepts of convergent evolution, pan-life mathematica, and DNA universality, found their ultimate consummation. Indeed, laowon and human were startlingly similar, except that laowon were slightly taller and had skin in shades of blue.

From their pinnacles of advanced industry, both races had burst forth from their home worlds driven by the indomitable, ancient urge: to be free!

Unfortunately, the laowon were uninterested in human freedoms. Nor were the ancient religious prohibitions against the manipulation of laowon genetic material extended to preclude experimentation on humans. Strange abominations, in vast numbers, began to appear from laowon gene labs. A human slave population that threatened to dwarf that of free humans, grew relentlessly century by century.

In the Court of the Imperium Lao, planet-hungry aristocrats, abetted by racist reactionaries in the Lao cult, urged laowon colonization of thinly occupied worlds, wherever they might be. Contesting Seygfan groups, the cult, and—the Superior Buro—the Imperial Intelligence organ—were engaged in a bitter internecine struggle.

Since the human sphere lay entirely within the palm of the empire, it was only the Imperial Family's iron grip on the space fleets that kept the greediest from tearing up the Lao-human treaties and grabbing human worlds at will.

Manipulated by the all powerful Superior Buro and cut off from further exploration by the laowon battle fleets, the human race faced a peculiarly humiliating destiny as the permanent slave race of the laowon.

And then in the year 17082, Lao Record (AD4533) one last, strange hope suddenly gleamed—scrap of legend borne out of the deep deserts of a distant, dying world and an archaeologist, a man with half his head burned away, were the foundation of a secret that could yet save humanity from the grip of the higher race.

When a small part of this intelligence was given to the decadent ruling elite of Earth, the information was in the hands of the Superior Buro within a few minutes. The Buro was particularly well organized on Earth.

The laowon pressed eagerly. What was the secret? And where did it lie? But the betrayal itself was betrayed, and those who possessed the last hope began a desperate race against the Superior Buro across the deeps between the stars.

From the beginning, the Superior Buro felt confident of victory. Indeed, the opponents were grotesquely mismatched. And yet, not even the Buro's gigantic computers could calculate every chance, every ricochet of fate.

For example, in the same year that Doctor Ulip Sehngrohn staggered out of the desert with horrifying wounds and his strange story, a boy was born to Hutmother Joana 416, of North West Alley in the dusty township that served Castle Firgize on the laowon frontier world Glegan. He was part of an experiment by Lord Deshilme of Firgize, a member of the ruling Imperial Family who had chosen exile on the frontier to avoid the fate that had overtaken his brothers at the court.

Fertilization in the laboratory with microsurgically altered genetic material was followed by implantation in the chosen female's womb.

Shortly after birth, however, Jon 6725416 was removed from the experimental batch because he had retained normal human intelligence. His number was printed on his forehead and he was sent to Joana in Hut 416 to raise, outside the laboratory.

From the first days though, Joana also spoke to him his "remembered name"—Iehard, which had been passed on through the females of Hut 416 for generations, kept alive by sheer human determination and cussedness, characteristics that the laowon consistently worked to breed out of the township populations.

Two decades later, Jon Iehard toiled in the great gangs working on the expansion of Castle Firgize that Lord Deshilme had taken up to give himself something to do in exile.

For days Jon's work gang had moved blocks of pink granite, onto the loading elevator beneath the great crane. The elevator took the stones the first hundred meters. The crane lifted them the second hundred, to the top of the new walls of the North tower.

Over them Ushmai, the laowon overseer, was a constant, demanding presence.

Another load was maneuvered into place. The elevator rattled upward. Jon sensed that Ushmai was not watching them so he slipped away to sit by the wall. There in the deep shadows, he was out

Ushmai's sight for once. He relaxed, squatting in the shadows watching the rest of the gang, naked but for the leather aprons and shoulderpads they wore to protect themselves, waiting the next shipment. The men milled around the watertank; they sweated like beasts.

In another minute Ushmai had noticed Jon's absence from the gang. The tall stickfigure of the laowon was moving into range, scanning for the missing worker.

Jon pushed himself to his feet and away from the wall. His hands rested on the blocks behind him for a moment. He felt cracks in the stone. He turned to look more carefully and discerned more cracks. All along the bottom course there were cracks in the big primary stones of the wall. The tower was to be raised another hundred meters, and when completed it would soar three hundred meters above Firgize hill. Since Deshilme preferred to build for posterity, he chose simple building materials—massive blocks of stone, reinforced with steel and concrete. The effect was an architecture of the brutal.

Ushmai was whistling at him. Harsh, piercing whistles. Ushmai was pointing angrily at the watertank.

"Damn the Ushmai," Jon said to Truk and Gus when he returned to his place. More blocks of pink stone were waiting to be lifted onto the elevator.

"The Ushmai is always looking for you," Truk said with a thin smile.

"He knows Hut 416 ate plump wabboos this week," Gus commented.

"Now who might have told you that?" Jon's eyebrow arched.

"A little flopper I know."

"Gus 555 is seeing your sister Wem, that's how," Truk gurgled.

"He never asked me." Jon scowled at Gus.

"Since when does he have to?"

"I'm eldest in my Hut. That's enough reason."

"Eldest *male*, I asked Joana. She agreed all right. Everything square and hutwise."

Arlbi leaned forward. "Look out, here comes Ushmai."

The angular form approached. The white overseer's suit gleamed in the sunlight. "6725416, you have been slacking again. If I have to remind you once more, you'll be for the pain booth, you hear me?"

Wearily Jon groaned his assent in the laowon tongue.

Ushmai turned to go but Jon called after him.

"By the way, there are cracks in those bottom stones. Cracks right through I'd say."

Ushmai purpled. "Cracks? In the Contractor's good stones? Nonsense. What would you know about stone quality anyway? Have you been to the quarry? Have you been among the skilled stone cutters? No, of course not, you are alley stuff, with the wit of a wild wabboos. Stick to what you know, moving stones from pallet to elevator. That's all you have to do. All you're capable of. Cracks! Indeed!" He sniffed loudly and turned on his heel.

The men moved stone. Ushmai oversaw them, the gang on their left who mixed tubs of mortar for their elevator, and the gang on the right who put facing slabs on another elevator.

The men quizzed Jon anxiously about the cracks. He described them as best he could. None were satisfied.

"So Ushmai is taking a cut on these stones, that's for sure."

"Ushmai fancies himself a planet lord. He'll make his pile, buy a jumper, and take his own work. That takes heavy raking from the Contractor. Everyone knows that."

At shift's end they stumbled wearily away. Jon took another look at the cracks. They were

definitely wider. He reported it to Ushmai who immediately became ill tempered.

"Get away from me!" he snapped haughtily. "If you repeat these slanders on the good stones of our gracious Contractor, I swear you're for the pain booth."

Jon shrugged and turned away. He was due for the pain booth that week anyway, for wabboo bones in the hut last month. What would it matter if he spent another five minutes in the booth?

But other than Ushmai there was no laowon he could talk to who was likely to listen to his story for more than three seconds. Laowon found human attempts to communicate intrinsically annoying. Humans were meant to be silent, servile, and as nearly invisible as possible.

He turned onto the causeway and followed his workmates back over the hill to the sprawling human township, where restless throngs of workers moved to and fro in the dusty lanes as the shift changed.

Back at the Hut, a big square room of slatted wood sealed with plastic, Mother Joana and her youngest daughter Troli were waiting with a lunch of tuber soup and dark ration-bread.

The soup was hot and still flavored lightly with the scraps of plump wabboo that Jon had poached the previous week from the Sweetcrystal game preserve.

The door opened and his younger brother Sab came in. Sab was but fourteen, a thin, lithe boy. He worked in the vineyards that radiated southwards from the castle walls.

"So Sab, back for lunch," Jon said in greeting. As the oldest male in the Hut, he took a constant interest in the doings of the others, Joana's four girls and three other boys. All the product of artificial breeding techniques, all as different as they could be.

Sab was a quiet little thing, a docile worker who rarely spoke. He had spent his first years in the laboratory, but had survived to return to Joana. His nights were wracked by dreadful dreams. Once in a while he had fits and tried to bite his own flesh. They had to tie him up on those occasions.

Together Hut 416 ate soup and ration-bread. Joana discussed young Wana's mysterious ills. To Jon, the symptoms sounded like the black-spot virus. He suggested that Joana take Wana to the infirmary, but Joana just pointed at the near-empty money pot. Jon chewed soup and schemed of some way to add to their slender financial reserves. For his own labor he received the ration-bread and water that maintained the hut. The labors of the younger children brought small cash payments, enough so that normally the Hut stayed ahead of the rent and heat bills. Sab and Gelda, who worked in the vineyards, would be due their monthly payment of wine soon. If he sold some of that, there would be money for Wana's visit to the infirmary. If little Wana lived that long, if it really was black-spot disease. It could be awfully quick. And then the Hut would be fumigated. It would stink for months.

There was a sudden noise, a shudder went through the Hut. A few moments later the door banged open, and Little Gita—one year older than Wana—flew in, all pigtailed and waving hands. There was an uproar somewhere in the distance.

"What do you think's happened?" Joana asked, peering over the township roofs toward the back Firgize hill.

"A spaceship must have come!" Sab shouted. "Like the one that brought Lady Magelsa to wed the Lord Innoo. Everyone will take the afternoon off!"

Jon checked the sky, no trace of exhaust fumes was visible against the cloudless blue.

The hill blocked off all but the view of the four towers of Firgize. Except that now Jon saw there were only three! "The cracks!" he shouted. "The cracks in the tower!"

A pall of dust was rising where the great tower had collapsed. Jon slipped out onto the Alley and ran down to the township gate. A mob of human workers was pouring over the causeway. Their faces were a tapestry of rage.

"Hundreds are dead. The whole tower has collapsed."

~~The men gathered in the township square. Red Urk was hoisted to speak. "The Overseer Ushmai was warned of the cracks!" He bellowed. "We demand the Overseer's expiation in the Agony Booth."~~

The crowd roared at that and flowed back to the causeway. But at the other end of the causeway the Guards, seven-foot-tall human pinheads, were massed in phalanx. The Guards held their shock batons at the ready. Steel helmets covered their tiny skulls. They were not noted for their compassion; at the whistle they charged the men.

For once the battle was long and furious; the men of the township were enraged by the latest in a long line of disasters brought on by Firgize incompetence. But eventually, the Guards broke through and by late evening had complete control of the main alleys of the townships. All that night hounding warriors with diminutive skulls ran through the Huts in an orgy of violence, rape, and slaughter.

In the morning rebel survivors were gathered inside the Keep of the Palace. They were harangued by Deshilme Firgize and then the identified ringleaders were taken for expiation. One by one they were thrust into the Agony Booth. Their chilling screams rang out all day and night, completing the dismal atmosphere that lay over the castle and its surroundings.

Jon waited on line for the Booth, having been marked down by Ushmai himself. Around the captives towered the huge microcephals, who nudged them and tittered at each quavering shriek from a dying man in the booth.

There was a movement on a balcony a few meters above, where a party of blueskins had appeared to witness some of the expiations. Jon noticed the Lord Innoo, heir to Castle Firgize, and his bride, the Princess Magelsa Gnovii among the laowon.

Ahead of him Rad 4623 was thrust into the booth. The clamps closed around his neck leaving only his head visible. The pain began and Rad bellowed mightily.

As the bellows hollowed out into the fluting screams in the "middle passage," so Jon noticed the Princess wince and stop her ears with her fingers. Was she perhaps dismayed at the heavy-handed ways of the frontier worlds? She looked down and for a long moment his eyes caught hers. Her scrutiny became a very careful one.

An unconscious Rad was removed from the booth and his body tossed onto the pile of those who had already expiated. The big microcephals enjoyed these events immensely, and they were giggling as they thrust Jon into the booth. He glanced back to the blue Princess on the balcony. She had taken her husband's arm and was speaking passionately in his ear.

While the clamps were swung into place around his neck, Jon noticed the booth stank of human excrement, sweat, and pain. He stared back along the line of doomed rebels and those who were drawn up to witness the expiations.

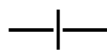
Unexpectedly a command in laowon was bugled down from the balcony. After a moment of shocked hesitation among the steel helmeted pinhead guard, the command was repeated with considerable impatience.

The clamps were lifted, Jon was pulled from the booth and hurried away to one side and around a corner, where a small door opened unexpectedly in the smooth wall of the castle. He was thrust through it.

In total darkness he climbed a winding secret stair. A guard was waiting for him above and he was taken through another secret door, then down a long corridor paneled in pale ochre velvet and with mural landscapes to a white door. Within, waited the tall, angular Princess Magelsa. In short order she offered him first the velvet suit of a valet to Lord Innoo, and then herself, in her own bed. Not long

afterward she conducted his initiation into interspecies sex. She was young and energetic and had acquired a taste for all kinds of unusual pleasures on Ratan, her sophisticated homeworld.

Laowon and human were similar enough physically to find such encounters mutually rewarding but long afterward Jon lay on the enormous circular bed in Magelsa's bedroom and stared out the window. From far away, almost from another planet it seemed, he could still hear the agonized screams of those who were expiating for the rebellion.



At first his life seemed indeed to have taken a turn for the best. Magelsa arranged for the bar-code on his forehead to be reduced by plastic surgery, but demanded that a slight addition, a small brand with her laowon initial code, be burned into his right buttock.

In the Palace, he worked under the fretful eye of Old Chalmes, the human Head Valet. As Jon worked and learned to avoid Old Chalmes, so he found a wealth of opportunities for enriching the diet of his mother and her family. Every week he took them the pickings of the meats, bottles of good wine, slabs of bread and cheese.

After the first few weeks Magelsa's demands upon him began to slacken. He realized that his time as her favorite was coming to its end. He also realized that all was not well within the Firgize household. Magelsa was unhappy. She disliked Lord Innoo, whom she found dull. She hated quiet rural Glegan with its cool forests and windswept heaths. She longed for the bright lights and excitements of Ratan's great cities. Endlessly, she begged Innoo for permission to travel.

This did not endear her to Lord Deshilde. He had not sought the connection with the Gnovii. They were of Blue Seygfán, he of the Red and thus out of favor at court. Magelsa was a compromise between Seygfán, and while the link did add to the security of Firgize on Glegan, it also represented the least of control held by the Heir himself.

Indeed, long interstellar voyages were most expensive. The cost of improving Castle Firgize to represent Deshilde's royal lineage was heavy. He would not consider another large outlay of funds. Not while he still awaited a grandson and heir.

Of course, Magelsa applied retroactive contraceptives every day with the hope that eventually she would get her way and be sent home to Ratan. There her disastrous marriage could be dissolved and she could resume the pleasures of her previous life.

Unfortunately for Magelsa, her dissatisfaction had been noted by Lord Firgize's own wife, the Lady Flaam. Flaam believed she had found her last chance to cement her own line to Firgize. Flaam came from the family Castigrii, upstarts on Glegan's south continent. She dreamed of enriching the Castigrii element in Firgize by arranging a match between Innoo and a young female cousin of the Castigrii now entering puberty. But to achieve that end Magelsa had to be killed and disgraced. Should there be simply a divorce, once more freeing the princess on Ratan, then Innoo would be forced to wed another female Gnovii. The Gnovii would insist upon it, and they were well placed in Blue Seygfán. Only if there was some provable taint upon Magelsa could their claim be turned aside under cult rules.

One day, therefore, Jon was awakened early in his own bed by a pair of microcephals. Wearing silly little grins, the huge idiots bound him and put him into a sack, then carried him away and released him, much later, in the presence of the Lady Flaam. She was clad entirely in black, seated in a chair carved to represent the snarling skull of an angmot.

Jon realized he was in great danger. The Lady Flaam allowed no visitors and enjoyed a reputation for poisonings in her own family and casually disposing of her human favorites by dropping them in

an underground pool swarming with bloodworms.

~~"You approach the end of your wretched existence, young man, unless you do exactly as I bid you."~~ Her voice was a harsh whisper as she delivered her instructions then ordered him removed.

Back in his own room Jon faced a critical dilemma. According to Flaam, all he had to do was disarm the security system on Magelsa's suite door and to send a signal when Magelsa and he were next entangled, naked and sweating on her bed.

Flaam and her guards would then burst in with cameras and microphones and catch Magelsa in the act. This would be Jon's pretext for using a hidden weapon, a small energy blade that Flaam had given him, to take Magelsa hostage and to kill her with when the guards went "berserk" and jumped him.

Flaam assured him that should he perform adequately, some other hapless fool would be substituted in the Agony Booth. Jon would instead be released onto the margins of the Polar Continent where a few small human settlements existed.

Was it possible to trust Flaam? He could visualize that last drop into the seething tank only too easily.

Later, alone with Magelsa, he took pity on the young princess and informed her of the plot that was taking shape around her. She had, after all, saved him from the Agony Booth.

Magelsa was instantly terrified. Her mother-in-law was already a figure of grim speculation from all the stories she'd heard. Now she became a source of hysterical fright. Magelsa ran to Innoo, threw herself down before him, and begged him to help.

Innoo was a survivor. He knew his younger brother would cheerfully seize any opportunity to replace him. He also knew that his mother cared little for him and disliked his match with the Gnovv. He made some thoughtful calculations and then called Jon into his presence.

"You must get into my mother's personal quarters one more time. I will see that you are equipped with the weapons for the job. You must kill her. If you succeed, I will reward you with freedom for yourself and your Hut group."

Jon had no choice but to agree. He submitted to the surgeon and one of his canine teeth was replaced with a poison fang. In addition, the end bones of his middle fingers were removed and replaced with artificial bones containing tiny pistols.

Several days later, Jon approached one of Lady Flaam's black-suited microcephalic Guards and gingerly handed the big man a slip of paper, then hurriedly withdrew. Later that same day, two huge guards appeared in the wardrobe where he worked. Solemnly they stripped him, examined him, and thrust him into the sack.

He was dumped out upon the carpet before Lady Flaam's grim throne.

"Why have you not done as I ordered?" She said.

"I cannot gain entry to her bedchamber. She has a new favorite."

Flaam's withered face screwed up in sudden rage. "You lie, I monitor her nightly orgies. She has no new favorite." She pressed a stud on the arm of her throne. A secret hatch opened in the floor exposing a dark pit. He heard water lapping far below and something else—the excited hiss of bloodworms.

Jon whirled abruptly and caught the nearest guard napping. His hand lanced out, his finger resting momentarily on the man's tiny forehead. Jon pressed down, hard. There was a little *crack*, a flash of pain, as the end of his finger burst, then the guard's head exploded and he fell like some human tree, landing with a heavy thud on the carpet.

The other giant sprang forward, picked Jon up to crush him against the wall, but Jon bit down on the massive biceps. He felt his left canine crumple and spat furiously to eject any remaining poison.

The guard fell backward with Jon atop his chest.

The Lady Flaam produced a handgun and fired. The pellet singed Jon's cheek and exploded in the masonry behind him. He dove at her feet and knocked her flying.

For a laowon of more than ninety-six years, Lady Flaam was remarkably agile. She landed well and spun to shoot at him again, but Jon had seized one of the guards' pain wands and hurled it straight into her face. She went down with a shriek and then he was on top of her, his hands around her throat. Blood from his finger all over her face, his thumbs pressing deep into her esophagus. A red tide flowed across his vision, a roaring rose in his ears, and when he was finally done, she was dead. He stood up and stared about himself. Blood dripped steadily from his shattered fingertip, and more blood seeped from where her nails had raked his cheek. Quickly, he tilted the bodies into the pit and listened to them hit the water far below. The sound of the worms built to a horrible frenzy. He found the switch on the throne and closed the hatch once more.

Sucking his finger to avoid leaving a trail of blood, he ran to Innoo's apartments with his new. Innoo was not there, an ominous departure from the agreed plan. Nor was there a response from Magelsa's suite. In desperation Jon ran from the palace and hid himself in the woods.

The next day there was a hunt. Microcephals and sniffer grenk worked over the grounds of the estate. Jon ran farther into the hills. He lived wild, but his finger began to rot and after four more days he slipped into the township in search of medical assistance.

Hut 416 on the North West Alley was empty. Its occupants had been taken away to expiate in the Agony Booth.

All day, Jon lay under the floorboards of the Hut and wept. At night he moved silently into the palace and worked his way through the familiar corridors to the entrance of the secret passageway.

In Magelsa's bedchamber the Princess and Lord Innoo quarreled furiously. She demanded to go home to Ratan. He demanded an heir.

"Why do you persist in your refusal?" He bellowed. "My father suspects me of my mother's murder. We must give him an heir lest his favor turn to my brother Lajook."

"Why should it matter?"

"Why do you think House Firgize rots here on this empty world?" Innoo shouted passionately.

She stared back silently.

"Because we are watched! Because my father escaped death only by coming here. Because the Heir will not accept any possible challenge in court. Because Blue Seygfan wishes to fly alone."

"But we're kiloparsecs away from court! We're beyond the back of beyond, we're almost in human space."

"Superior Buro is here. Old Chalmes, the head valet. He is Buro, my father told me ten years ago. 'Watch your words around Old Chalmes,' he said and he was right! I have observed Old Chalmes at work, he is a sly but persistent spy."

"So what?"

Innoo shrugged expansively. "My father escapes death only because they expect a Gnovii lineage cemented by an heir who will bring Firgize into Blue Seygfan. My father will not give up the Red!"

"Come to Ratan with me. Take one of my younger sisters, she'll give you your precious heir."

"How can I leave Glegan with that slave on the run? If he's found and questioned then both of us will face Expiation!"

Jon slipped into the room quietly and sprang to Innoo's side. He gave them a manic grin and pressed his hand to Innoo's face his middle finger tapping on the lao Lord's forehead.

"Surprise!" he said quietly. "I have to come to collect on your debt to me."

Innoo trembled, his eyeballs rolled up into his head.

"What do you want?" Magelsa's voice cracked with the strain.

"What the hell do you think I want?"

She looked blankly at him. "How should I know what a human wants? I mean, this is all I really need at this point. A feral human slave interrupting my life."

"How about a feral human slave who's been sleeping in your bed for the last month?"

She sniffed and turned her head.

Innoo groaned miserably, he begged for his life.

"That's funny, that's rich isn't it. You were happy to have me expiate, eh? Blame it all on the feral human, right? Think Innoo, one tap on your skull and my fingertip and your head will be joined forever in a little flower of death."

Innoo gulped air. Jon's voice grew cold and hard.

"This is what I demand," he growled and went on to detail his plan, as conceived lying beneath the boards of the empty Hut on North West Alley.

Eventually Magelsa went to the computer console and dialed a large amount of credit out of Innoo's accounts. She purchased two tickets on the next jumper outbound from Glegan, which would leave in two days time. Hers was a long distance ticket, to faraway Ratan. His was for a much shorter hop, to the free human system of Nocanicus, twenty-six light-years away in the direction of the Hyades stars. The cost fully liquidated Innoo's assets.

Then Innoo was made to dictate a full confession of his part in the death of Lady Flaam, which Jon copied and had Magelsa place in Lord Deshilme's personal computer files. It would be summoned up automatically by a simple coded call via telephone. Only Jon and Magelsa would know the code.

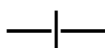
During the following forty-eight hours, Jon stayed awake on stimulants right next to Innoo, handgun in his good hand, trained on Innoo most of the time. Medics came and tended to the rot in his damaged finger. He gave himself doses of local anaesthetic and endured the process while they cut away the tip and cauterized the wound.

Still sweating from that experience, he ordered them to pack a small bag for him. Into it went a bundle of laowon paper bills, some clothes, and a supply of stimulant drugs. In addition, there was a new set of identification papers for himself, describing him as Magelsa's handservant.

On the second day, Innoo, Magelsa and Jon flew to Calb, the small capital city of Glegan, two thousand kilometers west of Firgize. There they boarded the shuttle to the orbiting sat, and after passing through Emigration, passed onto the huge interstellar liner. Jon disposed of his handgun just before the embarkation gate. Now his only defense against Innoo was that coded recording sitting in Lord Deshilme's computer.

He boarded the jumper, keeping close to Magelsa in case she should attempt some treachery. He needn't have bothered. The situation was working out just as Magelsa would have wished. She was on her way back to Ratan, with a horror story to recount to her parents. The Gnovii would sunder the claim on Firgize, and she would be safe. As for Jon, she had come to admire the determination to survive she sensed in him. A determined search had found little rancor toward him in her heart, and even a few embers of her previous passion; he was a lean, muscular young man with narrow face and dark eyes, so unlike the bulky laowon males she had known all her life.

The jumper built up the gravitomagnetic field and departed the Glegan system.



Innoo went back to Castle Firgize with a troubling tale for his father, of an insane Magelsa who had killed his mother and absconded with a human lover. Lord Deshilme never discovered the recording implanted in his computer and never truly understood why the Gnovii consequently cut his connection to them and dissolved the match between Innoo and Magelsa.

Deshilme, truth to tell, felt he'd come out of the affair relatively well considering he was finally free of the Castigrii witch Flaam. He even considered remarrying and was on the point of requesting the Heir for permission to return to court to find someone suitable from the ranks of Blue Seyfga when he was murdered by unknown assassins.

After a week in which suspicion focused on Innoo, a new bride for the Firgize Heir arrived, one Lady Tsinka of the Point of Blue, sent from court. She was three times his age, a near-senile hag with disgusting habits. It was suggested that Innoo would preserve his own future by seeking out permanent vasectomy. Uncertainty concerning the death of Deshilme was, however, laid to rest forever.

Jon Iehard, in the meanwhile, had flown across the deeps of space into the human sphere. The trip took several weeks, subjective, from point to point across the starfields, usually traveling in short hops of one to three light-years. Each time the ship reemerged in normal space, it had to begin rebuilding the gravitomagnetic fields while the navigators aligned it precisely with its destination point, avoiding all gravity nodes along the way. The process could take many hours.

At Ialpitan Space Base, Princess Magelsa said farewell to Jon with even a few tears, and kisses of joy. She was due to board another, larger vessel, a liner that would head out on the truly immense voyage into the far Orion arm, where eventually she would reach Ratan.

Jon watched her go with some misgivings. At the space base, surrounded by laowon military, he felt the most vulnerable to any move by Innoo. He was alone, and without Magelsa to back his story, he might be unable to get Lord Firgize to listen to the tape of Innoo's confession. For all Jon knew, Innoo had already seen to the destruction of the computer that contained the damaging file.

But no troopers appeared to arrest him before the jumper unshipped and headed out to the jump point.

Jon shared a small cabin on a crowded deck with an elderly woman who'd been given her freedom and a jumper ticket by her grateful laowon patron after a lifetime of service. She was en route to die in a free human system, and she spent most of her time burning incense and singing Panhumanist hymns in a doleful voice. It didn't take long for Jon to find her company oppressive and he forsook the cabin, spending most of his time idling in the small shipboard library.

Although the vast majority of its works concerned the laowon, a few volumes were devoted to the human race. There he found his introduction to perspectives on humanity that he had never before suspected. He discovered the universal alphabet of human ideographs. He set himself to memorize as much of the seventy most commonly used ones as he could before he reached human space.

As he viewed and read and listened, the enormity of the galaxy, even of human occupied space, crashed home to him. There were thousands of human colony worlds. There were the old settled worlds of the inner core stars and then there were the remarkable High Cultures of the far flung clusters, the Hyades, the Dipper Region, the Aldebaran Group. In all those systems humans ruled themselves. That thought was strange to Jon, almost frightening in its novelty.

When at last the jumper arrived in the Nocanicus star system, they began the wearying period of fusion drive, with aching hours of acceleration and deceleration as the ship nosed into the asteroid belt that was the prime settled part of the system, which had no habitable planets. Finally they reached Hyperion Grandee, the largest single asteroid habitat in the system.

The books and videos he'd studied had described the marvels of a high corporate system

glowing terms—Asteroid colonies! Space habitats! Jon was primed for all the technological wonders, but he was disappointed. The jumper had to ease its way through crowded space lanes to approach Hyperion Grandee.

On the screen, he'd watched spellbound as spindly ships, all grids and spheres and bright identification lights, slid by. Closer in, past rings of agrihabitats, swarmed smaller craft, only visible by their lights, winking myriads of red and white and blue.

As they curved onto the docking path, enormous shadowy structures passed by on either side of the jumper. Huge, intense lights blazed from a row of hexagonal openings. From the camera view, Jon had the impression they were approaching the hub of a vast wheel. Dimly lit, spokelike things, many times the size of the ship were drifting slowly past them.

The jumper docked with a slight shudder of vibration and shortly afterward Jon Iehard was out of the crowded corridors of Hyperion Grandee, his belongings in a small tote bag slung over his shoulder. He was a free man, standing on human-built floorspace.

The habitat was overwhelming. It pulsed with life, a steady pounding of human surf inside the public ways and open spaces. Rivers of people flowed everywhere, almost twenty-four million of them according to the tourist program. All were connected in some way or other to the centers of financial trade, entertainment, and light industry that gave Hyperion Grandee its astonishing vigor.

Fortunately he did not arrive penniless, or he would not have been allowed to disembark. Hyperion Grandee had a severe overcrowding problem. Advertising signs flashed in multicolored frenzy, images poured forth in an overloading fury that he had never imagined before. After gazing openmouthed for a while he found that by contrasting the common ideographs he'd memorized with Nocanicus Varietal he could comprehend many of the big signs and logos. "SDaba," "Wirl," "Stop No-Joy," "DD," "All Time," there were dozens, hundreds, thousands.

He took the notes of Lao Mercantility he'd packed at Castle Firgize to the first bank he identified—the Baltitude & Oxygen Bank. Inside the bank his notes gave the young woman who ran the small foreign exchange desk quite a thrill; she'd never seen paper money. She found the patterns beautiful, the colors rich and lustrous. However, she had to inform Jon that they were not of particularly high denominations and he wound up with a mere eleven hundred and thirty Nocanicus credit units for them. He only barely qualified for a credit card.

Back out in the city, he wandered in awe through the enormous clefts of the central sector around Octagon Five where structures towered more than a thousand meters above his head. He passed through immense archways, wandered inside broad passageways lined with shops, restaurants, and pleasure parlors. Everywhere there were people, millions upon millions, brightly clad in the pastels and primaries that were so fashionable. They surged restlessly through the corridors, their passing giving rise to a susurrant that reminded Jon of waves breaking on the shores of the Sweetcrystal storm.

He ate at snackstands and slept on a park bench his first night. He was duly awakened by the police who let him loose only after a stern lecture about vagrancy and a friendly warning to get the laow brand removed from his forehead as soon as possible.

Day, night, day, he wandered, finding that the habitat was always awake, always pulsing with life. If anything the night cycle crowds were even greater than those of the day. At some point he paused and booked into the cheapest hotel he could find, a hundred credits a day for the smallest room. He started to investigate the chances of getting a job.

After a day or so he discovered that he'd stepped from one trap into another. Hyperion Grandee's economy was superservice, high skill. Jon lacked the educational credits required for any jobs outside

the realm of service. But one look at the brand on his forehead and the faces of potential service employers shriveled in disgust. He began to hear disparaging words such as "breed," "brand man," and "laoman."

On his fifth evening he got into a fight in a small bar in Octagon One after being turned down for a job as a bartender. Almost the whole bar turned on him and roughed him up. Then he was almost denied entry to a hospital when he produced his new credit card. Eventually he was treated grudgingly, in a charity clinic.

In desperation, the next morning, he limped to a government job center. But the counselor's recommendations were not encouraging: Jon could, he was told, raise a small sum of capital by selling the rights to his organs to the transplant banks, enough to keep him going until the banks required his heart or liver or lungs. Since he was young and fit and reasonably good looking, he might be able to earn a meager living from the sale of his body for sexual abuse. In the light of the brands on his body and obvious laowon connections, the counselors advised him strongly against this course.

On the other hand, they pointed out, he might easily find a well-paid job on the laowon level of Hyperion Grandee. He even had the accent of the laowon worlds, nasal, clipped. And the laowon population in Nocanicus system was rising steadily as adventurers from all over the vast Imperium headed toward the human designated zone.

Jon, however, refused to consider that idea. The laowon would not get the leash back on an Iehar. And there might yet be a pursuit by the Firgize.

He had to admit, though, that things looked pretty hopeless, and he began to consider using the microgun still buried in his remaining middle finger. But death seemed terribly permanent, and he faced the prospect with dread.

Then a young woman at the center suggested Jon take the test for psi ability, as there was a strong demand for the psi-able in various jobs. He took the test and was found very sensitive to human fear and rage. He undertook further tests and then received a final recommendation, to the Mass Murder Squad, Hyperion Grandee Police Department; the police department was always looking for recruits who could be trained to track down the thrill killers who plagued Nocanicus. It sounded like grim work, but the money they mentioned was good. Enough for him to get an apartment and be able to live on Hyperion Grandee. But whatever he decided to do, he would have to do soon; his credit was almost gone and he could not afford another night in the hotel. As he had already discovered, homeless people were not allowed to sleep in the parks and corridors. In a few days, therefore, he could expect to be seized by the HGPD Vagrants Squad and hustled aboard a shuttle for one of the grim, old gigahabitats that warehoused millions of poverty-stricken people.

Indeed, he'd discovered that Nocanicus system as a whole was in deep economic trouble. Situated on the edge of laowon space, the Nocanius Corporation had been unable to attract colonist groups from the surrounding yellow stars with habitable worlds. The outrush from the Hyades systems had slowed drastically in recent centuries, since the laowon had taken most of the usable systems that might have attracted human groups. Without the colonists there was no work in building and refueling NAFA colony ships. Without such work Nocanicus' relatively large population faced slow, remorseless decline.

However, the decline was uneven. On the watermoons and the luxury megahabitats with their small populations, the standards of living were as high as anywhere in the human sphere. On the gigahabs of the asteroid belt, the situation was desperate. Too poor to remodel, some were leaking badly despite the high cost of fresh water and gas from the outer moons.

After thinking it through, Jon agreed to interview for the Mass Murder Squad. They read his p

sense test scores and whistled. They immediately tested him some more. Then they offered him the basic salary and the promise of "liquidation" credits in the future.

He put his thumbprint on the computer pad and explained that he would require some surgery on the middle finger of his good hand. Eyebrows rose when they heard his story, but his new employer agreed to fund the operation. Scores like his were rarely seen. They also enrolled him in speech classes to correct his lao-planet accent, and literacy classes since they found he was a functionally illiterate.

A few days later he began basic training as well. He lived in a dormitory with other trainees until he achieved his Competency Badge. He was unpopular with the other trainees for the laowon brand earned him enmity everywhere. He learned to live with the dislike, arranged for plastic surgery, and concentrated on being first in his class. He advanced rapidly to the status of Operative and was quickly fitted with his preferred weapons at the armory. Then he was dispatched to seek out and to kill the pestilential Kill Kultists who tormented the general public.

CHAPTER TWO

To avoid detection by laowon agents, the messenger left Quism through the sewers. He rode caravan south but left it well before the Meridian Gap, where the laowon kept an observation post. He walked through the night to cross the mountain ridge, far to the west of the watchpost.

The following night he wandered through the fringes of the North Machine Belt. In the starlight he observed that tall figures, mutant tribesmen, stalked him through giant, dead machines. He was young and fit; he took evasive action and outran them on the starglitter sands.

By day he dozed on a high ledge, inside a great hulk of corroding eternite. His spot had a good view in most directions, plus protection from the solar glare.

The next night brought him to the dunes of glowing glass. Besides a curve in the swelling crystal stood a towering pylon, connected to a rusting rectangle a hundred meters high.

He ran toward it, a thin man, cutting through the morning breeze.

The young Elchites greeted him warmly, but searched him nonetheless. Their eyes anxiously scanned the distances behind him.

"The man with half a head, I have a message for him."

Their eyes hardened, they bade him wait in a deserted shaft that appeared to have no upper limit. The walls were of some sparkling eternity material. He was still peering upward, trying to locate the ceiling, when a voice beside him startled him.

A gaunt man rode a silent wheelchair. Most of the left side of his face was missing. Instead of bones and flesh, a dark gray medical unit filled the space. It was connected through a tube to a larger unit that rode on the back of the chair.

"They said you have a message for me?" The voice was dry, leathery, with a curious resonance. A faint medicinal smell hung in the air.

"Yes. 'The bird flies, it has reached the system where our hope lies.'" The messenger spoke the words carefully, to make sure each was perfectly understood.

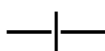
"Thank you," the man said. "Now you may go to the shelter, you have done well." The wheelchair turned and left as quietly as it had come.

The blue sun was coming up on the horizon. Wild purple shadows ricocheted down the dunes of glowing glass, pleiotic flashes of light caught the eyes.

The man with half a head paused beside his secret entranceway. Would they come soon? Would they come in time? He looked into the south and the plumes of the North Temperate Dust Belt. Huge dead machines marched shoulder to shoulder into the haze as if they were buildings in some deserted city of skyscrapers.

He looked up into the indigo sky. The laowon were up there somewhere, there were always laowon parties abroad on the surface now. One day they would understand the patterns. He prayed that that day would be delayed long enough for the mission to pass safely.

A stray breeze came out of the south, smelling hot, slightly acrid. Dust was coming. He opened the secret door and slipped inside.



It was Crazy Night aboard Hyperion Grandee, the end of the first academic semester and the beginning of Winter Month. There were parties and bands of revelers everywhere. The police department had its hands full, as usual, just keeping the crowds moving in Octagon Five, Six, and

Seven.

~~Down on Octagon Ten the students of Hyperion U. were celebrating in the time-honored manner~~ the fountains outside Shrad Hall were full of struggling maroon-clad forms. Around them a horde of drunken youths sang bawdy versions of the school song. Inside Shrad the faculty party was going full blast, with toast after toast for Coach Bach, who'd taken the Hyperion team to a 15-3 victory over Nocanicus U. in the annual wintergame.

It was also the night when the top forty students of the senior year were inducted into Orbit, the traditional home to the rulers, movers, and shakers aboard Hyperion Grandee. They were gathered around the clocktower in the darkness, each with an apple in one hand and a whole garlic in the other. At midnight, when the engineers changed the star fields for Winter Month, each would be asked a personal and embarrassing question in front of the others—and all the old members, hidden inside the tower and giggling their drunken selves silly. Depending on how their answer sat with their listeners, the novices would consume either the apple or the garlic. They might also have to take off their trousers or skirts and perform other humiliating exercises.

It was Crazy Night.

But bad craziness was also adrift in the air—blood craziness, murder craziness. The Kill Kults were in action and, tracking them, the Mass Murder Squad.

Theoretically, the forty young about-to-be Orbiters were safe inside the walls of the university grounds; security guards manned the gates to screen guests and visitors. In fact, everyone was so intoxicated that Arnei Oh had had no trouble at all in getting through. He carried a fragmentation device and a short-barrel .44-caliber automatic. Dressed in maroon garb, like the rest of the university boosters, he was undetectable as he passed guards and cops and the throngs of kids and worked his way across Hyades Meadows toward the clocktower.

Arnei was a nine-scalp man. He had taken twenty-three lives in his four assaults on the general public. In the Kill Kults he was one of the top names. His own club, the Dragons of Kali, bet heavily on his success every time he drew the tang.

This tang would likely be his greatest. They'd never forget him after this one!

He crossed through some bushes and paused. A gush of girlish laughter came from somewhere close by, and the grunting of a drunken young man. Arnei sidestepped. Under an ornamental shrub carved into a parasol, a young couple were copulating vigorously. A dreadful little smile broke over Arnei Oh's face. He reached inside his maroon coat for his switchblade. The girl was a magnificent blonde. He could already visualize her scalp hanging in his collection cabinet.

A hundred meters away Melissa Baltitude walked slowly toward the clocktower, the apple and the garlic heavy in her hands. It was important to walk slowly, to look cool and calm. Otherwise the vindictive old men in the tower would make one do all sorts of disgusting things in front of everyone.

Melissa wanted membership of Orbit more than anything in the universe right then. But she dreaded the question—and if Jason Patel had made the top forty, then her spiteful, beautiful former boyfriend would have given them all the ammunition they needed.

She gritted her teeth. Whatever the question she would answer it. And she would eat the garlic and jump around stark naked too if necessary. She would do whatever it took, and then she would be in Orbit and the rest of her life would be assured.

She heard the muffled screams, three of them, from the nearby topiary exhibit, but they didn't seem so extraordinary. A great wall of noise was coming from the fountains where the pigs were splashing and the pigwatchers were getting drunker. So she paid the new sounds no mind. What if some horny little pig female was getting raped in the bushes? It happened every year; she should've

known better. Last year there had even been some man-raping out in those shrubberies.

~~Melissa concentrated on the faces of those around her, gathering around the tower. There was Suzy America; Melissa had always known Suzy would make it. And Simon Weezel, and Garropy Ondin and others still too far away to make out. Would Suzy America actually marry Bertane Lagode? They were lovers from big families; when the daddies were Megabucks, the kiddies married among themselves. Melissa stilled the excitement she felt and concentrated on walking slowly.~~

Back beyond the fountain a slim man with staring eyes suddenly turned around and looked into the shrubbery. With a curse he pulled a short shock rod from his coat pocket and sprinted into the crowd.

Crystal clear on Jon Iehard's psi sense was a mental picture: the knife rising and falling; the beautiful hair; the leather-gloved fist wrapped in the hair; the knife sawing away around the scalp loosening, ripping, triumph!

He had him! Arnei Oh was in the topiary exhibit. Exulting in grisly triumph as he took scalps.

Jon used the shock rod vigorously to clear students from his way. Curses and screams of pain marked his path. He mashed the rod into the face of some big boy with a bloated belly who got in the way and tried to stop him. The howling face went down and Jon ran right over him and knocked two girls flying as he disengaged from the crowd.

"Stop that bastard!" someone screamed. Footsteps sounded behind him, but Jon ignored them and accelerated across the lawns, his other hand pulling out the Taw Taw automatic .22 that he always wore.

Into the shrubbery he ran. By good fortune he came on the scene of carnage almost immediately. The bodies had been dealt with in Kali Kult manner. Heads removed, torsos slit, and intestines spread far and wide. Jon had seen so much of this sort of thing in nine years working for the Mass Murder Squad that he hardly broke stride. He knew then what Arnei Oh's primary target had to be that night.

The youngsters pursuing him were not so familiar with this sort of thing and pulled up in horrified amazement. Somebody saw that Annie Klein had been scalped as well as beheaded. He was immediately sick in the bushes. The others joined him.

On the green around the clocktower forty-one figures in maroon were gathered in a loose circle. From the clocktower the questions were being put.

"Melissa Baltitude," boomed an electronically distorted voice. "Step forward."

She did so. "Melissa, is it true what they say about you and Suzy America?"

Her heart jumped. How did they know that? They'd been fourteen years old.

And then she became aware that something wrong was happening on her right. Bad craziness had made an appearance.

A small handgun was firing; there were screams. Everyone was running. A heavysset figure, too old to be a student, was running toward her with a long knife in his right hand. In his left was a small gun. He raised it and she stared into the barrel. She thought she heard her own scream.

But the first bullet missed her by a fraction. And then another figure, slender, legs pumping furiously, came into sight across the lawn. The heavysset man whirled, fired back at the pursuer who yelled at the top of his lungs. He had a gun too, Melissa could see it in his hand.

Then the heavysset man had an arm around her waist, hoisting her off the ground and dragging her toward the clocktower.

"Stop, Arnei!" the pursuer shouted. Arnei covered the gravel in three grotesque bounds and hurled Melissa into the door, driving it open. Arnei smashed through it and rolled into a firing position, his gun roared impossibly loudly in that enclosed space. Hot streaks zinged out the door over her body. Her bowels released as she pressed her face into the tile.

People were screaming and running up the stairs of the tower. Arnei slid in another magazine and pumped bullets up the stairwell. Some of the screams took on a different timbre.

Bullets came through the door, explosive things that dug inch-deep holes in the wall block opposite. But Arnei Oh had rolled aside and was in the shadow of the door. His hand stretched out for her arm. She stared horrified, but was unable to move. He had her by the wrist. One strong jerk and she was slammed into him, feeling his hot coffee breath in her face.

He was brutally strong. Still, she swung at him, landing a punch against a leathery cheek. He snarled and then opened his mouth. His teeth were filed to points. He lunged and seized her shoulder and bit down. She screamed, the sound echoing in the small room at the base of the tower.

He crushed her behind him, pressed her against the wall. Shifting position, his gun ready. She watched helplessly as he pulled out a black tube about a foot long. He punched a button on it and a dire little red light came on.

He stuffed it back in his coat and seized her by the hair. With a flurry of shots out the door he dragged her across the room to the stairs. In three bounds he was up the first flight, dragging her willingly. As she smashed into the wall on the second leap, she felt her forearm break.

Arnei Oh's gun boomed again, and there were more screams from above. But he was trapped, and he knew it, so he would take them all with him. The feat would mark him as the King of Killers in his own time.

He decided on a whim to take the dark-haired girl's scalp as well. He dropped her, knelt on her back to hold her down, and fumbled out his knife. With his gun hand he grabbed her hair and brought the blade up to her forehead, but there were footsteps on the stairs. He cursed. This operative had to be suicidal. He let go and brought the gun up, but the guy kept coming. Their guns boomed, a salvo at ten paces. Arnei's shot took Jon Iehard in the midriff but didn't cut the body shield. Jon's small plastic bullet stroked Arnei's shooting hand and exploded. Arnei saw the man fall, roll, and his own hand fountain blood. The shock turned him and flung him back into the stone wall.

Arnei gasped once and then shrieked his rage. He dropped the knife and reached for the bomb, only a flick and it was green. Then Iehard's second shot took Arnei's head off and ended the career of the king of the Kali Dragons. Jon didn't stop, however, reaching Arnei before the body even reached the floor. He picked up the bomb and threw it down the staircase with a scream of warning to any fools who might be down there.

The resulting explosion deafened Melissa, who was lying flat under the operative, and shook dust and stones out of the entire tower. Shrapnel whined around in the downstairs room for a few seconds thereafter.

It was over.

The man got up off her with a groan. She watched open-eyed, breathing in gasps, as he pulled out his coat and fumbled at the straps of a suit of body armor. There was a big dent right in the middle of the chestplate. Melissa could smell herself, and the blood of Arnei Oh, which was everywhere. She wanted to vomit but before she could, she fainted.

For a few long seconds there was a silence. The peace of the dead once again, thought Jon, who had felt it many times before.

Then from above came footsteps, cautious ones. Outside and some distance away he heard police klaxons. He hoped the medics would be along soon; his chest hurt pretty bad. He felt like he'd been kicked by a horse. He wondered if he had any broken ribs this time.

The first few adventurous souls from upstairs finally stuck their heads into the second-floor room. Wordlessly they stared at Arnei Oh's headless corpse. Then, hands over their mouths, both men ran

for the stairs. The woman following them merely shook her head grimly and picked her way through the carnage and followed them. For a moment her eyes met Jon's, and then she looked away.

He pulled himself to his feet, shed the armor where he was, tucked his gun into his waistband, and bent over the young woman who had fainted. After a gentle shake she awoke. He helped her to her feet.

"My arm," she complained quietly. "It's broken."

"Is that all?" he said.

"No!" She gasped. "My foot." And she would have fallen but he caught her and swung her up into his arms. He carried her down the stairs and outside onto the lawn. The cops were arriving, the klaxons howling off the buildings.

Other people, dozens of them in expensive evening dress, were running across from Shrad House. The anxious parents of the top forty. Jon sat beside the girl and watched several emotional reunions.

But a number of still bodies were scattered around the lawn. Arnei Oh hadn't had long to operate but in those few seconds he'd taken five lives.

A man fell down sobbing beside the still body of his son. Jon shook his head. This operation had been something of a disaster. He wondered if he would manage to secure the full liquidation fee. Arnei Oh should be worth Triplefull rate, but with so much carnage Jon feared he'd lose a percentage to the victims' families. Just then judges were as ill tempered about that kind of business as everybody else.

A tall man in a well-cut gray silk suit appeared, eyes distraught. He caught sight of Melissa.

"Lissa!" He bounded across the lawn.

"Are you all right?"

"My arm is broken, I think my ankle is too."

"What the hell happened here?"

"I don't know, Daddy. Ask this man, he killed him."

The tall, imposing fellow whirled on Jon. "Killed? Who did you kill?"

Jon had it—he faced Jason Pauncritius Baltitude, the gas baron. He'd seen him on TV news.

"The perp's name was probably Arnei Oh. We had a few others for him. Responsible for at least twenty-three dead. Mass killer, the reputed top boy of the Kali Dragons."

Mr. Baltitude gave out a bitter oath. "Why the ordinary citizen cannot have adequate protection against these bloodthirsty swine is beyond my understanding. How did this creature get inside the university grounds?"

"I assure you that wasn't the difficult part," Jon said tersely. He watched the police drive up. An ambulance was with them.

"Medics are here, Miss Baltitude," he said. "They'll give you something to kill that pain, I'm sure."

Another ambulance was approaching. You never knew with mass-murder stuff whether you were going to need one or fifty of the things. Bright lights whirled and flashed around the groves academe.

"So tell me what happened," Baltitude said. "I want to know how this horror could be allowed."

Jon would have shrugged but it would have cost too much pain. "We were tracking for him. We had pretty good predictions on Arnei Oh. He had enough of a record to give the computer something to get to work on. But these guys are elusive, and it's hard to protect every target. Luckily I guessed right. I thought he'd take a crack here, because of the useless security system. Big crowd, poor security—that's natural meat for a shark like Arnei Oh."

"You were here?" Baltitude seemed shocked.

"Over by the fountains. Bigger crowd there, I was afraid he'd just frag them out of the dark."

"You were over by the fountain, when you suspected this beast was loose in here? You were protecting the pigs when we had the top forty gathered in one place! I think you have some very tough questions to answer, my man. I'll be discussing this with your superiors at the earliest opportunity."

For a moment Jon stared up in disbelief. "I just risked my life to save your daughter, you realize."

"I realize nothing. I realize that your incompetence almost cost her her life. To say nothing of those that lie cold and dead over there. What were you doing while they were being slaughtered?"

"I was running as fast as I could. He started out in the shrubbery, I sensed it then. That's what tipped me off. If he hadn't paused to take some poor fool girl's scalp out there I would have missed him completely. He probably would have killed twenty of your top forty and gotten clean away. Armo Oh has been at the top of this game for years."

"Game? Are you mad?"

"Game, Mr. Baltitude. I take it that you don't much concern yourself with how these things go on since they mostly do take place down on the ordinary rent levels. Perhaps you should follow the newscasts more closely. There's a war on out there, these crazies versus the rest of the universe. That's the way they like it."

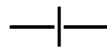
"Daddy, you're wrong, completely wrong. Now will you please get me a medic, I want some painkillers!" pleaded Melissa Baltitude. "This hurts terribly!"

Slowly Baltitude backed away, and then he turned and strode off toward the ambulances.

Jon got to his feet. "Well, Miss Baltitude, I think I'll be getting along now. I don't think this conversation is going anywhere. So, good night then."

"But I don't even know your name."

"Iehard. Operative Ex-five Double One. Tell your daddy to complain directly to my section head whose name is Copter Brine." Jon turned and stumbled off to the ambulances.



In the control chamber of the great machine, the Keeper progressed through a utilities check. Although the crew was unaccountably absent, the machine's routines went on undisturbed.

As it had every so often in the eons of loneliness, the Keeper noticed discrepancies in some sections. Somewhere deep in the bowels of the engineering complex enemy cells still diverted energy in quite extravagant quantities, from the engineering section power grid. That perennial problem necessitated recharging the energy banks far more frequently than the original maintenance program had ordained. The Keeper had been forced to change programming levels in the effort to find a way around the problem. The Keeper had even grown additions to its own intelligence in the effort. None of the changes had been easy.

The energy drain to engineering was frustrating. The Keeper did not have a real pain-pleasure circuit. In this, its programmable capacities were much less than those of other machines of its own era. It did have a node of dissatisfaction, however, related to failures in execution of prime programs. And over the eons the node of dissatisfaction had grown. The Keeper now had a very great urge to leave the Control Chamber and to go down to the Engineering section and find the annoying enemy cells that diverted so much energy, and render them permanently inoperative.

That idea returned ever more frequently to the forefront of operations in the spherically computational area set inside its massive batrachianoid skull. Unfortunately, the prime program forbade the Keeper's leaving the control chamber before the crew, or its replacement, returned to duty. Eternal vigilance, that was the program's watchword. It was enough to make the Keeper snap i

mechanical jaws in sheer frustration.

CHAPTER THREE

Jon Iehard awoke from the usual set of nightmares: Hut 416 and huge, giggling pinhead guards and silent mass killers who wreaked awful havoc while he fought helplessly to prevent them. It was always the same. Sometimes he thought he might be better off if he didn't bother with sleep.

Around him, his grungy little apartment seemed stale and even messier than usual. An empty booze bottle stood in the middle of a nest of dirty glasses. A pile of movie modules decorated the carpet along with the clothes he'd discarded last night.

He moved, and groaned. His chest hurt like hell. He checked the timepiece. It was six thirty. The engineers would be lifting the filters soon for dawn. Throwing back the covers, he turned the TV on with an audible and examined the instacaf situation.

With a hot mugful, he came back in time to see Blankette Va Vroe, the mayor with the famous cheekbones, speaking passionately about the latest refinancing crisis for gigahabitat Nostramedes. A lot of loans were riding on refinancing, but the wealthy watermoons of William, Ingrid, Shala, and Hideo were balking at the size of their contributions.

He gulped down the instacaf and went in for a shower. The laowon weren't about to disappear, so Nocanicus was in a box and the shipbuilding gigahabitats were doomed.

When he came back he felt much better. The news had shifted to the crime beat. Extra detective Coptor Brine was fielding questions at last night's emergency press conference. Jon listened with half a mind.

"...suspect was identified as Mood Oh Arnei, or Arnei Oh. Believe me when I tell you this one was one of the worst cases we've ever pursued. The leader of the Kali Dragons, with twenty-three killings to his name prior to this latest outrage."

A newswoman bored in. "There have been charges made about this case, Extra Detective Brine. What do you say to the accusation of, and I quote, 'Gross incompetence on the part of the security forces who could easily have prevented this slaughter'?"

"I guess I would agree. I should add we warned the university as much as three years ago that the security on Wintergame Day had gotten pretty slack. I think you'll have to take it up with them."

"There are also charges against your operative in this case, Extra Detective."

Coptor's big flat face grew hard. "Yes, I've seen those and I would like to state publicly right now that I think they're malicious, unsubstantiated, and stupid. We have precisely seventeen senser operatives. We can't cover every potential outrage site. Our man on this case performed a near miracle as it was, getting the perpetrator and keeping the loss of life to half a dozen. I think he deserves a medal, not these mean-spirited accusations!"

"Thank you, Coptor!" Jon said as he snapped off the set. He pulled on some clothes and let himself out carefully. Jon was living, temporarily as always, on a very mode-ish ramp. Very pastel, very audio-video-holo; ambisexual singles' parties every weekend. Jon felt like a sore thumb in his grays and blacks, and worked extra hard at keeping his profile very low. He was looking forward to moving on soon. The Mass Murder Squad encouraged its operatives to move constantly. The Kill Kults were well organized, determined, and prepared to do almost anything. Personal security was precious and precarious. In Jon's nine years, five senser operatives had been blown away in their own homes.

Once off the ramp, he headed into the park. The trees and open spaces were lit with the first sunlight of the day, mirrored, filtered, and given an ancient terrestrial tinge by the engineers.

Pretty good crowds were out already. On the paths to the Hyades Monument a cloud of joggers passed him. Two women were flying a kite in the shape of a gigantic female figure, and a small cu

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