

THE ORBORGN

Volume II
of
The Last Legacy
tetralogy

GRACE
CHETWIN

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for Sal

*Who can decipher
in storm or starlight
The written character
of a friendly fate—
As the sky turns, the world for us to change?*

From "Peter Grimes"
Benjamin Britten

Chapter One

SHIRA

15.08 Hours 16 October 2047

Bentnose Peak

Oh, God, the blood. The blood! Like bright red liquid permaplast, it oozed from Torc's chest and puddled on his chamber floor, congealing with his last bright twisted smile.

Shira moved her head from side to side against the pillows to shake the image. After all he'd been through, to end up like that—the *waste!* Rage brought her half-awake. Over Torc's death. At having been locked into its unfolding. She thrashed about more vigorously now, denying not so much the image as her intensity of feeling. Stupid, getting het up over something that had happened light years away, before Earth began. But she'd watched Torc so long—no, more: experienced what he'd felt as though she'd been right there in his head. And heart. God! She squeezed up her eyes. Serve her right for sneaking into Grandfather's mind, eavesdropping on those alien visions, weird, unexplained bursts of psi-images beamed in from the distant Pleiades. They must be important, for Grandfather had actually bade her stay and share them.

Shira opened her eyes. To her left, fake afternoon sunlight shafted down through dormer windows. The disgusting opulence, and the expense, just to foster the illusion that this great mansion in which she lay was still perched high up on Bentnose Peak in the Adirondacks, not buried in a permaplastic blister miles below its former site. And all for a handful of people while mil-

lions crowded, subsisting, in holes and domes around the globe.

Its owner?

Pitar Ellisen V, newly-elected Chairman of the World Council, had just sneaked up spaceside to trade Grandfather for arms. Hypocrite, pretending to cooperate with Grandfather to avert a second nuclear holocaust, and all the while using him for ante in a global crapshoot. How could Susann Cleary love such a man?

She glanced at the bedside chronister, a baroque marble clock with gilded hands circling a Roman-numbered dial. Three-fifteen. No use trying to contact Grandfather. This last transmission over, he'd be asleep and would remain that way for hours. She pictured his face; craggy, gaunt; long jaw softened with silky silver beard, and felt a stab of longing.

Grandfather.

Nothing, not an echo of a whisper.

Shira sat up. Better go downstairs. If MacAllister was hopping back to Estralita tomorrow morning for the latest strips of Grandfather's visions off the synergizer—the ones she had just secretly shared—she'd hitch a ride. She swung her feet to the floor—and almost toppled to the carpet with the sudden movement. Her head, what was with her head? The room spinning, Shira lay back and closed her eyes.

In the quiet, the old clock ticked and whirred. Programmed to the nanosecond, the artificial sun set and day deepened into twilight. A lamp clicked on, the bedchamber filled with a warm, mellow glow that cast no shadow on Shira's sleeping face. Suddenly, cutting through her dreamless state—the Hesikastor's voice:

Shira? Shira, Listen. Hengst has just . . .

Shira snapped awake.

Grandfather?

She felt no nearness, no sense of his presence. She called on him silently several times more then shouted out aloud.

"Grandfather!"

The carpet and drapes caught the cry and smothered it. The windows were dark; fake stars twinkled in a fake night sky. An incandescent crystal lamp

with creamy tasseled shade lit the nightstand. One-fifteen. Ten whole hours since she'd resolved to go downstairs!

Shira ran to the door. "MacAllister!" Oh, where was he! The hall ran right and left, recessed doors on either hand. "MacAllister!" A muffled bump, a glass tinkle, and a door opened behind her. "MacAllister!" In dark blue night-suit, his hair tousled. His eyes looked sleepy, but then they mostly did.

"Steady." He caught her by the shoulders.

She leaned against him for a moment, feeling his strength, then pulled away.

"Hengst has the silo."

"Christ." He rubbed his forehead.

Behind them, Susann's door opened. "What is it? Has Pitar—?"

"We think Hengst has the silo."

Susann went pale. "*Estralis*? Oh God. Pitar's—" Her face sharpened. "How did you hear?" She glanced toward the stair. "The 'beamer'?"

MacAllister shrugged.

"Then how?" The woman turned on Shira, eyes narrowing.

Shira ignored her. "MacAllister, let's go."

"Okay." He pointed down. "Kitchen."

"But—"

"We need to talk."

He marched her down, Susann at their heels. In the eighteenth-century colonial kitchen, Susann filled a copper kettle and clapped it onto the stove.

Shira hung back by the door. "MacAllister, take me to Grandfather."

MacAllister led her over to the dining booth made of old church pews and sat her down. "Now." With deliberate speed, he went around and slid in opposite. "You say the Hesikastor spoke your name then Hengst's then faded?"

"Mmm." Shira shot a warning look toward Susann—too late.

Susann whipped around, kettle in hand. "I'm neither deaf nor stupid. You're telepathic. And you've been linked with the Hesikastor all along. That's what you've been up to these past two days—watching his visions."

Shira stayed quiet.

"What a bore, to sit up watching the reruns with us," Susann said bitterly.

Shira bit her lip. The woman was dying to call Shira a hypocrite, but how

could she, when she herself had known of her husband's sell-out all along?

MacAllister spoke up. "Shira, why would the Hesikastor cut out like that?"

"It's obvious. They tranked him."

"Figures. Well, at least he's safe: Hengst needs him."

"*Safe?*" Shira leaned forward. "That stuff stops his psi waves cold!"

"Tranked him? But Ord wouldn't—oh my god! Pitar's only card! Wait! He'll call us soon."

Card? Shira leapt up. Grandfather a *card*? "I'm neither deaf nor stupid," she mimicked. "He won't call, he can't because he went up to STI to sell out Grandfather and now Hengst has him right here!" She thrust out her hand palm up then balled it into a hard, tight fist.

"Shira, sit down," MacAllister said.

She sat down, not because of him. She could just see her grandfather shaking his head at her outburst. *Shira, Shira, Shira.*

"Sorry," she said but she was still furious she couldn't help it. She sat, staring down at the table top, recalling when she'd last been in there, hours since. She remembered reaching out her mind, hearing the space shuttle's racket, seeing Ellisen's contorted face, the cockpit controls.

He's under stress . . . He's going up, and accelerating . . .

She banged the table top, rattling the mugs, spilling the tea. "We can't just sit here!"

"Quiet. I'm thinking," MacAllister murmured.

Shira made to stand again but this time MacAllister's hand shot out and gripped her wrist. "There's more at stake than two men. What about all the poor bastards out there, huh?"

Shira met his eyes angrily, then looked down. The way things were going, of all the millions left on Earth only one small remnant would survive—hand-picked by Hengst. "What now?" She pulled away, rubbing her wrist.

"We use our heads." MacAllister leaned back. "With all due respect, Susann, your hubby's trip to STI was stupid. He's no match for Hengst."

"Alistair! Pitar's our elected leader!"

"And as Shira said, Hengst has him and Estralita, and who stopped him?"

Shira frowned. "Grandfather would never—"

"Let himself be taken? Oh yes he would—and has. That's why you're here." Shira shook her head. "Never."

"No? It's a gambit, don't you see? He and whoever on Phrynis are playing a round of cosmic chukar—and we're the 'clars. He was doubtless giving you his next move just now when Hengst yanked his plug. What I'm trying to figure is," he rubbed his early morning stubble, "with data coming through, why would Hengst want to put him on ice? Doesn't make sense, unless—"

"Unless, what?"

He shook his head.

Shira glared at him across the table. *Tell me—or I'll read you anyway.*

MacAllister grinned. "Either Ord's synergizer is out again, and Hengst wants things on hold until it's fixed, or . . ."

"Or?"

"Don't make me say it, Shira."

"I'll say it for you: Hengst has his own synergizer now, and he's shipping Grandfather spaceside to carry on up there. Right?"

MacAllister nodded slowly. "That's my number one choice."

"Why?"

"He fancies himself a second Noah. And now he has somewhere to go with your grandpa to steer him."

"If he's Noah, where's his ark?" Susann cut in. "Phrynis is in the Pleiades. To get there you need a star drive."

"Hengst knows that, Susann."

"You mean—he has it?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"Then Hengst does hold all the cards," Susann said bleakly. "It's over."

"Maybe not. There're a couple of wild ones loose still."

Susann's head came up. "The star charts?"

MacAllister nodded. "In your husband's un-link files." He pushed back his chair.

"You said a couple of cards," Shira said. "Oh—Grandfather."

"The star charts are in his head. If Grandpa won't cooperate, Hengst will need the strips, which I'm gonna pull right now." MacAllister glanced to the

wall clock. "Hengst will be sending for them. And for you. And you, Susann."

The general's daughter didn't like that. "I don't know anything, Alistair."

"But you're a great bargaining chip. And Sven. We'd better move."

"Where?"

"I'll find a place."

Susann stood. "I'll get Sven. Oh, God, I'm going to have to tell him."

MacAllister nodded. "Make it quick. And grab some gear—keep it light."

Shira walked alongside MacAllister toward the access lock, the leggings of her fomylar suit whispering together. The other two trod behind, anonymous behind dark, mirrored visors. What had Susann told her son? And what was his take on it? She longed to read him but Grandfather would be sure to find her out. MacAllister palmed the lock, and the alloy slab thocked open. Beyond, a tunnel; numbered ports flush with the shiny wall: 1, 2, 3. Ports to the President's three launch silos, slots in the permaplast wide enough to admit one body at a time. They slipped through, and waited while the slab slid shut again. Shira closed her eyes, sent out her thought, feeling for sign of activity in the silo beyond.

All clear, MacAllister.

She looked up into his visor, saw her own face staring back at her, bulbous, distorted.

Thanks.

MacAllister led them past port #1, halted before #2. He palmed the lock, slipped through the narrow gap, and, pointing them on to #3, closed it after him.

Sven slid down the wall to sit on his pack, hunched, head bent, as though still half-asleep. Hard to believe he was only a year or so younger than Shira. As far as she could gather, he lived alone with Susann under Bentnose, never seeking company in the community shelter. Why? Beside her, Susann leaned against the permaplast, making no effort to communicate. Shira pictured MacAllister behind the door, going through his moves, a strategy that he'd carefully explained on their way through the bright, silent tunnels. No use just taking off in his hopper, he'd said. They'd be tracked and caught like apples

falling from a tree. So . . . they'd give Hengst just what he expected. An hysterical granddaughter rushing to Granddad in MacAllister's hopper—#2—and flying into the net. MacAllister was setting the #2 controls to do just that, tapping in voice responses in case the craft was challenged en route. By the time they were rumbled, they would be gone in hopper #3, out into the general traffic swarm. Ingenious. She sent out her thought.

MacAllister?

Nearly done. Still all clear out there?

Far as I can tell. Where are you up to?

Just heading for the pad. Stand by.

Tricky, to set two craft to launch simultaneously without alerting Traffic Control.

Almost through?

Uh-uh. I'm boarding now. Stand by.

Shira glanced at the other two, making no move to share her exchange with them. The seconds dragged in that bright, white, silent tunnel. After about a minute, Susann pulled off the wall, went to stand in front of #3 port. Then she shifted back, squatted beside Sven, put her arm around his shoulder. Sven didn't acknowledge the gesture, but stayed still, like a lump of god-knows-what. Susann straightened again, and, with a slight turn of the visor toward Shira, went back to stand before port #3, eyeing it expectantly.

The port door slid open and MacAllister beckoned them in. Sven scraped back upright against the wall, hitched his pack and squeezed through. Shira and Susann followed, emerging into the bottom of a giant well that towered into the heights. In the center, the hopper waited, ramp down, jets already venting. MacAllister ushered them up and in under the low hatchway. One minute to patch themselves in, and adjust their seats for launch while MacAllister's hands went rapidly over the controls. Even through her helmet, Shira heard the whine of the vertical booster swell into a roar.

Thirty seconds. A warning signal shrilled. The shaft was open. The way was clear. Twenty seconds. Shira's webbing was secure. She was aware of Susann and Sven on either side of her still fiddling with their harnesses.

Ten seconds. Nine. Eight. A blue light came on. She glanced to MacAllister

intent on the controls. Three, two, one. Shira pictured the twin craft slowly ascending their shafts, up and out into the predawn air. She felt a slight tilt as their hopper, breaking clear, angled away from its neighbor, imaged the two craft like twin needles shooting off in different directions; one toward the silo in New Mexico, and the other—theirs—to heaven-knows-where. But only the Estralita hopper would track, a non-event, for MacAllister had been shuttling to and from that place at all hours of the day and night on errands for Ellisen. MacAllister had somehow scrambled their real flight vector. By the time the trackers realized, they'd be long gone, he said. A mile up and accelerating. Shira swallowed hard, felt her ears pop. Suddenly, they slowed, thrusting Shira out against her harness. As she settled back, she let out a deep sigh. They were in the clear.

They unhooked their webbing and raised their visors. Susann looked sick and puffy in the cabin's blue light. "They haven't picked us up, then?"

MacAllister stayed bent over the controls. Finally, he straightened up in satisfaction. "Hengst will give 'em hell, poor sods."

"Where are we headed?" Shira asked.

"Well," MacAllister said thoughtfully, "there's this guy . . ."

Chapter Two

SHIRA

15.45 Hours 17 October 2047

RCH Station #P3/14

Shira looked around the table—at her four hosts, their smiling, bearded faces flushed with bonhomie and fermented soy. At Susann's polite and unfermented smile. At Sven's fixed stare. And at MacAllister, head cocked toward the speaker, a large man, big as Alistair. Rufus the Red was a radio rat like MacAllister, and a fellow Scot. It seemed they went back quite a way.

A surge of something fierce—impatience, frustration—started up inside. She sent out, nicked the edge of MacAllister's attention. His eyes slid her way.

Half an hour, okay?

No. Not one more minute.

MacAllister's eyes narrowed. *Even if your life depends on it?*

Shira scowled and stuck her legs straight out under the table. Two hours spent there already! Agh, she straightened up, feeling brattish. She should be grateful to him for finding this hiding place: a subpolar clearing house where goods shunted down by shuttle-drone from STI were warehoused for the PanAmerican continent. She pushed out a sigh. What else to do but worry and wait for Grandfather's voice? She might as well put on a good face and play her part at this well-meant, makeshift banquet.

Rufus reached the end of a rambling tale of the days when he and

MacAllister had been young dons at Edinburgh, and MacAllister laughed. "As I remember it, Rufus, you're the one they hauled off, and I bailed you out. And it was sixteen windows we broke, not sixty, Jess counted."

Jess? Shira looked from one to the other seeing MacAllister's fire die behind his smile. "Excuse me." She leapt up and fled down the passage to the cell she was to share with Susann. She sank onto her cot, alone at last. The excitement over unexpected guests was quite pathetic. Those men were alright though, especially Rufus, Number One. Number Two was Tomas, engineer, a small man with a quick, white smile in a small brown face. Jocko The Brain kept inventory, while Kim seemed to be in charge of general maintenance. She'd scanned them lightly, sensed only great good will, especially in Rufus. Would they still feel it if and when they learned the reason for their dropping in like this? She ran her fingers through her hair, snagging on the tangles. God, she was tired. This place was just a couple of hours from Bentnose as the crow flew, but MacAllister, zig-zagging like a rabbit to get there, had taken forever.

She leaned forward, elbows on her knees. She'd thought her grandfather invincible. He could control his body functions, autonomic or voluntary, to a high degree, but pumped full of Hengst's poisons? She rocked back and forth.

Oh, Grandfather, be okay. Tell me what to do. . . .

The mess room door opened, letting out a burst of laughter, then voices sounded along the passage. Shira kicked off her shoes, dove under the covers as Susann opened the door.

"Shira? We're going off to look around. Coming?"

Shira held her breath until the door had closed again. The noises faded, and all was quiet save for the hum of machinery and the hiss of air. She rolled onto her back, letting out a short, curt laugh. The World President's wife—doing the grand tour of an obscure government storehouse without a single public visicam in attendance!

She lay for a while, trying to still her mind, to stay ready for her grandfather's call, but finding it hard, she took up a mantra and tried again. The humming, throbbing, whining faded, and with the sound, all sense of time. She slid down to alpha, then on to theta, where she lingered, hoping for his

call. When it came, she jumped.

Shira, hush, and listen . . . The voice wavered, grew uncertain. *Do you hear me?*

Yes. Oh, God, something was wrong.

Silence. Then, *Shira, I'm not in Estralita now.* Another pause, different: he knew where he was, didn't want to tell her.

Hengst took you spaceside.

Yes. They're forcing me awake. I've been holding out but I'm getting tired. Where are you, Shiralee—no, don't tell me. You're safe?

I—think so. MacAllister—

Pulled the star charts? Good. Tell him . . . The voice went in and out. *Destroy them. And whatever you do, keep . . . clear of Hengst. . . .*

Silence again, worse: a hollowness. She sat up. Should she go to MacAllister? How, while he was with the others?

Shira lay down again and closed her eyes.

She flew over the Bourg. It was dark, and cold over the wind-scoured mounds that shielded the enclave. Suddenly, a loud bang and flame shot into the night. *Aunt Marisa! Kazais! Felipa!* She banked to dive but a hand seized her from behind and held her back.

She turned

Not the Bourg! Not Earth at all, thank god! Torc held her, Prince Torc of Gurnyac, his agonized face almost past recognition.

She looked down again recognizing what she saw now. Not the Bourg, but the murder of King Sharroc in his tower revisited: the fire, his death cry and the screams as Queen Meltha's high walkway collapsed in flames.

She struggled, sweating, up toward consciousness only to fall back into nightmare. Now she was Ramoni watching the golden roofs of Rm crash and roll away down to Lake Asn's shore. The great gates hung on broken hinges, and there: Torc's gruff old mentor, D'huru Nor, arms outspread toward her, Shira-Ramoni, his mouth working silently. *Go back! Go back!*

Men in shiny blue-black helmets came and cleft his skull with axes. Then they trampled him, swarming past into the city, up and down the steep stone

stairs, teeming past the serried walls like roaches. Fire sprang up all over, smoke burst out in choking clouds. The clash of steel, whoops and shouts. The gutters ran with blood.

Damn! Damn! Damn you all. There is no justice under heaven!

Ramoni? Or Shira?

She woke with a sob in her throat. A thin sliver of light cut the base of the door. The other cot lay empty, the covers still turned back. She squeezed up her eyes, recalling the horror of her dreams.

Dreams? They'd been more vivid than any she'd had before, and they'd left a strong press of fear.

The passage was deserted, so was the mess room, except for Sven, slumped in an armchair, watching the public compuscreen. On the table were remnants of supper. Shira helped herself to cold casserole, filling her bowl too full in her need. She carried it to a neighboring seat, eyeing Sven covertly, his puffy face and sallow skin under the artificial tan.

"What's new?" Talk to herself. Shira dug into the bowl hungrily, eyes on the screen. Someone was making trouble in the Anzarc Zone: a dome burned out, two thousand shelterless—death sentence on the innocent. Riot in a Siberian enclave; food battles in Central India. A convoy had gone astray, the crew vanished en masse. Shira frowned. The tally of catastrophes went on, worse than usual, but . . . no mention of Ellisen's disappearance. She sneaked another look at Sven. What was he thinking? Couldn't tell from his face. Dare she read him? She was about to push, just a bit, when the announcer's voice cut through. ". . . word from our new World Council Chairman, Controller Pitar Ellisen." Shira snapped back to the screen. Ellisen—*live?*

Of course not, just a simple ruse. A health report, from a President too busy to appear in person, read by a clean-cut New Washington aide. She listened to a cheerful clip strangely at odds with the general news, listing increased living space; a falling leukemia death count; a new drug to combat breakouts. The reading finished, the aide's face faded to black, replaced by Ellisen's profile: windblown hair, blue eyes narrowed slightly like a mariner's scanning the horizon for some Brave New World. Now, fluttering behind him, the World Flag fluttering from Bentnose Peak, and to finish, the strains of the World

Unity Hymn piping to a synthesized crescendo.

"So still nobody knows," Shira murmured.

"Or cares." Sven uncurled.

Shira leaned over, cut the 'cast. "Your mother's—"

"Fixing to screw MacAllister."

"Sven?"

Sven shot her a quick, sly look. "That's life."

Shira set her bowl down. "MacAllister's a gentleman. And you shouldn't talk that way about your parents."

"My mother wants the rat, trust me. My dad—" Sven scrambled up and went to the door. "Is in love with a dead man." The door thwacked shut.

Shira stared after him. That would be Sven's great-grandfather. Well, could be right there. But MacAllister and *Susann*?

"There you are." MacAllister appeared in the doorway. Shira eyed him narrowly. Aunt Marita always said there was never a stink without the rotten meat. "Where are the others?"

"Aloft. Stargazing. Want to join us?"

"Stargazing?" In a warehouse?

"There's this little sky dome. Coming?"

MacAllister frowned as she shook her head. "What is it? Your granddad?" She nodded. "Hengst shipped him up."

"Sorry."

"He wants you to keep clear of Hengst. And destroy the strips."

"I can't go that far, Shira. Not without Ellisen's okay."

"You must do as Grandfather says," she argued. "He's a wild card, remember? Trust him."

"Mmmm. I'll think about it."

"You trust Rufus."

"With my life—as I have many times."

"You told him yet?"

"Not yet. I'm sounding out the others. What do you think? Come on, I know you've given them a once over," he added as she hesitated.

"They seem okay. Are they pro-Ellisen?"

MacAllister grinned. "You'd think he was the new Messiah. Susann looked so proud I thought she'd burst."

"And Sven?"

"Makes me nervous."

Shira nodded. "He hates his father. He also says that you—"

"I, what?"

Shira looked down.

"Come on." He took her arm. "Let's get upstairs."

She pulled back. "I had nightmares, MacAllister. Earth and Phrynis mixed in together. I'm scared."

"Look at it this way: your granddad's under heavy stress, and they're messing with his mind so things are getting skewed."

"Skewed?"

He shrugged. "Me, I'm just a radio rat. But seems to me that if you rattle a man's marbles, even the Hesikastor's, new stuff, old stuff, tumbles in together, like rocks in a mill." MacAllister ushered her out the mess room door, and up the passage. "You never did tell me: how's Prince Torc doing?"

"He's dead."

"Aha. Pity. How?" They walked through airlocks to a narrow elevator.

Shira told of Feric's warning of Torc's coronation, and his defiance, leading to his death, while MacAllister, finger poised on the 'up' key, took it in. "Christ. And Ramoni?" Shira told how Ramoni left, of her letter, Gumyac, I am with child. How Torc burned the letter, gelding Gar in the process. Of Torc's last ditch bid to save Tanna.

"Did he?"

"I don't know."

"Interesting." MacAllister punched the key and the door slid aside. "That made two heirs, Gar's and Torc's." MacAllister pressed for go. "Say both kids survived, which one made the throne, I wonder? If Gar's did, then Tanna survived, and she got to be queen after all. Wow. What a price to pay!"

The ride was short and quick, up a central shaft which ended at the foot of a spiral iron stair. It was dark at the top. Shira stepped over dim figures huddled under the little glass bubble, got down between Kim and Jocko, and

settled, crosslegged. She could barely see Susann, squashed between Rufus and Tomas; the World Chairman's wife, hunkered down among the rats and teks. Adjusting Shira began to see more. Rufus's bright beard looked dark up here, almost black. He smiled, and she saw the gleam of his teeth.

"Feeling rested?"

"Thanks."

"Sorry you missed the tour, Shira. Tell you what, I'll treat you to your very own, name the time." That brought a chorus of jeers and catcalls. "See what happens to a guy's reputation when a goodlooking girl comes along?"

Susann shifted. "It was fascinating wasn't it, Sven?" No answer. Susann went on doggedly, describing her tour through communications, plant and maintenance, computer banks and sick bay; stock zones and loading docks. While they were in the control center, a supply drone had arrived from STI. Sven had docked it, all by himself, and parked it in its proper slot. Hooray.

Sven got up mumbling about bed.

"I'll see you down, lad." Rufus started to his feet, but Sven insisted on going alone. They listened to the whine of the elevator going down. Rufus took Shira's arm and pointed up. "Polaris, see?"

The pole star was bright as a beacon overhead. Like great Forthyr, she found herself thinking. Only Forthyr was fixed. Rufus went on, naming the constellations. Shira sought, and found, embedded like sequins in the filmy scarf of the Milky Way—the Perseus cluster, and . . . She fixed her eyes on the blackness beyond: the Pleiades. Somewhere in that alien swarm burned Demiel: tiny, unremarkable sun, subtended by the planet Phrynis.

Shira gazed up. Across eons, the images had come. From that tiny point to this. And yet Torc's Known World seemed so immediate. Rufus was saying something about how strange it must be for her to see the real stars from the roof of the world, under real sky. Shira looked down. Susann's eyes were almost closed.

Rufus looked at his wrist. "Good God. We're into the first watch. One-fifteen, men. Jump to—" A signal blared, cutting him off. "What the hell—" The man struggled to his feet. The others got up fast, this was no drill. Susann's eyes opened wide. "What is it?" she said, but the men were already

pounding down the companionway.

Shira followed, thinking Hengst. The elevator doors were shut; the men, on the way down. She tried to send out, but was too agitated. By the time she had focused herself, the doors were reopening below. She pushed out, and recoiled. An airlock had been breached! The doors hissed shut, the car came back up. Beside her, Susann muttered, "Why wouldn't they say?"

The elevator arrived.

MacAllister waited at the bottom. "Susann." He took the woman's arm. "Sven's broken out."

"Sven? *Out?*"

"He was suited up." MacAllister hustled them to the control center, where infrared scanners swept the polar dark. "Rufus and Tomas have taken out two cats. Look, see? They're out already. That's Rufus." He touched two screens, marked vis and trac. "We see what he sees." The viewpoint on the vis screen bucked and jerked over a narrow moraine of arc-lit ice that ever stretched before it. The trac screen was black and featureless save for the tracking arm sweeping around and around an empty grid.

"Let's have sound." MacAllister flipped a toggle. There came a hiss, and the room filled with static and cussing. Rufus shouted "Got him!" On the trac screen at two o'clock a blip appeared, moved to center target as the cat's scanner homed in. In the vis screen loomed a small figure, bent into the driving wind; a radiant shape from which filaments of body heat curled out like tongues of steam.

Snatches of voice stuttered in the silence. "Do you copy, Tomas?"

Tomas copied. "Bloody idiot . . . what in hell does he think he's . . ." The figure vanished off screen. "Left, Ruf, left . . . back up . . . slow . . . there!" The viewpoint bounced, veered, and for one instant almost capsized as Rufus steered his cat toward the fleeing boy. A new sound rushed in, the fury of polar wind keening over the ice. The scanner righted, steadied, held, centered on Sven's retreating back. The craft stopped. The men were getting out to follow Sven on foot. Shira put an arm about Susann's rigid shoulders. Susann stayed put as two glowing figures appeared in the scanner, then diminished into the distance, where, converging on Sven, they pulled him back,

struggling, toward the screen. They overran it, then disappeared.

The air crackled once more, the wind cut, and Rufus's voice came clean and clear. "He's okay. Sick bay, Kim. Hit the south lock, Jocko."

Susann turned to MacAllister. "Take me there, please."

Shira watched them out. Poor Sven. But lucky: he hadn't wanted to die, or he'd not have suited up. Poor Susann. Shira followed after.

They brought Sven in unconscious, tranked. Shira hung around a bit, saw she was not needed, and went back to her cubicle. He seemed none the worse for wear, physically, anyhow. But his mental state? Nothing she could do. Shira kicked off her shoes. If only Grandfather were here. He'd make things right. She looked across to Susann's empty bed, neatly turned, still unused. The woman must be dead on her feet. But she insisted on staying with Sven in sick bay, even though he wouldn't wake until morning. Morning? It was past three now. Shira thought of the wide darkness flowing out beyond the small scope of the scanners. Boundless, endless wind, no light. To vanish like a spark into that emptiness. . . . She shivered.

Grandfather.

Her mind and his were but sparks in the vastness of time and space. What if they were blown apart, away into that immense uncertainty, never to touch again? Only a heartbeat ago she'd been grumbling about the Bourg, and wishing for change. Now she wished all this had never been. That Grandfather had never gotten it into his head to leave the place, that they were still in that tight and close haven. But he had left, for reasons of his own, taking her with him. Now, whatever happened, life could never be the same again.

Chapter Three

PITAR ELLISEN

10.25 Hours 17 October 2047

STI Zone 2/Level 4

They were watched, he knew it. So bypassing the Mondrian, the Picasso, and the Rembrandt merchant; ignoring Cezanne's cathedral trees and a dreamy, rosy Renoir girl leaning on a keyboard, he kept his eyes front, gazing fixedly into a blank screen: the visicom. Fool, to have been so cocksure. Hengst had held the strings the whole time, he the puppet politician jerking at the master's whim. Thanks to his own stupidity, no one Earthside even knew he was gone. Furling hell, to have come up with only Katz!

A door in the right wall opened, and there Katz stood, showered, shaved, gray hair slicked back, but still in his own gray woollen jumpsuit. The collar was crumpled, the creases gone to folds, but otherwise immaculate as ever.

"Sir?" Katz knew they were watched, was asking for a cue.

"Sit down."

Katz sat, folding his small neat hands in his lap. Despite the composure, his mind was going at a clip, Ellisen could bet on it. "Katz . . ." The gray eyes gleamed watchful behind the antique goldrimmed glasses. "Try the visicom."

Before Katz could comply, it lit up and there was Hengst's steely smile.

"Controller: you slept well?" They both knew he'd sat vigil in that chair all night. "Breakfast is coming. Bon appetit." Hengst's face cut, but the screen stayed on, showing now an outside view of the complex. From this distance, Space Tektoniks Inc, or STI, resembled a pre-tech baby's rattle, slowly revolving in the blackness of space with the sick-brown glob of Earth behind it. The hard thing to judge was the scale. How many hundreds of kilometers long was that massive, hollow shaft with bulbous ends? The larger bulb, tilting toward Earth, housed the fusion piles that powered the complex. The smaller one, a glass-domed observatory, tilted toward the outer planets. And in between? Four sets of four concentric rings, equally spaced along the upper two thirds of the spindle, rotating at different rates to provide whatever gravity their functions required. These rings, or levels, numbered one to four outward, and each whole was termed a zone. The four levels in each zone were connected by eight radial tunnels, shafts serviced by a series of elevators, separated by double locks, going 'up' toward the spindle, and 'down' toward space. The zone nearest to the observatory, Zone I, (classified R&D), was occupied solely by boffos, teks, and servs. Level 4 in the second zone, where Ellisen was right now—housed admin. personnel, Hengst's own command quarters, the three levels going 'up' into lower gravities serving as non-classified chemical processing areas. The third zone housed light industry; the bottom one, foundries, and heavy manufacturing shops. The whole complex was webbed in by cables, glistening like gossamer in the glare of giant arcs; to one side hung a maze of scaffolding within which cargo ships were tethered, auxiliary shuttles plying back and forth from airlock to loading dock like small white lice. In zone four, fat gray tubs unloaded lunar ore from what had been Ellisen mines until Hengst, scoring in the last war, had stripped the Ellisens and everyone else from the heavens.

The view cut to inside shots now, to miles of looping permaplast tunnel, to scanner views of factory floors: a foundry, silver-suited workers pouring molten alloy; a low-grav lab, white-clad boffos bouncing to and fro; vast, steamy hydroponics houses; metal mills, chambers full of twisted pipes extruding tortured streams of liquid permaplast to be caught and sealed under pressure into great metal canisters; molding shops and warehouses piled with finished forms

ready for shipment to Earth: small homely things, chairs and tables, beds, baths, and shelves; huge sections of more vital stuff—prefabricated domes piled high, enough to house Earth's entire population so why were there never enough? A tantalizing glimpse of a weapons hall, the latest anti-personnel heads stacked on a tractor bed. . . .

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!

A slot opened in the service wall, and a robocaddy rumbled through. Breakfast. Rage had given Ellisen an appetite.

It was good: real, like his own food, not your soy this and that. Granola, apple pulp, omelette, wheat toast, coffee, and full cream milk. While Katz reached for the coffee, Ellisen helped himself to granola. He would not, must not betray weakness, or fear at this show of power. He poured milk, stirred it in. Hengst wanted Phrynis, hadn't they shaken on the deal? Ellisen had promised Phrynis's location in return for a say in who got what and when from Hengst's arsenal. Of all men on Earth, Ellisen considered that he himself cared most for its survival, understood best how to ensure it. The Hesikastor had come to him, warning of another war. It was while verifying the old man's claims to these visions via Tannis Ord's synergizer that those inexplicable psi transmissions had begun. The synergizer had boosted the Hesikastor's psi powers, Ord said, but whatever the explanation, those star charts had been sent, giving by their configurations the location of this second Eden somewhere in the Pleiades.

Watching the Phrynis strips, he, Ellisen, had figured how to prevent this second second holocaust his way—not by world disarmament as Fazhakian urged, but by fair arms distribution among the Powers. His bargaining chip? The charts. Not an ethically pristine solution but, fires of hell, the old man still won something. And Hengst still had his arms market intact. Which had to mean something, after all, star charts notwithstanding, it was going to take the guy some time to find a drive to take ships that far. The Pleiades, for god-sakes! In the heyday of space travel, before everything got shot to hell, no manned ships had even gone a tenth as far.

So why had the man had taken him hostage? And why the move to get the charts at all? Not hard to figure. The dog-in-a-manger still wanted everything—

and to stick it to Ellisen into the bargain.

There was so much bad blood between them. . . .

Hengst had brought down the Ellisen empire and Ellisen's grandfather had died in the doing. Rage surged once again, and this time he couldn't even risk an Eheim, wouldn't give Hengst the satisfaction. Instead, poker faced, he kept his spoon moving at an even rate, slowly emptying his dish.

Only two places Hengst could get those charts. One, from the Hesikastor's mind; two, from the records of the charts from Ellisen's own unlink files. So it wasn't over yet. The old man would never let Hengst strip his mind. And if MacAllister was the man Ellisen thought him, he'd never let Hengst get his fat hands on the strips, either, unless Ellisen told him to.

"Mr. Chairman. I trust the food is to your liking." Hengst was back on screen, seated at his desk, looking straight at them. Ellisen set down his spoon with a slight clink. Would they talk now, or what? Hengst's office door slid open, and Ellisen bit back a cry.

In the doorway stood a shortish man, medium build in gunmetal suit; ram-rod back, bottlebrush eyebrows, short mustache, shiny skull. General Voltov, Ellisen's former rival for the World Council Chair, defeated thanks to M'Boda and the Emirates. What in furling hell was *he* doing up here? The man crossed the floor with brisk, short steps as Hengst stood up, extended a hand. "Ah, General. A pleasure. I hope you had a smooth trip?"

Voltov bowed, took the offered seat. The viewpoint shifted to the two men in profile; Hengst's square fleshy head bobbing on his shoulders, jowls scraping his collar, Voltov's neck poking up like a turtle's, thin beak nose.

"Why the summons, Hengst?" Voltov always spared his words.

"Summons?" Hengst smiled. "Let's call it a friendly invitation." The manufacturer leaned back, his square, squat hands gripping the edge of his desk. He pointed down. "Don't believe what you hear down there. Another year, my boys tell me, and it will all be over."

"But your own people up here have forecast—"

"A necessary fiction. Panic is a terrible thing."

"Only a year! How long have you known?"

Hengst touched a panel in his desk, and the wall behind him slid aside,

revealing curved window. Ellisen made a sound in his throat. A fleet of silver ships big as citidomes floated in the middle distance, tethered to a vast alloy grid stretching way into the dark. Dear God! They'd heard of Hengst's starfleet, had taken surveillance shots of known state-of-the-art craft in various stages of development. Decoys, the sly bastard! Hengst gazed from the screen with patent pride. "Our hope for a future, all ready to go."

"But—" Voltov couldn't take his eyes off the ships. "I thought—your stardrive—there were problems."

"Solved, General. The cryonics, too, long since."

"Then why—"

"We had no destination."

Voltov leaned forward slightly. "And now?"

"One has been found."

The devil it had! Ellisen clenched his fists.

"Chairman Ellisen is informed?"

"Of course."

"Then where is he?" The question hung in the air. Voltov tried again. "He knows I'm here?"

"Oh, yes." Hengst bared his teeth. "He knows."

"So . . . what do you want with me?"

"I've built sixteen ships. Each needs a skipper, crew, and a civilian Director."

Voltov pulled his eyes from the screen. "How many people to a ship?"

"Six thousand."

"But . . . that's nothing to what's down there."

"That's all the cryobanks will hold."

"What will happen to the rest?"

"You tell me."

Voltov slowly got to his feet. "I demand priority for my family."

Hengst smacked the desk. "I decide who goes or stays. Sit." Voltov sat. "The flag ship's mine, of course. You want the second?"

Voltov looked shaken. "But how can you pick—?"

"I have records going back to '25. I've been culling crews—and passengers—for one whole month. Three ships are filled already."

Fires of hell! Ellisen breathed out hard.

"My family," Voltov was bleating. "My wife."

Hengst waved him shut. "You get five slots, including your own. Fill 'em how you like. Accept?"

"Well, I—"

"Yes or no?"

The beak tipped up. "Yes."

"Good. I'll have you piped aboard now."

Voltov was on his feet again. "But I—"

"Goodbye, Voltov."

Voltov bowed his head and left.

"Rejoice, Ellisen." As the door closed on Voltov, Hengst grinned into the scanner. "There goes the Opposition."

"You can't do this," Ellisen said. "You can't play God."

Hengst spread his hands. "A ship in exchange for the star charts."

"If I refuse?" He'd not lick ass like Voltov.

Hengst shrugged. "I've sent down for your unlink files."

Ellisen clenched his fists. "And if they're gone?"

Hengst laughed outright. "I have the old man."

Ellisen stood in the shower, the scalding steam pulses pounding his sore flesh. All day he'd sat out there, watching an endless stream of people cross Hengst's office floor, many he'd believed to be his allies. He grabbed a body brush, scrubbed savagely. Din Park, Chinn; Hayden, and Sevigny of the middle European bloc; Schmidt and Ram Singh, and, worst of all . . . M'Boda's great bulk waddling across that floor, his slab teeth gleaming; smiling cheeks bunched into bossy whorls of ebony as powerful black hand engulfed Hengst's white one and the arms pumped up and down. Ellisen squeezed up his eyes, remembering. M'boda, the man who'd clinched his Presidential seat. If it hadn't been enough to see that one squeezing his fat ass into Hengst's chair, the rest had been worse. Hengst, aware of the scene's witness as M'boda was not, had led the African leader to rehearse the full, humiliating truth: that Hengst had been behind it all along. Ellisen threw down the brush and stood

staring at misty tile. Why had Hengst tipped the scales to favor him? Did Hengst think him easier to dominate than Voltov? Ellisen shook his head. No. It was because he was an Ellisen. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Humiliation was the game, and Hengst was winning.

A sudden thump startled him. Katz, through the steam-haze, pointed to the sitting room. Ellisen nodded, Katz disappeared. Quickly, he moved into the relative chill of the dressing room, scrambled into a clean jumpsuit. Then, still brushing down his hair, he hurried into the sitting room. In the visicom screen: a cubicle and a bed tangled in pipes and drip-feeds.

The Hesikastor had arrived.

Ellisen sat, his eyes on the old man who lay upon it. Pride screamed at him to get up and walk away. But he did a quick Eheim, relaxed, as Hengst entered and stood, looking down at the Hesikastor's unconscious face. One glance out at Ellisen, then Hengst curtly signaled through an observation panel to a frieze of boffos milling in the next room.

The Hesikastor stirred, sighed, and opened his eyes. He looked like hell. Tranked out, of course. Now they were shooting him stims. Jesus, they were going to kill him! Ellisen clenched his jaw, performed an Eheim, relaxed. The old man turned his head, appeared to see Hengst for the first time. But Ellisen wasn't fooled. He knew something of Fazhakian's powers.

"Hesikastor. Are you comfortable?"

The old man stared past Hengst's right ear.

"Hesikastor?" Hengst repeated, frowning at the boffos, who were busy looking busy. In his own good time, the old man turned his head. "I hear you," he said, and Ellisen was strangely cheered. I hear, the old man meant. But I won't necessarily listen. Hengst leaned closer, shouting in the man's ear as though he were a half-wit, or deaf. "You're not Earthside any more."

"Oh?"

Ellisen glanced to Katz. He was also savoring the moment. Every flutter of Fazhakian's eyelids, every wavery monosyllable made Hengst look more and more the dupe. Hengst saw it. But he plowed on, gesturing vaguely outward. "I've a fleet of ships out there, Hesikastor, ready to take us out. As soon as you have told me where Phrynis is."

The old man smiled. "I'm no astronomer."

"You have the stellar configurations in your memory."

The smile remained. "This is an observation room."

"Yes."

"Near your office?"

"Pretty near." Hengst's brows came together.

"And you visit it often."

Hengst's face darkened. "I don't see—"

"How many doors between here and there? Ah, you can't say." The old man closed his eyes. Hengst glared up at the boffo team, jerked his finger downward, then toward the control panel in the room beyond. The old man's eyes opened again, swiveled to Hengst. What, you still here? they said.

"I want those charts," Hengst said flatly, all pretense to patience gone. "What you won't give, my men will take."

"Only if I wish it."

"You'll have no choice."

Fazhakian nodded slightly. "Maybe we can deal."

Ellisen jumped up, moved toward the screen.

"Deal?" Hengst folded his arms. "What deal?"

The Hesikastor looked genuinely tired now. "Give me a starship to do with as I will, and you shall have your charts."

Hengst threw back his head and laughed. "No deal. I have you, you have the charts. I'll pull them in a week."

Fazhakian shook his head.

"I have your granddaughter," Hengst said softly.

Ellisen looked to Katz. Ye Gods! If Hengst had Shira, he had Susann also. And Sven. "Bluff," Katz murmured. "He'd have the strips, too."

Ellisen was not so sure. The unlink file was double-coded, set to scramble if breached. "Hengst's men could have botched it."

Katz shook his head. "Look at the old man," he whispered. Ellisen looked. Fazhakian didn't seem in the least concerned. The old man's eyes had closed again, and remained so. Hengst's face was a mask.

"I get the strips. In the end, I win."

No response.

"Take him down, and keep him down!" Hengst snapped. The visicom cut.

Katz shot Ellisen a quick What did I tell you? But Ellisen took no comfort in that. He, a virtual prisoner to the man he hated most in the world, was being made to witness who got what and when, while the rest of the world went to hell in a bucket. Ellisen smashed a fist into his palm.

SHIRA

06.14 Hours 18 October 2047

RCH Station #P3/14

When Shira awoke, Susann was lying opposite, out. She crept to the bathroom and took a quick shower. Then she went to the mess room for some breakfast.

Rufus was just finishing. "Hi. How are we this morning?"

"Okay—I guess."

"Susann?"

"Sleeping. I never heard her come in."

"She wouldn't go to bed—until Sven came to and that was after four."

"Oh?" Shira helped herself to toast and soycaf.

"That kid—I know they get problems at that age, but this one . . ."

"What happened?"

Rufus rolled his eyes. "He told Susann to get out."

"Where's MacAllister?"

Rufus shot her a look. "With him now." He poured himself more soycaf. "We're watching him around the clock."

Shira nodded. In his present state, Sven was a menace to himself, to them all. Her thought went back to MacAllister. Or rather, Jess. Rufus was watching her expectantly. "The woman he mentioned last night . . ."

"Jess, you mean?" Rufus cocked his head. "Alistair's wife."

Shira nodded uncomfortably. "What was she like?"

"Beautiful," he said simply. "We were all in the same class at Edinburgh. We all would have died for her. She chose Mac."

"What . . . was she studying?"

"Criminal law. She'd have made a damned good barrister. Practical. Good speaker. Persuasive. She could wrap Mac around her finger. Did."

"How?"

"For a time we thought they'd not get hitched. He was doing a lot of test flights. It bothered her until they broke up altogether, then, just like that, he gave up space, took up ciphering. When she saw that he was really going to stick with it, they got married. Which made it so damned ironic, in the end."

"Ironic?"

"When the first wave of bombs fell—" Rufus shot her a keen look. "Mac and I—we never speak about this, got it?"

She nodded.

"Alistair hadn't seen his old flying buddies from the day he quit. But that week he'd gone to a reunion, spaceside. He was there when— Jess got wiped in the first wave, along with fifty million others. He dropped out of sight. Never heard of him for years until one day he buzzed a station I was in. Alistair MacAllister, a radio rat! But then, look at me stuck here. We stay in touch, we reminisce, but as I said, we've left Jess alone, until last night."

Jess. Beautiful Jess. Future lawyer. *MacAllister's wife*.

"Any—any children?"

"They hadn't gotten around to it. They were so young. They had all the time in the world." Rufus pushed back his chair. "My watch. Gotta go."

Shira finished breakfast alone. MacAllister must have loved Jess very much, to give up being a pilot. Shira sighed. Would a man ever love her that way? She shoved her empties down the service hatch, and went back to her cubicle. Susann was awake. "Good morning, Shira. Where is everyone?"

"MacAllister's with Sven." Shira perched awkwardly. "I'm sorry about Sven," she said, and really meant it.

"Thanks." Susann said in a low voice. "I'd been expecting something, I suppose. He's been so quiet for so long. But I wasn't prepared for this. I think he hates me." She looked close to tears. "Have you any notion why?"

Shira shifted uncomfortably. "Ask Sven."

"He won't speak to me."

"He might now." Shira doubted it, but what else could she say?

"No. There's something on his mind and I can't shake it out of him. Would you . . . could you . . ."

"Read Sven?" Shira made to leave. "Look, I said I'm sorry, but this is between you and Sven."

Susann struggled up. "Sorry? You little hypocrite, you're enjoying this. You hate me for what Pitar did, and you intend to make me pay."

"That's sick," Shira said, and opened the door. Susann ran across and grabbed her arm. "Listen: I didn't sell your grandfather out."

"You were party to it."

"He'll be all right, Shira."

Shira shook free. "How can you say that? Grandfather is an old man, too old to have all this happening." Shira looked upward. "I don't know if I'll see him again. I don't know if he'll survive."

"Oh, he will. He has more strength than you or I. Or Pitar. God knows what Hengst will do with *him*."

"Mrs. Ellisen: my grandfather was taken against his will. Your husband went up there of his own accord. I hope he gets what he deserves."

"What an ugly thing to say!" Susann flushed dark red. "You know, for all they say, you're no better than anybody else!"

Shira fled, making for the elevator. She heard Susann call after her, then the doors closed and she was mercifully going up. God, the Ellisens! But for them, she and Grandfather would still be home! By the time she reached the upper level, she was shaking so much she could scarcely climb the stairs.

Chapter Four

TANNIS ORD

*08.00 Hours 18 October 2047
STI Zone 1/Level 4*

Ord stood with Suk and Prosser, gazing about. Half of him made whoopee at what he saw: low, wide space; hermetically clean, brilliantly lit. Walls partly assembled, a half-built synergizer couch to one side leaving plenty of open floor in the middle for holoverter projections. The other half? Across from him, and apart, was Hengst's tek team, headed by a Woolcott, did he say his name was? Smooth: handsome and knew it; head and shoulders above Ord, which didn't say much, showing off the half-built synergizer as if it were his own. *Lousy flunky teks!* Not a single original idea among them.

Suk simmering on the verge of boil. The Hesikastor lay nearby, being debriefed. "You know what that means. They're shooting him every drug in the book, but he won't give."

"Yet," Ord had said, then bit his tongue.

Suk flashed him a look. "His powers are growing, he'll hold out. Besides, anytime now there'll come another transmit and he'll go beyond control. Picture Hengst's face when that old man clicks into psi mode!"

Ord wasn't amused. In his opinion it was to their greater good that Hengst got the Phrynis charts. But he knew when to keep his mouth shut.

Woolcott was still bleating away. "Of course, you'll observe how the modifications resolve the problems with the modular relays. Admittedly, the specifics of this imagector are quite good, considering the state of the art in that era, and the resources available."

Imagecor? Ord glared. *Imagecor?*

The wall behind them, door and all, was clear permaplex from top to bottom: an observation wall, dividing lab from control room; visicams beyond, installed and working. Hengst's spy wall. Probably watching now, Ord thought, the back of his neck pricking. Listening to everything they said. Even so. *Imagecor!* "Did you by any chance work for Sturman?"

Woolcott nodded. "I was his head research tek. A genius. The most brilliant of his time."

Heat crawled up Ord's face and shined his scalp. Most brilliant of his time up a pig's ass. Trier, Sturman was, and a decent guy, but *genius?* The poor bastard's jimmy-rig had never ever worked—and Hengst himself had canned the specs. "That"—he jabbed a finger—"is a synergizer. A *synergizer*. Got it? My machine, my invention, my name." *Imagecor!* "And for the record, there's been nothing to touch it, before, or since."

Hengst's voice boomed out behind him, making him jump. "Gentlemen. Cut the semantics. I want the old man on that couch within five days."

Five days? Ord rolled his eyes. "But I haven't—"

"Five days." Hengst vanished.

Ord smoothed the red-brown strands across his scalp. Then he turned to Suk and Prosser. "Okay, let's take a look and see the hash they've made."

13.48 Hours 24 October 2047

STI Z 1/L 4

Ord stood by the observation room, his eyes on the images flickering over the transducer screen—TS—above the old man's head, his mind on the tek beside him. Damned Bosney! That he, Ord, should be standing by his own machine—*his own machine!*—while a damned tek second grade—and only Woolcott's bloody third assistant, to boot!—manned *his* controls, of *his* baby, over *his* subject! At the same time he was thinking this, however, Ord, conscious of the visicams, kept his eyes front, his face slack and neutral. Never know when Hengst was watching. Over the transducer screen a succession of bright images flashed: test figures, translated from the old man's mind through the synergizer and projected onto the screen. Anything and everything that Fazhakian pictured sprang onto that screen, and it was a mark of the old man's mental strength and power of concentration that this was all they were getting. For eighteen hours straight, ever since they'd booted up the synergiz-

er and spliced the man in, Woolcott's men had been hammering after the star charts, but that mind had not let up though those boys had tried every known truth serum.

But he was tiring, Ord could tell. Oddly, only part of Ord wanted Hengst to succeed. The other part was rooting for the old guy. Careful, he warned himself. You'll end up a bleeding heart like Suk. Bosney bent toward the mike. "Hexagon, if you please, Hesikastor. Red, on a green ground."

On the screen the image formed, perfect, unwavering. Ord folded his arms. Any minute now, Bosney would slip in the trick question again: "The star charts, now, if you please, Hesikastor. From a viewpoint approaching the Demiel system." Demiel, the tiny, third rate sun around which the planet Phrynis revolved. Each time, the old man's mouth curled into a faint smile, and his voice came through the quiet: "Shall we begin again?"

Bosney's face went tight. The man was fit to kill, Ord just knew it, but Hengst had given the order: put him there and keep him there until he shows and tells.

Eighteen hours straight, by God.

Suk stood behind Ord, beside herself with rage. Prosser? Resigned as ever. Ord rocked forward on the balls of his feet. Only that morning he'd reminded them that it had been a week, the most they'd gone without a transmit. Any minute now that old guy was going to click back into psi mode and that lot wouldn't know what hit 'em.

And Hengst would have to call in Ord at last.

Ord glanced to the Hesikastor's face, remembering the excitement down in Estralita, the shock the first time the old man slid from alpha into psi mode. Prosser, standing by the controls, gaping at the visiplat that showed the Hesikastor's brain waves, the wavy line swelling to a great green tidal surge.

"Stubborn old buzzard." Bosney dabbed at his mustache nervously. And Ord knew why. Any moment now Hengst would pop on screen, screaming for results. "I don't get it. We've panned him up, we've panned him down, fast and slow. We none of us can shake him."

Ord smirked. Being a mere observer had its compensations. These puffed up bastards thought they knew it all. He was beginning to like the Hesikastor, oh yes, even though it scared him at the same time.

Give Hengst a run for his money, old man. Make him squirm. He'll get you in the end, but he shouldn't have it so easy.

Thank you for the vote of confidence.

Ord leapt back from the observation wall. The words had come loud and clear, the old man's voice for sure—but right inside Ord's head. He glanced to the others, but they appeared not to have heard. Fazhakian was midway through a complex visualization exercise involving a rotating trapezium in four colors—and he'd heard Ord's thought and responded to it in stride. And the synergizer hadn't caught one whiff of this mental substrand! Ord eyed the couch next door, recalling his thoughts, what he'd planned to do behind the old man's back.

Have you been listening all along?

I never eavesdrop. You reached out, I heard you.

Ord stared. All those years, all that grant money. Here was the most exciting subject he'd ever come across. Ironic. He'd never now have the chance to work with him. *Why are you holding out, when you know Hengst will break you in the end?*

Don't count on it, young man. And don't you give up either. Things aren't altogether hopeless—neither are you.

What do you mean? Who said—

Hengst's voice cut through. "Bosney—anything?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Ord, any sign of cracking?"

He could feel Suk's eyes boring the back of his neck. God, if she but knew! "Not yet, sir."

"You can still think of nothing to help this thing along?"

"No, sir."

"Very well. Keep at it, Bosney. He's got to be tiring." Hengst cut.

Suk dug Ord's elbow. "Dammit! The guy needs rest. They've shot him stims enough to kill a regiment."

Ord walked through into the lab and stood looking down on the old man's face. The eyes were closed, of course. Mouth closed, also; wide firm lips showing through the silvery whiskers. The skin was bluish and papery under the bright light, but this was due much to the fact that the Hesikastor had pulled his life force deeply inward.

You were saying, Hesikastor?

A funny sound came over the intercom, sort of in between a cough and a squeal. Ord looked to the screen. The stripes were breaking into fragments

and scattering like sparks in a wind.

"Jeezus H," Bosney said. Ord whipped back into the control room. The poor bugger was hitting every button in the manual, without success. He turned about as Ord went in. "What's this?"

"He's flipped into psi. You'd better buzz Hengst."

"But Dr. Woolcott said—"

"Now." The visiplat was algal green.

Hengst beat Bosney to it. "Bring him back, Ord—now."

"Sir, they—whoever have complete control. We can only ride it out."

"How long?" demanded Hengst, as if he didn't know.

"Some transmits last less than an hour; others, more than a day."

"And then?"

Ord swallowed a sigh. "After each transmit the Hesikastor lapses into a comatose state of varying and unpredictable duration. After that, he awakens as though from normal sleep."

"We'll have him then?"

Ord rocked up on the ball of his feet, down again. "Judging by past episodes, there is a window, sir. That is, if . . ."

"If what, dammit?"

"If we leave his neural system clear, Sir." Ord waited for Hengst's response, surprised at his own sudden temerity. He glanced to Suk, caught her startled face, and his spirits lifted.

Hengst was scowling. "Very well, Ord. Take over—and keep me informed." Mercifully, the man cut.

At his nod, Suk went through into the lab, wiped the old man's brow, checked his feeds, closed the stim valve. Ord scanned the wall. The psimeter was rolling beautifully. The screen above the old man's head was still dark. Needed setting in the psi mode. And quick, before they lost more valuable strippage. The old guy looked dead as he always did during these things. His hands, if Ord went through and felt them, would be cold as a corpse's. How could the life essence, he wondered, get that low outside a cryonic pod?

"Screen, Pross." The screen lit up again, and shadows moved across it.

Bosney exclaimed, lucky bugger. Woolcott would be terminally pissed, but couldn't be helped, Ord thought maliciously. Couldn't disturb a man off watch. He glanced to Prosser at the controls, at Suk standing by the old man's couch. He looked to the screen, narrowing his eyes. Still couldn't see very clearly.

What in hell were those spots and smudges? The last view he'd had of Phrynis was King Torc's bloody assassination in the citadel—full color, nothing spared.

"Why the screen?" Suk called. She jerked her thumb at the floor. Ord smacked his scalp with his palm. "'Verter, Prosser."

Prosser toggled on the holoverter, and at once the flat images sprang off the wall screen into three-dimensional solidity: gray misty floss, a bloody great ball of it, filling the center floor. Too vague. "Focus, Prosser, focus." Prosser focussed. The 'verter images grew sharper, clearer; floss became . . .

Ord caught his breath. In that small control room one could have heard a feather fall.

"My God," Bosney said. "My God."

Shira

14.15 Hours 24 October 2047

RCH Station #P314

The week was rough. Sven, out of sick bay, stayed in his cubicle. Shira, ashamed of her outburst, was extra courteous to Susann to make up for their exchange, while Susann, coldly polite, avoided being personal.

No one came up to the dome during daywatch, a fact she'd come to rely on. Shira threw herself onto the floor, crossed her legs, staring up at the dismal October sky, always dark and getting darker. She quieted her mind, then reached out, alert for sign of her grandfather. Nothing.

A scrape on the stair brought her to her knees. MacAllister.

"I've been looking all over for you."

She flopped back again. "Oh?"

"Sven's acting up again. Susann's scared he'll try something really bad."

Shira shrugged. "As opposed to what?" she asked tartly, then added, softening. "He doesn't want to kill himself."

"That's a relief." MacAllister nodded. "But he could cause trouble. Susann thinks he needs urgent counseling, but where, at this point?"

"There's the Bourg" Shira said, and immediately regretted it. She didn't want the Ellisens there.

"That's out," MacAllister said. "Hengst will be watching it. Susann believes you could do something for Sven—if you would."

"I'm not allowed to read people, do I have to tell you? Besides, Susann's his mother. Let her help him."

MacAllister sighed. "You're being difficult."

"I promised Grandfather."

"Okay, we'll leave it there—for now." Shira closed her eyes, heard him move back down the stairs, and out of earshot. Distant sounds came from below. Blips, whirs; a pneumatic whine, the rumble of cargo locks. Up here was the nearest to quiet and privacy you could get. Presently, she slipped into that wonderful, bright alpha state on the edge of deep meditation. Her favorite colors drifted past, like slow windfilled sails. . . . They began to glow as though they were reflecting the light of a hazy sunset, not those smoggy nowadays efforts, but the gorgeous ones you saw only in the archives. The glow brightened, then deepened into cold late evening, a clear and radiant sky sprinkled with stars. She looked up, saw bright Forthyr, sky anchor; there, Racacta, and Syrcyr, and Thyrl, while low on the horizon, Ao hung like an amber lantern. She was in Phrynis!

Her body slumped, her jaw slackened, her mouth opened slightly. But inwardly she trembled with excitement.

Grandfather!

"No time, no time," she murmured indistinctly, when he didn't answer. They were into it. Already the glowing sky had deepened into dusk, the wind, grown keener over the wintry plain—a wider, wilder plain than the one Torc had crossed with Ramoni. Shira shivered. *Cold* Locked in these visions in Grandfather's mind it was like being there. But where? Where were they? And *when?* Not in Torc's time, for Torc was dead.

A slight movement caught Shira's eye. She looked up to the smudge of horizon, and saw the homing herders, their breath rising in rank clouds, and heard their lowing over the hush that told of coming snows. . . .

The men were tired to the point of exhaustion, grimly holding on. They were late. If they didn't keep moving, the herds would be lost. But tired was not all. Shira frowned faintly. Someone there was anxious, mostly for himself, but also . . . for another. And mingled with that anxiety was great fear, almost to the point of terror. It was not pleasant, that fear; it made the breath short, the sweat seep out to the barhide surcoat. Shira found the man just as he pushed forward, jostling his fellow herders, to reach the headman. Big, he was big; bigger and heavier than most. Some five, six of the others were already

mounting thars, outriders to prepare the Fend for the herds' homecoming. This big man, it was not his place to go, but so great was his fear it made him bold. As Shira's thought merged into his, he reached out, caught the headman by the sleeve. Why, if Lahr would not let him ride, Anka might be mad enough to take knife to him.

Shira recoiled momentarily, shaken by his violence. Her mind went dark, vague shapes and movements came and went. When her vision returned, the man was riding, and, she knew it just as clearly as he did himself, he would keep riding for full three days across the plain with the others, his mind part on the receding herds, but increasingly on getting home before . . .

Shira, surrendering, lay still, locked in the shock of what lay before him, and in the terrible grip of his desperation. . . .

Chapter Five

Anka Ragnar loomed large in his crofthouse doorway, his very bulk a challenge, nay, a threat to the timid woman barring his way. His throat was raw; his breath, short; and his hide coat hung wet and heavy on his back. He looked angry at seeing the woman there, more even than usual. He was angry. The anger masked his fear.

The woman hitched her doyshan up around her face, leaving only her eyes visible, startled brown eyes fixed upon him; on his sweat-streaked face, thick-set beard grit-gray from three days' hard ride across the plains, on his threatening scowl. "Horen Ragnar—we did not look to see you till morning."

Anka looked past her, his scowl intensifying. *We?* "When did it begin?"

"At first light, Horen Ragnar. Don't worry. We've been with her all the day. You'll soon have your son."

His son! He made to push her aside, and would have, but for a second figure that moved to block his way. A tall figure this, dressed entirely in black: black skirts, voluminous black overblouse, black-fringed doyshan.

Annhilde!

"Wait." Her low voice carried a man's authority.

His lip curled in disgust. "Who sent for you, hag-woman?"

Without a word, Annhilde backed him out and down the steps into the failing light and fixed her dark brown eyes upon him. "A body has a right to see her own daughter delivered." She closed the door firmly behind her and

placed her back against it, reversing by this simple move the polarity between them, she now the dominant one, he now gazing up at her, the supplicant. His face darkened. One hand would snap her in two, an she were a withered stick.

As ever, she seemed unfazed by his scowl. "Don't worry. Voreen didn't ask for me, so don't be angry at her. She wouldn't dream of disobeying you, poor child, though her life hung in the balance. I myself insisted on staying until you got back, at least."

"Well, now I'm back, so take yourself off!"

Annhilde stayed put, skirts flapping, ragged, in the wind.

"Go on—get out!" He waved his hands at her, careful not to touch her, all the same.

The scorder slipped her doyshan back off her tight-coiled hair, careless of her face revealed. "You're a rough, hard man, Anka Ragnar," she said. "Yet that I can forgive, for isn't it ever the way of men? But your obstinacy and stupidity—no." She lowered her voice. "Obstinacy at wedding her, stupidity at getting her with child again, knowing full well the risk."

"Quiet, gross woman!" He wished that he dared shout the words, then seize her and hurl her from his door. He looked fearfully from right to left, then behind him, up the empty street. "The child came . . . unbidden," he muttered, turning back toward her.

She laughed, of course. She knew as well as he that no man gave seed carelessly in the Fend, where every additional mouth threatened their very survival. That fact her laugh underscored, that and her easy ascendancy over him. But she wouldn't win this time. This time he was ready. "All right. What if it didn't? And what if the first one didn't either? A perfectly normal child as that one was: my son, and everything I wanted—murdered by you, his own grandmother, in the womb. What would Voreen say if she knew, woman? And Headman Lahr—what would he do with you, eh?"

"How many times must I say? The child aborted naturally, and too soon for any to know if it were a son . . . or anything else," Annhilde said firmly. "But son or no, normal or no, I had naught to do with its ceasing. A scorder works for life, not death, as in your heart you are aware." She moved down

a step, pointing a long brown finger at him, backing him off onto the path. "Listen: I risked my life—and hers—to tell you why you mustn't wed her, and why she should not be with child. You gave your word, on your very father's honor, that you'd mind my warning, and twice now you've broken it. Did I not say that a second time would be even more dangerous? There's only one thing worse than a fool, Anka Ragnar, and that's a stubborn one. You've done my daughter grievous wrong. Worse, you not only barred her from my help, but had to be away when her time came." Her voice went deep with passion. "Oh, how could you, when you knew it was so close!" She was eyeing the fat swatch of leather tallies at his belt: red for the cows, blue for the bulls, and white, the prized white, for the harlings.

He patted them defiantly. "I had to go, else lose these to the others or the snows. I delayed going as long as I could, and came back as soon as I could. Even now, Horen Sharn's bringing in my herd with his own and you can imagine how dear that's costing me."

"Not enough, Anka Ragnar. Not enough. Tell me, how much dearer will it cost you when they come to burn you, eh? And what use is a son who proves an *orbargon!*"

The denial stuck in his throat.

"You think not?" She shook her head slowly. "Day after day I've watched Voreen's belly swell, hoping you'd recover your senses and put aside our quarrel for her sake—for all our sakes. But no. You never sent for me. Even when you'd gone, Voreen wouldn't open her door to me, her own mother, for fear of crossing you. By the time I heard of her laboring, she'd already sent for those three in there, and why not, poor child, in her precious innocence having nothing to fear? Oh, what have you done in your obstinacy and stupidity!"

The fear started in him then, and rage and hate. "Enough! Stand aside and let me pass. My son will be as he should be!"

Annhilde stood her ground. "Are you sure? You don't look it." Her voice softened. "Come—tell them inside that you and I have settled old scores and send them home. You may be sorry, else."

A low moaning came from inside, followed by the murmur of women's voices.

es, and the chink of a pail. Anka's mouth went dry. Anger and anxiety churned inside him. Foolish and obstinate, she'd called him? "If she be at risk, scorder, the fault is yours. You're the orborgon's source, not I. If the child turn out so, the taint's on your head, not mine!"

Annhilde pursed her mouth, deepening the runnels fanning from nose to lip, and stippling the chin. "Taint? Blame, more like. I should have known that your desire for a son would prove too strong. That, and your wilful pride, the same bull pride that keeps you even now from hearing sense."

Another moan, more urgent than the first, began a weird ascent to a higher, louder pitch. Abruptly, Anka moved off the steps and pressed his face to the tiny window by the door. Annhilde's eyes were on him. She'd know full well he'd turned aside not so much to see into the room as to shut her off.

Suddenly, she spoke out again, not in her normal voice this time, but in her strange soothsaying chant, starting the hairs on his flesh. "Pride, Anka Ragnar, and stubbornness will one day bring your death, do you hear?"

He went quite still, said nothing, waiting to hear what more she might utter, but she only sighed at last, and said, "I shall go."

He heard the crunch of her boots as, gathering up her heavy skirts, she started down the steps at last. Still he didn't move, but stayed, face to the window, blindly looking in. Her footsteps halted on the path behind him. "Yet shall my mind stay open to this house. You may have need of me before the day is through." Her boots ground over the short shingle path and out onto the rutted road.

Now, now he allowed himself to turn and watch her black-shrouded form recede up the hill, and merge with the deepening dusk. Cunning old miper. Had that singsong voice been genuine? Or had she assumed it to frighten him? Had she spoken true or false? As scorder—or as jealous hag? Fresh sweat pricked his brow. What if she really had spoken true, and the child proved not as it should be? He moved from the window and up the steps. Nonsense. It would be normal as the first, whatever Annhilde said. She'd never wanted to give up her precious daughter, and this was just a ruse to regain control. But even as on the day he'd accused her of giving Voreen to drink that which thrust from her body the tiny life stirring within it, so again he'd trust his

instincts. She was simply playing on his fears to wrest Voreen from him.

For how could she know that a second child wouldn't be as normal as the first? And why should he believe her, when she'd lied the first time? The child would be normal. He'd made up his mind quite firmly that the risk was minimal. The shock of learning that the scorder herself had been born an orborgon, that she'd had her third eye cut out secretly at birth while her parents were out on a summer grazing, had long since faded. And, after all, Voreen herself had not turned out to be one, had she? In excising the eye, had not the knife removed the taint also? The scorder herself had admitted that this could be the case. But could be, she'd insisted, was not reason enough to justify the risk of begetting another generation. Even now he was not so sure that that tale hadn't been one huge lie to keep Voreen from him. Had even thought thus in the heat of the night that the child was conceived, the second time he'd deliberately forborne to chew the bara seed. Still.

He passed his palm across his brow. The appalling risk! Why, why . . . why of all the f'wellas of the Fend had he desired Voreen Faure? He put his hand to the latch. Curious, how now that he was free to enter, he was reluctant, almost afraid to do so. He knew, everyone knew, the terrible chain of events to which such a birth would give rise: the ritual snapping of the child's neck at the father's hand before the headman and the Council of Six; the headman's formal call for docimasy to determine blame for its appearance. If laid on the father, his choice was between castration and death: if the mother, her sole option was submission to the scorder's knife—like to end in death, anyway. The laying of blame was ever a matter of expediency, for who, in that close society could claim to be entirely free of the taint? Since in this case, he comforted himself, it was between a valuable masterherder and a mere hearthraker, they'd likely blame Voreen.

But . . . could he see Annhilde taking up the knife against her own? And after he had so willfully defied her? Could he see her doing that and letting him go unscathed? Tell me, how dearer will it cost you when they come to burn you, eh? He laid his head against the door. The choice between castration and death was for those innocently responsible. If Annhilde denounced him as foreknowing then they all three would go to the stake.

Agh, how conspicuous he must look, hovering by his own door! Anka snapped up the latch and pushed through. At that instant, there came an anguished cry from the bed and muffled exclamations from the women. He stood, blinking the last of the daylight from his eyes. The women were staring at something—and he was never to forget the sight as long as he lived—something pale and gleaming that one of the women held suspended by the heels.

She shook it once or twice, as one shook a deadly shufar to snap its neck, then she examined it again. It hung still, without a sound. One terrified look she shot Anka, then, in nervous haste, she bound the thing in the cloths Voreen had laid out ready, bindings lovingly stitched these many months. Then the woman laid it in the wooden box which was to have served as cradle, and dragged the box away around the foot of the bed. The other two with eyes averted busied themselves, bathing Voreen, changing water in a pan.

Anka, unable to move or speak, watched the first woman place the ritual orat leaves over the baby's face to seal in the soul: over eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and then—his heart twisted in his breast—over the brow.

Voreen lay on an old sheet, dark hair caught up in the birthing cap, eyes closed, thick dark lashes curling on smooth firm cheeks sallowd by the flame of rancid turboil. She must have sensed that he was there. "Anka?" With an effort, he stirred himself, and, moving forward, took her hand. At his touch, her eyes half-opened, shadowy, unfocused. He swallowed. "How do you feel?"

"Tired. The baby—is he—did I—?"

He forced a smile. Nodded.

"Show me, Anka. Show me."

He shook her hand gruffly. "It . . . sleeps. When you wake will be soon enough. Rest now." He bent to kiss her damp forehead. Even before he straightened, her eyes had closed again.

The women had been watching from the foot of the bed. "Right sorry we are to see this, Horen Ragnar." That from the one who'd met him at the door. The one who'd held up the child. He knew her now. Wife of Horen Pahar, the adahi handler, and member of the Council of Six. "How ever could this have come to pass upon your house?"

He faced them dumbly, unable to answer.

"I can't understand why still they come, after all these cycles of time," she went on, nervously. "Your blood is untainted, I'd swear, for well I know your mother's house, your father's, too. Your wife—"

One of the others nudged her, looking to the bed. The woman reddened, raised her doyshan over her face, forgotten in the heat of the birth.

"We must go to Horen Lahr," the nudger said.

"No!" His voice was harsh—too harsh, as he saw from their recoil. Relenting, he came as near to an apology as man would to woman in the Fend. "I—am tired from the herding. My thanks for attending my wife, and for the good broth on the hearth. I shall myself go straightway after I've supped to inform Headman Lahr of this . . . thing. You'll not speak of it meanwhile."

"Of course, Horen Ragnar." They bowed their muffled heads. "We wish you well, and sound sleep to your poor dear wife until the morrow."

As the door finally closed on them, Anka's shoulders sagged. Those last words hadn't been lost on him. He looked across the room to Voreen and prayed that she not awaken until the business was done. Poor Voreen, who'd been so happy when he'd left for the Herding. "Don't worry," she'd told him, laughing and patting her proud sunlit belly. "I'll hold him in until your return!"

The rage surged within him, against the blood bane that plagued their race without warning, against the scorder for carrying it, even momentarily against Voreen—against anyone and anything but himself.

Oh, what have you done in your obstinacy and stupidity. . .

He crossed to the hearth. He was hungry, and in no fit state to think and act sensibly. He ladled up a bowl of broth, but after only a spoon or two, he set it down, slopping it out onto the tiles, and strode back to the foot of the bed. Of course, it hadn't moved. Like all such, it looked dead. For full half a sunaround they were said to lie so. Had Annhilde Faure lain thus? If so, how had she stayed concealed? His son! Anka's mouth twisted. Son? He'd forbome to ask. Why, with his own hands he'd snap its neck that night, before Headman Lahr and the Council of Six. Such was the law.

The little head caught his eye and would not let go. So beautiful it looked,

under the dark green orat leaves. Could there—could there have been some mistake? He reached out and lifted the leaf off its brow. In the yellow light, the livid cicatrice glowed in its center, the bruised and bossy swelling looking for all the world like a third closed eye in the sleeping face. Tenderness vanished, replaced by revulsion. And fresh fear. What if—what if Horer Pahar disregarded his command and told her husband of this thing? Was the Council even now convening to march upon him?

One quick glance at Voreen, still sound asleep, then he bent down, swept up the box and its contents, bore it out and around to the refuse pit at the back of the house, where he hurled it from him. The little box flew out in a wide arc to land with a wet thud upside down in the swill pile.

Anka brushed his hands together as though to clean them, then, without a backward glance, he strode off up the hill to the house of Ingat Lahr.