



CHAPTER ONE

PITAR ELLISEN

*10.05 Hours 19 September 2047
Bentnose Peak*

Controller Pitar Ellisen V stared across his desk over the wide polished floorboards toward the tall gray windows where bare aspen and sumac clawed a bleak flat sky.

Ellisen liked what he saw: a sombre world; not dead, like the real world way up there above ground, but suspended, waiting, he part of it. Waiting to release locked energy on a whole new cycle of life.

Ellisen's fingers drummed lightly on the desk top.

For four days now he'd waited gazing upon that projected wilderness while in reality the stricken slope above him shimmered in the late summer heat. For four days now Pitar "The Viking" Ellisen, Controller of the PanAmerican Federation had privately sweated it out, awaiting the vital vote that would decide who sat in the next World Council chair.

He wanted that vote badly.

Like dominoes the commitments had fallen to either side of the meridian dividing the Feds from the Reds, half to him, the

other half to General Voltov of the Sino-Soviet bloc. Now everything hung on the United African consensus and M'boda.

Which way? Which way? Ellisen's fingers abruptly stopped. The Emirates surely wouldn't come out for Voltov, not against Ellisen's package: a bigger share in the arms race and a piece of Hengst.

A blue light winked on the desk sensorband to Ellisen's right hand. Susann's light. He reached out, touched it lightly. "Yes?"

"Pitar . . ." A small silence. "Let me wait with you."

He let the silence lengthen.

"All right. Shall Sven and I see you for lunch?"

"I don't know. Get back to you later, okay?"

Another pause, and he could picture the firm full lips compressing into a tight straight line. "I guess."

"Susann—say good morning to Sven for me."

"Say it yourself, Pitar. He's right here."

Ellisen bit the bullet. "Hi, Sven. What's up?"

No reply. It was hardly a bright question, Ellisen had to admit. Apart from the small gym, a tub-sized swimming pool and the slingball court, there was precious little else for that one to do except sleep and read and watch antique movies. Still, if their son chose to sulk it out, that was his affair.

When the blue light winked off, Ellisen, his mind already back on Hengst, barely noticed.

Hengst, not the war, had killed Grandfather.

Manfred Hengst, squatting like a spider in his space web high above a festering Earth. Space Tektonics, Inc: five miles of conglomerate, pickings from the war. Research stations, observatories, shipyards, factories, foundries, mines. Manfred Hengst, grown fat on an ailing Earth.

But not for long. From the World Council chair Ellisen would pick Hengst's legs off slowly, one by one.

A yellow light pulsed with a faint buzz like a polite cough

behind the hand. *M'boda?*

“Yes, Katz?”

“Sir.” The voice sounded thin in the low-ceilinged room.
“Palo Alto. On red.”

For a moment, Ellisen was blank. “*Palo Alto?*” A two-bit relay outfit below whirling red grit that would flay the hide off a buffalo in ten minutes flat. Who in firehell was calling the Northeastern White House direct from there—and for what? “Palo Alto?”

“On red, sir.”

Red. Top security encoded. *For the Controller's eyes only.*
“Come.”

Another touch on the sensorband and instantly the comforting winter scene was gone to a world chart on which tiny lights blinked, clocks flashed, and schools of quick bright arrows tracked earth-encircling clouds of swirling radiation borne on prevailing winds. Great crimson blotches, like some mutant leprosy, or malevolent lichen splashed across the chart: lethal zones devoid of human life: London, Moscow, Israel, New York, Canberra, Nairobi, Calcutta, Peking. Other patches, pale pink to gray marked more “fortunate” areas that had not been leveled but hit by antipersonnel bombs and virus carriers. In these gray zones now thousands lived out short, useless lives in appalling conditions because there weren't enough protective domes even after all this time, and the underground shelters were crammed to danger point. And up there Hengst played Nero, tinkered with star drives and star fleets while the world below rotted to death.

Damn, where was Katz?

Ellisen's eye moved across the chart to a tiny beacon eighty miles west of Ticonderoga: his present position, the Northeastern White House, under the bossy mass of the Adirondacks.

The heavy oak door rumbled aside to let Katz through looking, as usual, more like a scholar than the veteran civil ser-

vant that he was. The glow from the chart reflected off the neat gray hair, the gold-rimmed antiques that he affected to wear, off the polished genuine leather shoes. The gray jump suit—wool, Ellisen would swear—was knife-edge sharp and the rim of white collar above it was starched and plain. At his waist hung a swatch of plastic “keys,” a swatch containing the command key to Ellisen’s personal communications unit. With that card, Ellisen knew, Katz had just routed the red line from the outer office console directly through into the study.

Katz stood inside the closing door, the original paneled door of the old mountain house with its added core of solid ergomentium that once closed rendered the room airtight and soundproof.

“Big screen, sir?”

“Uhuh.”

Katz went to the wall beside the world chart, slid aside a wooden panel to reveal the master sensorband. Two touches and the chart was gone, and a giant face blinked patiently in on them, a lean angular face, sunlamp brown under a shaven head. The eyes were blue as Ellisen’s own, but heavy-lidded, giving them a sleepy look. The tag on the collar said, MacAllister, A.E. Rating #794/8.

“Go ahead, now,” Katz commanded. “Re-ident yourself.”

“R.S.W.32 calling Bentnose on red, on red.” The voice was even, unhurried, showing no sign of nervousness. A lowly radio rating, a “rat,” calling Bentnose Peak from some god-forsaken dusthole direct without clearance? Ellisen glanced to his desk chronister. Oh-seven hours Pacific time. The red-eyed end of the night watch. What had happened that the man couldn’t wait an hour until the day brass showed? And how in firehell had he managed to enter code red direct without the second key? Ellisen eyed the face with growing interest. Some radio rat. Resourceful, but quite possibly a fool. He’d hit the alarm and called out the brigade. There’d better be a fire. . . .

“Continue, R.S.W. 32. The Controller is waiting.”

The man blinked once. “I’ll see him first.”

Katz was thrown, Ellisen knew it, but it didn’t show. He merely pressed the sensorband again and Ellisen knew that MacAllister, A.E. rating #794/8 could see his Controller now. God, this had better be good. Ellisen nodded the man to speak.

“Man just walked in, Controller. Pylar Fazhakian. Hesikastor. He has data you should see. Transmitting . . . now.” The face cut.

Pylar Fazhakian. Ellisen swore. There he was waiting to hear from M’boda and the line was taken up by this. As he reached out to cut, columned figures began scrolling slowly up the screen. Codes. For what? Ellisen lowered his hand. PanAmerican missiles, currently deployed in silos about the territory. Highly classified, sensitive material.

“Katz, what in firehell—”

Katz pointed to the bottom of the screen. Less familiar codes now, but still recognizable. Ident tags for equally classified warheads similarly deployed over in the Sino-Soviet bloc. And those, coming now—derelicts of ten years or more, foisted onto the North African Emirates. Some, Ellisen didn’t know at all, but now the gist was clear: this was a list of active warheads from around the world, all stationed and pointing somewhere, all set to trigger. A list for which certain heads of states would trade their sons. Ellisen would.

The scrolling stopped. “That it?”

MacAllister’s face was back again. “Yes, Controller.”

“Fazhakian still there with you?”

“Yes, sir. He wants to speak with you.”

“Put him on—no. Secure yourselves until further orders. Over and out.”

Katz cut. “You want me to call in Security sir?” “No. Wrap them up and bring them in.”

Alone, Ellisen sat down again and tapped for a print out.

With a whisper, a shiny white scroll slid from a slit in his desk top to rest at his right hand. He ran his finger slowly down the columns, trying to think. Where could a man like Fazhakian gotten such material?

Katz came back in. "They're on their way, sir."

Ellisen pushed the printout across the desk. "What do you make of it?"

Katz crossed over, read the scroll up and down. "He's either running the slickest grubbing operation I've ever seen, or—" "Or?"

"He's sniffing entrails again."

"Hmmm." All thought of M'boda gone, Ellisen stared at the columned figures. Spy? Prophet? He couldn't buy either. "What do we have on him?"

A quick smile, a baring of the teeth. "There is a file."

There would be. Ellisen crossed to the fire, stirred it, then leaned back in his blue chintz armchair beside it. "Pull it."

"Yes, sir. Screen or holoverter?"

"Verter."

Katz cut the lights and the screen and all at once the firelit space between wall and desk filled with tiny hologram figures in a brilliant landscape of sea and sky. Of whitewashed cottages on sunbaked cliffs. Of urchins loping along a flat wide beach with an improbably floppy brown dog.

"The tallest boy is Pylar Fazhakian, now Hesikastor. Dog was called Lupy. Place, Kkannakale on the Black Sea. Wiped in '25, of course."

"Go on."

More clips of that extraordinary life. Hazy, disjointed, but not short of a miracle, when most records of anything and anybody had gone up in the war along with half the civilized world. Newscasts of the old man's emergence as the Hesikastor and the spread of his message of brotherhood and the simple life. The poor man's guru, the media had called him, tongue in cheek. His growing popularity. Peace rallies.

Mass following. The tabloids full of the old man and his gloomy prophecies of global holocaust. And all around him the Alliances being forged and broken. Betrayals, petty wars, more treaties.

Ellisen sat up. July 2025. Archived glimpses of Chambertin, then United Nations President, his turtle's wattles upstretched toward a dark and intense Hesikastor, whose own lean length was stooped to speak in the presidential ear; Chambertin, the bumbling old appeaser, shuffling back and forth between hot spots. There, off to Israel from his last meeting with the Provisional Palestinian Government, eye on the newscasters, nodding gravely and looking wise. But for all the warnings, the wise nods, the fedayeen broke out and the first bomb fell August 4th on Tel Aviv, the key log in the jam. Almost on reflex the rest followed, escalating to cover half the globe. On that day millions perished and during the days and months and years following millions more in a sick, maybe dying, world.

Wasn't he judging Chambertin harshly? Since Ellisen's own rise to power the Hesikastor had tried to reach him several times in vain.

Could the old man really have the gift of future sight? Was history just about to repeat itself, with he, Ellisen, a second Chambertin? Hadn't his rise to prominence in the World Council been through his shuttle diplomacy over rearmament? Ellisen returned to the parade before him, the Hesikastor now emerging after the war, long-haired and black-bearded now, a latterday saint on barefoot pilgrimage across the smoking cinders of Europe to give comfort where he could. Ragged survivors weeping, kissing his feet, clinging to the hem of his robe.

When Katz spoke suddenly, Ellisen started. "He pulled some of them together under the Balkans. Couple of thousand, they say." Katz cut and looked across the room to Ellisen, obviously awaiting his reaction. "Built quite a com-

plex I understand.”

It would be, that size. “With what?”

“Bootstraps. His people pooled their resources, dug a hole with their bare hands, and fitted it with scrap. And by barter.”

“*Barter?*”

“The old man swapped goods and services for—” Katz coughed. “Healing.”

“*Healing?*”

Katz restored the light. “That’s official, sir. The old guy has no credit, no known assets.”

No credit? It didn’t compute. Outside the system a man was nothing but a bundle of rags with the life expectancy of a dog. He’d have to call in Security after all. “I want him scanned, Katz. Get Pearson.”

“Er—”

“Now what?”

“Controller, if the man’s genuine, Security can’t handle it.”

“Alternative?”

“Psionics.”

“For God’s sake, Katz! Anyway, who’d be left in that field?”

“Nobody much. There was a Sturman, can’t track him down. Schiller’s gone. Wong’s almost: leukemia. I found a Tannis Ord over in Denver.”

“Any good?”

“There’re no credits, no publications, but he’d only just gotten going by ‘25. Bought the old Estralita silo in 2023. Set up his own center. The Psionics Institute of New Mexico.”

“In an old bomb silo?”

“Apparently.”

“You’re not saying he’s still there? Surely we requisitioned the place.”

“We did, sir.” Katz steepled his hands. “But it appears to have fallen between the cracks.”

“And so we never got around to using it. You’re not telling

me he's still down there?"

Katz shook his head. "He was posted to the Denver Hospice in '25. Shall I put in a call?"

"Let me think about it."

Alone, Ellisen pulled himself out of the armchair and went back to his desk. A moment later cold snowlight shone once again into the room, this time with sound: faint outdoor twitterings and the strident calls of Canada geese—recorded, the geese being long gone along with everything else out there larger than a cockroach. He remembered the far times his grandfather took him hunting, how he'd listened to those wild compelling cries and willed the birds away. Despite his secret, silent urgings, one by one the bodies exploded from the sky and his grandfather had sent him to gather the ragged bags of blood and feathers from out of the mud and bring them back to the hide.

August four, 2025: the first global atomic war.

Next stop: Armageddon.

How long before the prediction came true? Last time, it had been a little over six months. Prediction? Or lucky guess? Or plain coincidence? Believe the old man and the World Chair wasn't going to be much of a sinecure. He glanced to the chronister. Eleven thirty. Within the hour he'd be here. Pylar Fzhakian. *Hesikastor*. Spy? Or prophet? What would Ellisen say to him? How would their meeting go?

Eleven thirty! Fires of hell! He reached out to call Susann, set up a late lunch, but Katz buzzed again. "Chief M'boda, sir. On red." An authorized call this time, vectored through an eastern station, second-keyed, scrambled, and properly relayed.

After all the waiting, suddenly this was it. "Come."

Ellisen activated the miniature tri-co-beamer in his desk and at once the small lens slid up, already crammed with the vast bulk of an African of indeterminate age with shining blue-black face and gray grizzled hair.

M'boda leaned forward, eyes shining, obviously relishing the moment. Ellisen fought to keep his face still, his eyes from betraying to the man the importance of that moment to him. Far away beneath the mountains of Tanganyika the African took a wheezy breath.

Ellisen beat him to it. "President M'boda. Good to see you."

The man nodded, the flesh of his chin folding about his high white collar on the rebound. "Controller. It is my duty to inform you that the Emirates met two days ago." A chair creaked as M'boda clasped his hands on the desk before him. "There were hold-outs."

Silence. The squeak of Katz's shoes across the floor. "Right up until fifteen minutes ago six fiefdoms leaned to General Voltov."

So?

"But now we're all agreed. Controller, I'm happy to inform you that the Emirates are with you to a man. May I be the first to offer my congratulations."

Ellisen, aware of the adrenaline swamping his gut, allowed himself a slight nod. "I thank you. You'll of course keep it quiet until the twenty-fifth?"

M'boda's slab teeth gleamed white against full lips. "Count on it, Controller—or should I say, Mr Chairman?"

"Not yet, President M'boda. Not yet." The smile irritated him, with its claim to familiarity. It were almost as though the man had actually reached out and laid hand on him. A word or two more—after all, M'boda had just delivered the deciding vote and knew it—and Ellisen cut. For a moment he remained staring into the blank 'beamer, then leaned back and closed his eyes.

"Congratulations, sir."

"Yes." Ellisen stirred, looked up. All those months of dealing, making promises. Hoping, scheming. The adrenaline was gone, leaving him flat. He thought of Susann. He was

suddenly sorry he'd cut her off. Why had he done it? She'd gone with him so far, so long. The last few months must have been hard. The last few days, harder. As soon as Katz was gone, he'd call her in. No—the old man was due within the hour. Maybe he'd buzz her, set up a late lunch.

Katz rounded the desk on his way out, but before he reached the door the red light winked again on the sensor-band. Another signal code red. Ellisen looked to Katz, puzzled. After a second's hesitation, he opened the channel.

“Controller here.”

“Ellisen?” A gravel voice loud in the quiet, with the stridence of one used to shouting into lesser ears.

Stunned, Ellisen pressed visual and at once the lens filled with a square, solid face in a bare skull as squat as the shoulders it sat on, a gray stone ball on its gatepost. Hengst. “Controller, I offer my congratulations. I'll be discreet, of course, until after the fact. Then I shall look forward to celebrating your success. You'll come up I hope the week after the twenty-fifth, perhaps the twenty-eighth? Bring your wife. Stay a day or two, look around. Make a break for you before you take up the slack, eh? Until then, over and out.”

Ellisen cut, his eyes dark with shock and outrage. “Damn!” He jumped up. “The bastard!” The man had actually penetrated impossible atmospheric layers, bypassed the relay stations and directly accessed their cable line. How? *How?* And for how long?

Even Katz looked shaken.

Furling hell! Not only accessed, but broken the scrambler code. Hengst must know about Palo Alto as well. But not about Ord, though. Thank God they'd not called the man.

Katz made for the door. “I'll alert Ciphers and Communications, sir,” he said, without much conviction.

“Right away,” Ellisen said. “And chill the red line.” They couldn't call Ord now. If Ellisen wanted him, they'd have to pull him from Denver direct and unofficially. But how?

Ellisen subsided, stared out at the snowlocked mountain-side. A couple of hours before everything had seemed so secure, and now twice in as many hours there'd been a major breach in security. Bloody Hengst, playing God again and getting away with it. A fresh flood of adrenaline washed through him, rage-triggered this time. He remembered Eheim, took a deep breath, spread his hands out on the desk until the anger had subsided. MacAllister had also breached security, and he without Hengst's advantages. And MacAllister was on the side of the angels. Interesting.

His humor partly restored, he called Susann. No reply. Damn the woman. Never there when he wanted her. That wasn't fair. He'd hardly spoken to her the last four days, had even taken breakfast there in his study. He paged her. A minute later her voice came breathlessly over the intercom. "Darling? Sven and I were on the slingball court. Do you know, he's suddenly as tall as you are? I swear he's sprung an inch overnight."

"Susann? Susann, look: let's make lunch around two, okay?" Maybe, he thought, he'd tell her about M'boda's vote. "In here, all right?"

"There?" When she spoke again, her voice was guarded. "Did— Has—" Unexpectedly, she laughed. "Oh, all right," she said, and somehow, it was.

"Love you," he said, suddenly glad that he'd called her. Maybe after lunch they'd take time off together. Upstairs. Katz buzzed. "Sir: The Hesikastor's approaching now."

"Good. Go meet them."

Faintly excited, Ellisen deleted the winter scene, called out the entrance scanner, and the big screen caught the silver tail of a hopper descending under an already closing airlock port to the decontamination chamber. He counted out five minutes then switched to inside, watched the elevator doors open on the gleaming craft, watched it roll across into the shadows of the tiny service hangar opposite. The area was deserted,

secured from local personnel.

Beside the open hangar doors Katz waited in a small yellow cart for the hopper's two passengers.

For a moment, nothing, then shadowy figures emerged from the gloom of the hangar out into the bright, white, floodlit passage and moved toward the waiting cart.



CHAPTER TWO

12.27 Hours 19 September 2047
Bentnose Peak

There were not two passengers, but three. MacAllister, Fazhakian, and a girl in a thin white jumpsuit, loose blonde hair down to her middle, medium height, slight, even frail between the two men. Who was she? Where had she come from, and who'd given her permission to go along. Another strike for MacAllister, probably.

The man was big, big as Ellisen himself, topping the Hesikastor by a good two inches. He moved well, Ellisen noted, and—Ellisen watched him turn, hand first the girl into the cart to sit beside Katz, then the old man, to sit next to her, then climb himself into the empty backseat.

A gentleman radio rat. What do you make of that, Katz?

He watched the cart move off, the backs of the heads dwindle into the distance. The old man hadn't changed much as far as Ellisen could tell. He still had his beard, the long hair swept back behind his ears like vigorous wings, but now the black was gone to silver. His step was firm enough, though, and his back straight. How old was he? Ellisen wondered. It

was impossible to judge.

He got up, paced about. He looked toward the windows, then on a sudden thought crossed back to his desk. A touch of the sensorband and a live projection of the real early afternoon sun from up there flooded the room. How many times since he could remember had he gazed out through infinite light and space from the comfortable confines of that dark and solid window bay?

He turned away. Sometimes it worked, and he could almost believe that he was once again up on the mountain looking out through real glass panes, could almost feel the high winds shaking them as though to loose them from their anchorage to shatter them against the rocks below. But not now. The screens and the outside scanner projections were only what they were: surveillance tools subverted to comfort him with subtle sophistry.

He went to the fire, threw on a log. Not that it was cold. In fact the fire placed an unnecessary burden on the recycling system, but he liked it. The study had always felt cool, even in summer, and the hearth had seemed so gloomy unlit.

His back to the screen, he stood staring into the new, bright flames, rocking back and forth on his heels. He could have followed the cart's progress on the 'beamer, but now he was too restless. Strange, he'd not felt like this in a long while. As though he were waiting to greet distinguished guests at a dinner party instead of gearing himself up to conduct an interrogation. *Two* interrogations.

At last the door signal and Katz was ushering his party through.

Ellisen found himself walking over to greet them.

"Hesikastor." He shook the proffered hand, nodded to MacAllister.

"Glad to meet you at last, Controller." The old man's voice was unexpectedly mild with a rolling Russian accent. "Permit me to present Shira, my granddaughter."

Ellisen glanced to Katz. She'd not been in the files.

The girl looked up at him from under thick dark lashes—striking contrast with the hair as pale as Ellisen's own. The face was small, oval, with uptilted eyes and Slavic cheekbones. There was not a sign of a blemish on her, Ellisen noted. Or, come to think, on the old man either, apart from age's normal mottling.

To his amazement the girl made an abrupt curtsy. "How do you do."

Ellisen took a hold on himself. Waved them to the couch beside the hearth, sat himself down in his armchair opposite. Katz, without a word, took an upright chair to Ellisen's right hand.

The Hesikastor smiled. "Such an astounding feat, the complex, Mr. Controller. A credit to the Ellisen foresight and sense of responsibility."

Was the old man being sarcastic? Anti-Ellisen snipers had long made issue over the family's almost feudal relationship with nearby Ellistown. Was the old man referring to that, or to the refugees harbored behind the tunnel walls?

"And the house. To come through miles of permaplast to . . . this." The Hesikastor waved his hand about. "Mr. Katz told me how you brought the house down piece by piece. The sudden sight of a three-story mansion after the tunnels was . . . shocking."

Shocking? Again Ellisen felt the discomfort. Was the man complimenting him, or calling him extravagant? Moving the house hadn't been extravagant, not at the time, for the bombs hadn't gone off then, nor were ever expected to for the most part. And hadn't for full fifteen years after the shelter's completion. For fifteen years the house had nestled in its protective plastic bubble under the mountain like a giant art form in timber and stone. For fifteen years the complex of cells and tunnels had stood empty save for Ellisen's visits. For fifteen years the locals had called the gutted foundations up on the

mountain “Ellisen’s Folly.”

“If I had only known in ‘24 that the Ellisens were of like mind about the coming war,” the Hesikastor went on, “I’d have sought their help then.”

“You wouldn’t have had much joy,” Ellisen said. “Grandfather was too wrapped up in his lunar mining operation, and I was just a Capitol Hill cadet. The shelter was purely a family affair.”

“Pity, for had the war not happened your grandfather might not have lost his precious lunar mining rights to Mr. Hengst, is that not so?”

Ellisen didn’t like the sudden turn of conversation.

“All this empty space feels strange,” the girl said suddenly. “How many people live in here?”

“You mean the shelter? Or the house?”

“Both.” Her eyes were intent on him, unusual eyes, light brown, almost gold, like a cat’s.

“The complex outside houses a couple of hundred.” Ellisen paused. “The house remains for my family’s sole use. I assure you, there’s plenty of room for everyone out there. In fact, I only wish we could accommodate a greater number, “ he went on quickly. “But the life-support system won’t sustain any more. In fact already the population’s increased past the limit by five percent over the past fifteen years.”

Now why had he said all that? Since when did he have to justify himself? All over the place the wealthy survived comfortably in their small private shelters, whereas at least the Ellisens had taken the additional trouble to provide for their less fortunate neighbors during an era of high optimism when building shelters had been considered at best an eccentric indulgence, an unfashionable and expensive waste of time.

“The increase is good,” the old man said. “It speaks well for your system. Elsewhere the populations are failing. How do you do it?”

“I do nothing,” Ellisen said. “The place is run independent-

ly of the house by qualified professionals. All credit must go to them.”

The girl again. “Didn’t anybody transfer topside?”

“Where to?” Ellisen shrugged. “The domes fill faster than they come.”

“Do you have break-outs?”

“We did in the beginning, Miss Shira, along with everyone else. But not now.” After twenty-two years of living like a mole, people lost the urge to feel the sun and die. The in thing now was leukemia.

“Do your folk ever get out?” The girl was persistent.

“They do. There’s a shuttle roster to the Boston domes every month.”

The girl nodded, apparently satisfied.

“I guess we’re underneath the old garnet mine, Controller?” This from MacAllister.

“By a good half mile.”

“I hear your great-great-grandfather won Bent-nose Peak in a poker game, 1888, right?”

Ellisen eyed MacAllister sourly. It was right, all right. The legends were rife about his raunchy ancestor and that drunken poker game. But if the man knew that much, he certainly knew the rest.

Whose inquisition was this anyway? Ellisen turned to Katz. “I’ll speak with the Hesikastor now. Alone. Our other guests will take lunch out in the anteroom meanwhile.”

The girl snapped around to look at her grandfather. As though she’d actually spoken, the old man shook his head slightly. She took his arm and looked stubbornly across to Ellisen.

“Controller, I’ll stay.”

Ellisen forced a smile. “I’m sorry, Miss Shira. He won’t be long.”

The girl’s eyes went dark, angry, then just as suddenly her face cleared. She flipped back her long fair hair and stood up.

“Very well.”

MacAllister got to his feet after her and the pair of them followed Katz through the door.

Alone, Ellisen gestured toward the robocaddy standing beside the hearth. “A drink, Hesikastor?” Or was it too early?

“Thank you. A glass of water would be most welcome.”

Ellisen splashed iced water into a crystal goblet, handed it over, then sat. “You certainly got to me this time.”

“Desperate days call for desperate measures, Controller.”

“The data. How did you get it?”

The old man took a sip of water. “It came to me.”

“How?”

The Hesikastor tapped the glass to the side of his head. “In here.”

Ellisen leaned forward. “You mean you had a sort of vision?”

“Oh, yes. Just like before. Just like before. Do you know in ‘24, ‘25 I saw everything just as clearly as I’m seeing—things now. It’s going to be much worse this time, you know. There’ll be nothing left.”

Ellisen jumped up, crossed to the desk, took up the printout and dropped it into the Hesikastor’s lap. Then he stood over him, his back to the fire.

“Those numbers—you saw them written just like that?”

The irony was plain. But the Hesikastor only looked up mildly.

“Oh, no. No, I sorted them out afterward.”

“Then where did you see them?”

The old man’s voice came in a whisper. “Like last time. On the sides of the bombs.”

“You expect me to swallow that? Hesikastor, what do you want?”

“An end to the insanity, before it is too late.”

“If you’ve already seen the end, how can you change it?”

“I don’t know, but I believe it could be changed, somehow,

by some act of grace. Anyway, I can only try. I take my visions as warnings, you know. I have to believe that with effort and grace things can be changed. I didn't succeed last time, I know, and yet I cannot just stand by to watch the human race commit suicide. Even now . . . " He stopped, shaking his head.

"Even now, what?"

The old man sighed. "It may be too late. The life chain is broken, perhaps irrevocably. The ecology's gone wild. But this next letting will surely set the seal. Controller, if you have any wish at all to save this Earth you must heed me."

Ellisen looked down on the old man speculatively. Suppose, just suppose he were for real. My God! He sat down. *Armageddon*.

"When, Hesikastor?"

"Soon."

"Can you give me a date?"

"I'm afraid not."

"This year, maybe?"

The old man shot him an old-fashioned look. "Maybe."

Maybe. But where? The Big Powers were still thinking mere survival. If trouble lay anywhere it was down the central strip. The buffer zone. The so-called neutral chain of States separating East and West that had in fact triggered the horror of '25.

Very soon.

What to do?

The immediate answer would be to work to adjust the arms balance all the way down the buffer strip. Shore up the Emirates against the Zionists. Zultan against Old Iraq. How much, and where? The old man would have to feed him more data. *If* he proved genuine.

"This claim of yours, Hesikastor: you'll consent to verification?"

The Hesikastor nodded. "Yes, yes. But after verification

then what?"

"Excuse me?"

"Surely you have wondered why I have come to you?"

"I assume that you too have the matter of world survival at heart."

"Indeed. Controller, you are a powerful man. You could do so much. I have come to ask you work with me toward world disarmament."

Ellisen stood up. "Disarmament?" On his last election platform? "Be practical, Hesikastor. The world hasn't taken to it over the last two thousand years, it's certainly not going to now."

"Not after '25?"

"Especially not after '25. Everyone is scrambling for a better weapons system to prevent a repeat, and a better defense net to offset it."

"I beg you, Controller. Please at least consider the option."

The old man must think him crazy. "And commit political suicide? No, Hesikastor. No deal."

"Then how can I do work with you? Where you will call the nations to arms, I will urge them to lay their weapons down. I must."

The old man got up. Ellisen thought all of the data he might be taking away with him.

"I'm not for armament, exactly. Only redistribution. Perhaps we can still work together, Hesikastor."

"You think so?" The old man looked toward the door, which annoyed Ellisen immensely.

"Since we differ so radically I wonder you came to me at all."

"You were the one," the old man said simply. "It was you, or no one."

Startled, Ellisen looked into the old eyes, saw his grandfather twenty-two years before, his ruined face starting from his pillows. *Pitar, remember you're an Ellisen, and the*

Ellisens came over here to make their mark. Mine was Lunar Mining and now I've lost it. Get it back, my boy, and take that Hengst apart. It's you, or no one. The log, shifting in the hearth, flared into flame then subsided into smoking charcoal. Ellisen took up the tongs and resettled the log briskly on its cradle.

Armageddon.

He mustn't let the old man go.

"You'd permit verification then, Hesikastor?"

The old man set down his glass and stood up. "I am in your hands."

Ellisen rang for Katz.

Fires of hell, it was thirteen thirty hundred hours already and there was still the MacAllister fellow. He'd have to buzz Susann and make it dinner instead.

"Sit down." Ellisen nodded MacAllister onto the high-backed chair across the desk. MacAllister sat, loose yet wary, a mountain cat up in a noonday tree.

"Perhaps you'll now tell me exactly what happened this morning."

MacAllister's eyes went to the sensorband.

"Off the record. You have my word."

MacAllister nodded, apparently satisfied. "It was oh-five-forty two. My second was on his break, when the old guy arrived."

"How? How did he arrive?"

MacAllister's lids came up briefly. "I have no idea. The air-lock trig blew and there he was, just standing there. Dead center of the primary scanner."

MacAllister stopped, as though expecting comment.

"Go on."

"Which was strange, because none of the perimeter trigs had blown. And the hopper pad was empty. Anyway, there he was, looking straight into the eye as though he knew exactly

where it was.”

“His granddaughter with him?”

“Not that I could see then.”

“Where was your second all this time?”

“Still out. There was the old man in his tuxedo, looking like one of us. When I asked for the password he gave it, just like that.” MacAllister snapped his fingers. “Do you know it’s changed every watch, double blind? I opened up. That was when the girl zipped in.”

Ellisen nodded. “When they were down, what?”

“The old man showed me the data, asked me to get it to you urgently. When I saw what it was I did.”

“You recognized the material?”

A pause. “Call it a lucky guess, Controller.”

“MacAllister, you’ll please not play games with me.”

“I have some knowledge of Ciphers.”

“I see.” Ellisen let it go. “How did you know I was here?”

“The Hesikastor said so.”

“He’s a persuasive man.”

“Indeed he is.”

“How did you access my red line without a second key?”

The lids came up again. “You a radio rat, Controller?”

“No.”

“Then you wouldn’t know if I told you. But I’d be glad to talk to a Communications man, if you like.”

Ellisen refused to be rattled. “State your credentials, MacAllister.”

Another pause. “I had a Chair in Communications in ‘25. Edinburgh University, UK. My place of origin. I was before that a free-chartered Mercantile Space Pilot, First Class.” A brief sad smile. “Grounded by marriage. There was a Doctorate in Quantum Electronics, an associate Chair in Ciphers at Berkeley, and a research fellowship in Space Engineering with P.S.R.C.”

“You can verify all this?”

“Can you?”

Ellisen reached for Katz, remembered Eheim, took a deep breath and spread his fingers on the desk. “And so now you’re a class 8 radio rating in Palo Alto. How come?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“You’d better.”

“Controller, it’s personal. As to what I did today—I had to act fast. Make the right decision for you, for the old man, for—” He sighed. “For everybody.”

Ellisen stood up. “Drink, MacAllister?”

“What is there?”

“Name it.”

“Scotch. Double. Neat.”

Ellisen felt the man’s eyes on him as he went to the robo-caddy, poured a generous tumblerful, held it out. MacAllister padded across the wide room, took the glass and dropped onto his former place on the couch.

Ellisen mixed himself a Brown Lady—heavy on the rum, light on the kuva—and went to stand on the hearthrug. “Skol.”

“San Fairy Ann.” MacAllister raised his glass, but instead of drinking straight away, he swilled the Scotch around and around slowly, eyeing its amber currents against the warmth of the flames. “I’d almost forgotten,” he murmured. He took a deep, appreciative sniff, then a sip.

“MacAllister—” Ellisen checked himself. He was acting on impulse, something he’d not done for years. MacAllister was looking at him across the hearth, waiting. “You still fly a hopper?”

“You still ride a bike?”

Ellisen laughed. *Touché*. “I’m sending you to Denver. Fetch a party. The thing is, he won’t know you’re coming.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“My pleasure.”

Ellisen stood up, set down his glass, rang for Katz.

“Sir?”

“Have a hopper ready. And a flight log for Denver. Mr. MacAllister’s fetching Ord now.”

Katz looked from one to the other. “He need Security detail, sir?”

“Absolutely not. After this morning the right hand knoweth not what the left hand doth. Set up Security gear, Katz. And a hazer. You handle firearms, too, MacAllister, no doubt.”

MacAllister ducked his head slightly.

Katz went to the door, stood waiting for MacAllister to follow. MacAllister stood, peered into his glass, then reluctantly tossed back the remaining contents.

“Don’t worry, MacAllister, if all goes well, there’ll be more, and the time to enjoy it,” he said, and saw from MacAllister’s quick look that he’d said quite the wrong thing.

To Ellisen’s surprise, the man put out his hand. “I hope things turn out, Controller.”

Ellisen seized the waiting hand, pumped it hard, once. “So do I, MacAllister,” he said. “So do I.”

As the men crossed the room, Ellisen glanced to the chronometer. If Susann hadn’t yet eaten they’d maybe still make it. And even if she had, they might still make it. Upstairs.

Ellisen walked over to the intercom.

*16.00 Hours 19 September 2047
Bentnose Peak*

He lay on his back staring up at the beam and plaster ceiling. His neck ached, and his arm had gone to sleep but Susann lay curled in the crook of his elbow and he hadn’t the heart to shift her. He wiggled his feet to the end of the bed seeking a patch of cool sheet. Catching his movement, Susann stirred, murmured. He reached down, stroked her tousled

head. “You say something?”

She opened her eyes, looked up at him with dark brown eyes that turned down at the corners giving her a vulnerable look bordering on hurt. Irresistible. “I said, this sure beats slingball.”

He sat up, reached for the last of the burgundy.

She came up now and took her glass, the sheets slipping from her breasts. He reached out, cupped one of them lightly, and raised his glass. “To the future First Lady of Earth,” he said and drank.

“You don’t sound so thrilled.”

“I am really. I guess I’m tired. Susann—thanks for putting up with me. I’ve been a bastard at times.”

She put a finger to his lips. “Don’t. It’s been a rough. But we came through. As always.” She pulled away slightly, her eyes quizzing him. “Pitar, what now?”

He leaned back, closed his eyes, resting his glass on his chest. What indeed? How long before the world exploded once more into a mess of blood and feathers? This time there’d be nobody left to pick them up, if the old man was right.

Hengst was the key, ultimately. He was the one who dealt the cards. Who got what and when and how. The game was still between him and Hengst even though the rules must now change. If the old man was right, there’d be no time to take Hengst apart. They’d have to get to him some other way. And fast. But how? And with what?

“Pitar? The Hengst business. Are you still going for him?”

He looked down at her, his eyebrow raised. “Why?” She turned to face him. “Darling, if you do, don’t look back. Don’t get bogged down in a private vendetta. Your grandfather’s dead, and we’re alive and there’s a world at stake out there.”

Ellisen set his wine down, spilling the red onto the white linen cloth of the robocaddy. *Private vendetta*. If she only

knew. He almost told her then, that old Pylar Fazhakian was over in the guest wing. But God knows what that would bring about his ears. She'd want to meet him, the girl even. Because she, General Cleary's daughter, was as much against his armament platform as was the Hesikastor.

That's why the rift, why things had gotten so hard, only they didn't say as much, not in so many words. There weren't any left.

His mouth went tight. As if she were the only one who cared about the ecology.

The life chain's broken. The ecology's gone wild.

Ecology! How did you poison a dead man?

He shifted, angry at his thought, at Susann. The desire for her company was suddenly gone. He swung his legs to the floor.

"I have to go."

"Pitar!" The eyes were really hurt now. "You said we had until six."

"I know. But there's something I thought could wait that won't. I'll see you at dinner," he added, and reached for his liners.

"Pitar—something bad is happening to us."

He pulled on his navy jumpsuit, clipped the belt shut. "Don't be so melodramatic, Susann."

He turned to go.

"Why," she called after him, "are you going off like this?"

"Later, Susann," he said, and went downstairs.

CHAPTER SIX

TANNIS ORD

*20.20 Hours 27 September 2047
Bentnose Peak*

Ellisen stood . “If you’ll come this way, gentlemen . . . “
Ord left the security of the dinner table for the treacherous expanse of polished floor. The women had already withdrawn: Susann Ellisen and an Abigail Somebody or other whom Hengst had brought down with him, a Valkyrie of a woman head and shoulders above everybody save Ellisen.

Wishing now that he’d not drunk so much, he followed the rest: Ellisen, Hengst, and Katz, from the dining room, down passages, a flight of treacherous steps, across a hall into another wing—God, this place rambled—and there was the door to Ellisen’s study.

Thock. Whumph. Ord felt a fluttering in his ears.

Hengst stopped, square, squat, menacing as a dwarf star just inside the door. “We talk *now*, Ellisen?”

“Momentarily. Drink? Cigar?”

Ord’s eyes glazed. More drink?

He took the far corner of the couch beside the fire and watched the others clustered around the robocaddy. Hengst had selected a short, fat cigar from an antique humidor and

was busy clipping it. Ellisen handed the man a snifter, then poured a glass of something for the Gray Eminence. A small glass. Katz had drunk sparingly throughout the evening. Tiny sherry. One glass of white wine. A sip or two of port.

Ord wished he'd done the same, but it was too late now.

"Drink, Ord?"

"Oh, er."

Ord felt the blood flushing his face as Ellisen crossed over to him, bent down and handed him the snifter.

Carefully holding the brandy level, he watched Hengst, thick cigar in thick fist, make for the blue chintz armchair opposite, commandeering it as he no doubt commandeered everything else. It looked comfortable, well used. Ellisen's own, probably, and Ord bet Hengst knew it.

To Ord's amusement, Ellisen outmaneuvered him, moving to stand over him, wide-legged on the hearthrug. Hengst wouldn't like that. Rumor was that, spaceside, he went about on stilts.

Katz took a high-backed chair at a discreet distance from the fire, leaving Ord all alone on the wide couch.

"Well, Controller." Hengst blew out a cloud of fragrant smoke. "Perhaps now you'll tell me what this mystery is all about."

Ord looked from one to the other of the men expectantly.

Ellisen raised his brandy glass. "To our future alliance, Hengst."

Hengst frowned. "Alliance," he muttered. He drained his brandy and clapped it down on the hearth. "Now. To business."

"Okay." Ellisen took a sip from his glass, set it up on the mantleshelf. "I want to talk arms agreement, Hengst. I want to discuss who gets what and when."

"Go on."

"I'm proposing a trade."

"What? For what?"

"What I want for what you want."

Hengst squinted up through his cigar smoke. “What *I* want? How can you possibly know what I want?”

“For thirty years you’ve been probing space. Developing starships, building God-knows-what-sized fleet up there. And there it sits because after all this you haven’t yet found it any place to go. For all your miles of radio cable, Hengst, and your probes and your observatories you’ve found not one sign of what you’re looking for.”

Ellisen paused, then added quietly, “But I have.”

Hengst, cigar halfway to his mouth, looked up. “Really.”

“I have evidence of a planet, out in deep space, rich in natural resources just begging to be developed. I don’t want that planet. I want control of this one. Real, effective control, you know what I mean.”

Hengst nodded, barely. “This planet you’re talking of, Ellisen. I can’t imagine how you found it. What signals get down here go by me.”

“They certainly do. And did.”

Grunting, Hengst picked up his snifter and went to the robocaddy. He poured himself another brandy and sat down again.

“You say you have evidence of this place. You’ve obviously got it all prepared.”

“You want to see it?”

Hengst nodded.

The Gray One crossed to the far wall beside the curtained window bay. Windows? *Down there?* Ord watched him slide aside a wall panel revealing a sensorband, and, Ord’s eyes gleamed avariciously, a Hengst Supronix Mk 6 Tansjector, loaded with extras, including, oh glory, a holoverter.

Katz double-checked the setting, started the run. Ord watched him jealously. They were his signal strips. He should have been working the damn thing.

The lights cut in the room, but for the dim radiance of the sensorband and the glow from the fire.

The center of the room filled with stars. Ord stared,

entranced. The sight had been impressive enough on the TS. Through Ellisen's 'verter it was awesome.

The stars began to move. Ord barely refrained from ducking his head as the outer solar planets whizzed past him, then whoosh, he was rushing outward toward the stars. He closed his eyes, feeling dizzy. He couldn't watch the star tunnel on the TS. He certainly wasn't about to go through it via the 'verter.

When next he looked he was nearing the distant sun, and there they were, gliding into the wide parabolic turn. The disc appeared, got larger, and larger, until it was a huge sphere hanging in the center of the room, slowly turning on its axis.

"Earth," Hengst murmured, just as Ellisen had, then, "Hey, no!"

The man leaned forward, his forgotten cigar threatening to burn his fingers.

The strip slid on. What did Katz think about it all, Ord wondered. Did he see the beauty of it, or was it just data to be coded and filed?

Suddenly, there they were, from the viewpoint of the mountain looking out over the lake.

Though he'd been prepared for it, Ord ducked as the huge white bird swooped harshly from the beamed ceiling and faded into the floor.

Hengst looked up at Ellisen. "That is your planet?"

"It is."

Hengst looked thoughtful. "Where did you get the footage?"

"I'll tell you that when you've seen the rest," Ellisen said. "Katz?"

Katz kicked in the second sequence.

Like the Cheshire cat's grin the strange script hung disembodied in the air. A blink of an eye and there were the now familiar words red-encircled:

*3412: the 37th year in the 12th reign of the Gngangar Dynasty
Being the First Year of the Old Imperial Calendar . . .*

And there, at last, round and gleaming in the gloom, the huge domes high in the mountains, behind the great wooden gate. An exclamation from Hengst but Ord ignored him, and Ellisen, the lot of them. Fascinated, he watched as though he'd never seen the stuff before. Such a difference the 'verter made, he didn't want to miss a single second of it.

"Most interesting," Hengst said when it was over. He threw his dead cigar tip into the fire. "I like it. Now will you tell me where you got that stuff?" Ellisen thrust his hands deep into his jumpsuit pockets.

"Absolutely. A few days ago, I had a call from Pylar Fazhakian—"

"Palo Alto! Good God, Ellisen, that's it?"

Ellisen looked annoyed. "It is."

Hengst waved a fist toward the middle of the room. "He's behind this? I can't believe it." Hengst uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. "Listen: if you're basing your offer on that man, forget it."

"Just a minute, Hengst." Ellisen raised a hand. "I'm not here to waste our time. I can authenticate everything you've just seen."

Hengst smiled up at him coldly. "Mysterious signals that get by my detectors up there. Fancy hologram dreams of a self-styled prophet. I can't buy it, Ellisen."

"The signals that produced those images got by you because you're not equipped to pick them up. They aren't radio in nature, but psionic."

Momentarily, Hengst looked startled. Then he reached for his glass. "I'd like to see you prove that, I really would."

"You shall. Dr. Ord?"

Ord's middle dissolved and his hands sprang moisture. Here was what he'd been dreading. The reason he'd drunk too much. Now when he needed it, the effect of the liquor had worn off, leaving him alone and scared.

Ellisen and Hengst facing off with him in the middle. Should he stand? He tested his knees and decided not.

Ellisen stirred impatiently. "I introduced Dr. Ord at dinner as an aide, Hengst. Actually, he's a psionist. Go ahead, Ord."

Ord sat up. "Mr. Hengst, several days ago, Mr. Ellisen sent for me. He said that the Hesikastor claimed to have had certain visions. He was very skeptical of the visions, yet in view of their content, he couldn't afford to overlook them entirely. So he asked me to verify them. This I did, and I'd like to show you the result."

Hengst frowned. "More pictures?"

"They establish the Hesikastor's credibility beyond reasonable doubt."

Hengst's frown deepened. "How?"

"They contain highly classified material, too much for one man to get even were he a master spy. I think you'll agree, sir, that espionage is not Mr. Fazhakian's forte."

Hengst was plainly not amused. Ord ran his hand over his scalp, appealing to Ellisen for support.

Ellisen stayed where he was.

"Very well." Hengst leaned back again and crossed his thighs. "I'll see this material."

A nod to Katz and the center of the room filled with mountains under lowering cloud. Strip one. Pan-American missile complexes. Sino-Soviet complexes. Then the bombs.

Hengst would recognize them, every one. After all, he'd made the things and shipped them out.

Ord all but cried out as the ancient Z52 swooped like a bloody great Boanerges past his ear to disappear into the hearth in a streak of black and yellow tail band. Chemical code sign, Suk had told him, though God knows she knew.

Ord fought the urge to turn his head away. The number of times he'd watched this stuff over the past few days, he had it pat. Sick, Suk had called him. But after the initial shock, he'd felt numb. Impressed, but quite unable to connect it with reality. Now here in the hologram it was real all right. So real that he couldn't stand it.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

"I see what you mean," he heard Hengst say at last. "The details are incredibly accurate. How did you do it?"

Ord opened his eyes. It was over. The Doomsday hologram was done.

"Tell him, Ord," Ellisen said.

"I took the images direct from the Hesikastor's mind, sir."

"Be more plain."

"With my synergizer, sir."

Hengst eyed him intently. "Synergizer?"

Ord felt a little surge of excitement. The man, with his hi-tech monopoly, was in for a surprise.

"It's a device that transduces mental and psionic signals into the physical mode, sir."

"Oh. Another Sturnman's imagector. It didn't work."

"Sturnman didn't go far enough, Mr. Hengst."

"You reckon."

"I know, sir."

"I see. Well, I'm open to persuasion." Hengst spread his squat square hands. "I bought Sturnman out in '24. Still have the blueprints."

Sturnman's collateral. Poor sod. The man must have gone bust.

"Ord, I'm interested," Hengst said. "Carry on."

Ord described the preliminary tests, the Hesikastor's rising psi energy, the sudden flashes, the Hesikastor's death and revival. "When we slowed the impulses on the strips and decoded the recording, sir, we had about eighteen hours worth of material. Snips of his life, his career. Data on Earth."

"The dying man's last moments."

"Not exactly. The data was extracted by an outside agent, and so fast that it killed him."

Hengst's heavy brows came up. "How could you possibly know that?"

"We couldn't, not at first. It was a hunch based on the evi-

dence. But a good one. Mr. Hengst: the man died. We were unable to resuscitate him. Whoever killed him *restored him whole*. Within an hour of his death, the Hesikastor's vital signs had returned to normal."

Hengst nodded. "And the star trips?"

"The first one immediately followed his revival. The second transmission came early the following morning. Each time the Hesikastor exhibited no distress. The speed of the incoming signals, you notice, had now been adjusted to his psi rate.

"And the incoming data? Your opinion on that?"

"We believe that the Hesikastor has been scanned for information. And that whoever scanned him is now reciprocating."

"Ah, yes. Those star charts." Hengst turned his attention back to Ellisen. "You said you knew exactly where the planet was."

Ellisen rocked forward on his heels. "Yes."

"I see."

Ellisen stopped rocking, stood quite still on the hearthrug. Ord held his breath.

Hengst swished the last of his brandy around inside the glass, stared down into the bowl.

"Of course, I'd have to see the old man."

"Of course."

Hengst's head came up. "There is one thing. Those iron-heads couldn't build a hay cart, let alone mount a caper of this magnitude."

"They didn't," Ellisen said quickly. "There's nobody left on Phrynis now."

Hengst looked from Ord to Ellisen. "Phrynis?"

"The planet."

"Oh. *Phrynis*. What happened to everybody? To the cities, the buildings? The gate?"

And the domes, you greedy bastard, the domes, thought Ord, catching the glint in the man's eyes.

“According to the charts they beamed us, they’re long extinct.”

“Extinct?” Hengst eyed Ellisen narrowly. “Then who’s sending the signals?”

“An automatic beacon triggered by psi energy focused to the right level. Ord, you explain.”

Ord cleared his throat. “It seems that the synergizer somehow boosted the Hesikastor’s psi power, sir. I don’t know how. It’s done it with no one else.”

“I see.” Hengst stared past Ellisen into the fire. “It’s certainly feasible.” He looked up. “I wonder why? Why the beacon? Why the exchange?”

Ellisen smiled, relaxing a little, Ord thought. “We don’t know, yet. I’ll bring Fazhakian in tomorrow morning. Let you talk to him yourself.”

“No,” Hengst said. “I’ll go to him. See him in action. Look at this synergizer.”

Ord’s breath caught. He felt threatened. The man couldn’t take it from him, could he? Ellisen wouldn’t sell him out as he was selling the old man?

Panic made him brave.

“Actually, sir, the plant’s pretty well outdated now.” He glanced across to the window wall. “Just a small screen. Nothing like this.”

“Oh?” Hengst’s heavy eyebrows came up. He turned to Ellisen. “Then we’d better take a ‘verter with us, eh, Ellisen? You got somebody to patch it in, Ord?”

Ord bobbed his head. “No problem, sir.” Ord didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. In trying to put Hengst off, he’d only gotten himself updated.

“I don’t suppose you’ll say where he is, Ellisen?”

Ellisen’s smile broadened. “Sorry, Hengst. You’ll have to go blind. Leave aside your tracer and take us on trust.”

Ord winced inwardly. All that smiling didn’t fool him. There was bad blood between those two. He remembered Ellisen’s laugh as he’d held the Ellisen Lunar Mining Shares.

Hengst had taken the Ellisens to the cleaners after the war, as he'd taken everybody else up there. It must hurt for someone to rook you then have to stand aside to watch them get fat on the pickings. God knew he'd feel the same if somebody took his silo. Or his baby.

Hengst gripped the arms of the chair and planted his feet square. "Very well. I'll put a call in spaceside to warn them I'm going to earth for a while, as it were." He hauled himself up. "My God, man, I'm looking forward to this jaunt."

Ellisen led the way to the door.

Ord belatedly stood up to follow them. He hadn't missed Ellisen's glance as he'd left the hearth. Ord had done fine. So far.

He hadn't missed the greed in Hengst's eye, either. There wasn't a thing in that man's life that he'd wanted and not gotten in the end.

Some deal this was in the offing. Top level shenanigans and his, Ord's future somehow riding on it.

He'd better come through.

*09.34 28 September 2047
Estralita*

Ord stood nervously by the couch. God! If anything should blow now! And he didn't just mean the synergizer, either. The air in that small place was loaded.

Ellisen was a smooth one, Ord had to give him that. The way he'd brought those two together. Hengst was thinking of cooperating over the arms situation, he'd told Fazhakian. Such a look the old man had given him. He hadn't been fooled, Ord would swear, but he'd said nothing. Only kept his own council and gotten up onto the couch.

Shira had read pretty well, though. If looks could have killed, the lab would look like Hamlet act five scene two by now.

Then there was Suk.

I hate that man . . . and I hate you for helping him. . . .

The sweat was running now. He ran his hands down his jumpsuit.

As if the place weren't crammed enough. The old man on the couch. Shira beside him. Suk, her face a tight little Oriental mask. Prosser by the wall. Hengst with Ellisen just inside the door. MacAllister back of them, with Katz, leaving the floor space clear for the hologram.

Ord couldn't help a small tinge of excitement at the thought. All this time using a tri-di-corder and never being able to see its true results until now. The TS was still operating, of course, but whatever came through today would be there, in its full roundness, filling the lab.

Ellisen waved him on. "Go ahead, Ord."

Ord crossed his fingers and set the headband on Fzhakian's brow.

"We'll warm up," he said. "Go through a check routine we use to establish the subject's norm. Hesikastor, if you will, I'd like you to visualize a black circ—"

That was as far as he got before the TS cut out.

But this time Ord didn't panic. Instead he looked to the psimeter, saw the green flowing, rising with beautiful geometric symmetry.

Gradually, as though one's eyes were adjusting to darkness, the black of the TS changed to the dimness of a dark paneled chamber, the walls of which were . . . Ord blinked and looked again . . . hung with rich tapestries.

The lab filled with shapes and shadows.

A bedchamber.

God.

In the middle of that bedchamber stood a gigantic bed thick with furs and in the middle of that two naked figures, a young man and woman, were doing what came naturally with a fierce energy that made Ord's crotch tighten. The young man rolled aside, said something into the girl's ear. She, laughing, replied. Her voice was high and clear. Her accents were

harsh, yet slightly rounded in the long vowels. But most of the words were familiar enough.

“The Gurnyac krudt is like Adiga’s well: the faster it’s drawn, the faster it fills!”

Hengst laughed.

“They speak *English* on Phrynis?”

“The signals reach the Hesikastor’s mind inchoate, sir. He must be forming them into English for our benefit. I’m sure he could just as well put through in Armenian or Russian or any other language he speaks.”

The bodies rolled, thrashed, and lay back at last side by side, spent.

Oh, God. That would have the same in any language.

Nobody moved. Nobody spoke.

The man’s body shone coppery-green in the dim lamplight. His flesh was firm, tight-stretched over high wide cheekbones, beaked nose and brow, and Ord could see clearly the slate sharp angle of the jaw under the richness of blue-black beard.

He was tall, very tall. Proud. Arrogant. He’d strut high, strong, light on his feet, like a stag. Beside him all of them there in the lab were traveling salesmen, even the Viking. Even MacAllister.

A god, he was. An Apollo. An *alien* Apollo, for alien he undoubtedly was, for all his earthy appetite.

The woman, too, had that same alien *feel* in spite of her Reubens body. Ord stared at her mouth. So ripe and red even in that dim light, swollen from the kissing. Inside her tongue would be soft and wet and inviting.

Hengst laughed again.

“Earth’s greatest moment and what do we get?”

There came a heavy thud from somewhere outside the chamber walls, startling Ord as much as it did the young man on the bed.

The young man raised his head slightly, a young stag sniffing the wind. Then, grunting, he reluctantly rolled over, and turned on them a cold blue eye. . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Torc came up too fast. Puffballs of pain swelled and burst in his head. Had he heard the sound, or only imagined it?

Naked, he crawled away from the damp warm body curled beside him and fell cursing to the floor. Served him right for drinking too much wine again. He picked himself up and stumbled over polished flagstones to the far wall.

There came a scratching now, then a second thump as something hit the paneling from the other side.

He needed more light.

He made the casement, wrestled back thick harpile drapes but no light came. Cloud had gathered while he slept, smothering bright, full Ao.

He bumped around bulky chests, the stand holding his white pilgrim clothes, to collide at last with the small table on which stood the lamp, on the lowest setting.

He turned it up too fast, squeezed his eyes shut in pain and turned it back low. He looked, blinking, to the bed. Tanna's flesh glowed in the dimness. She lay on her back, legs splayed, arms outflung: the swell of breast and belly glistening smooth as the dunes of Pruth. One long leg was straight,

the other, bent up and out, the dark between the curve of thighs shadowy, inviting.

He seized the lamp, took down a blade from the wall, unsheathed it and moved back to where he'd heard the noise. There, he raised the arras masking the length of the wall and pressed a knot in the wainscoting. At once a panel swung out, shoulder high, revealing a dark glory hole beyond.

A youth, enough like Torc to be his brother, fell across the sill, his blood spilling over the flagstones.

“Aravac!”

Torc threw his sword aside and squatted to raise him, cradling the bloody head against his chest.

Aravac's eyes opened, barely, not blue now but dark—black, through the slits. The mouth moved. Blood came out, more blood, warm and thick against Torc's flesh, rich red and shiny as the wine they'd glutted themselves on at the farewell feast but an hour before.

“What is it, Aravac? Answer me!”

Torc looked around the chamber. He must stop the blood. He looked across to the bed. Tanna hadn't moved, curse her for a stupid fallowella. He called out, as loudly as he dared without waking those keeping vigil in the outer chambers. “Tanna! Tanna—wake up, I say!”

No response.

Torc's arms tightened. Aravac was dying. The thought moved him strangely, for all the deaths he'd witnessed by the sword.

“Aravac! Who did this? Tell me, and he shall pay!”

Still no response.

Torc tried to think. After supper, Aravac had been going back to his chambers. To meet a certain fallowella, he'd said. But here he was, fully dressed. He'd never gotten there.

Could he have been taken up some sudden private quarrel?

Torc shook his head. No one in all the citadel would dare to raise his hand against a friend of the crown prince, even with

just grievance. Neither would Aravac have used Torc's secret back door unless . . .

Torc's eyes narrowed. Had he been right? Was danger come here, into the very citadel, from the Weald? He'd asked Aravac to keep an eye out.

Oh, the blood. He must stop it somehow.

Before he could move, Aravac's eyes opened wide, their whites crazed with blood. He saw Torc, seemed to recognize him. He tried again to speak, but a rush of foam choked the words.

"Aravac—!"

Aravac went limp in Torc's arms.

On a sudden thought, Torc glanced up at the gaping glory hole. Was he, Torc in danger now? Could Aravac have led his assassin to Torc's secret back door?

Torc laid Aravac down and peered through the glory hole into the darkness of the tunnel beyond.

No. Whoever had done this to Aravac must surely be dead, or dying, for Aravac would never risk leading another to him.

What to do now? Get rid of Tanna, then give the alarm, of course—and that was surely going to mean trouble!

He ran to the bed and shook the sleeping girl. "Tanna! Tanna—get dressed, I say!"

For a moment, she looked dazed, then she focused on his bloodied chest.

"Highness!"

Torc snatched up her dress from the floor beside the bed and threw it at her. "Out. Hurry!"

She slipped it on, pulled it down, and fumbled the laces, then felt around for her shoes.

"Get to your bed—and keep your mouth shut or it will go ill with you, you hear?" He marched her over to the open panel.

She caught her breath before the glory hole.

"Aravac! 'Tis the lord Aravac! What have you—"

“I said,” he snapped savagely, “keep your mouth shut!” He made to push her over the sill.

“But Torc, Highness—” Tanna clung to the edge of the lintel.

Torc’s fingers dug into her shoulder. “Go,” he said, then relenting, he released her, and crossing the floor, took up a second lamp in order to light her way along the low crooked passage to the outer panel that opened onto the gallery behind his chambers.

He thrust the lamp at her.

“Here,” he said, but Tanna was bending over Aravac. “Wait. See: his hand.”

Torc looked down. The barest tip of what was unmistakably a shuktek protruded from the rigid fist. Now why hadn’t he seen that? Frowning, he bent to retrieve it, but his head throbbed with the sudden movement, and for a moment everything went dark. Tanna caught him, steadied him, and by the time his head cleared he found her squatting beside him, examining the stick closely.

Strangely stirred, he snatched it from her and laid it on his palm. He’d been right. Danger was come to the very citadel, and Aravac had found it! He frowned, looking down.

Like all shukteks it was roughly the shape and size of a small knife, but unlike any he’d ever seen it was crude and unpolished.

He ran his finger along the straight edge, picked up a splinter. The other edge was notched in the usual way.

“What is it, Torc?”

Ignoring her, he continued to stare down at it thoughtfully. He knew what it was, all right, but it was not a fallowella’s place to know of such things, it being a ritual summons to a meeting less than public. Called to no good purpose, that Aravac should die holding it. Called by whom? Where, and when? He fingered the notches, some deeply indented, some small as the teeth of a wember leaf. There the answer lay. But

only for those privy to the call.

One good thing might come of all this: with luck, he might not go to Rm after all. If Gurnyac were threatened, surely the crown prince belonged at home.

He would see his father, now. Take the shuktek to him, make his case. But first he must get rid of Tanna.

He stood to pull her upright, but in that moment Tanna reached out, took Aravac's other hand, and prising open the fingers, let fall a heavy gold coin.

Torc snatched it up and held it to the light.

It bore his father's head on one side, and on the other the royal Gnangar crest. A thousand gosheng piece, a small fortune—even for Torc.

That clinched it.

He seized Tanna, drew her up, and thrust the lamp into her hand.

“Get back to my mother's chambers, and if you breathe one word of what you've seen this night, your head will hang by the Great Gate and your tongue beside it. Now—go!”

He pushed her through into the darkness and closed the panel door.

“**B**ut, Highness—the king sleeps. You know as well as I that one may not disturb him now.”

Torc blew fiercely, beat his fist on his palm. It had been easy passing the guards compared to this.

“Gense,” he said, glaring down on the old man, “I must speak with Sharroc. Wake him—at once.”

Old Gense shook his shaggy locks, pulled on his tousled beard. Torc could well guess what the old gont was thinking.

“I'm not drunk, Gense. I'm deadly serious,”

Still Gense eyed him doubtfully.

Torc barely forbore from seizing the old man's beard and swinging him around by it. But that would only bring the guards running. He put his mouth close to the old man's ear.

“I swear to you, upon my mother’s life and honor, that if you do not wake the king now you’ll live to regret it—barely.” He fingered the scabbard at his side—a tactical error.

“And since when did even the king’s own son think to go before him bearing arms?” the old man cried.

“I wore it through the citadel as self-protection, only.” Torc unbuckled his sword, threw it at the old man. “Now—admit me to the king!”

“Protection?”

Gense, staggering a little from the impact, set the weapon aside, went to the king’s bedchamber door and spoke softly into the lock.

There was the sound of bolts sliding back, and a key grinding, then the door opened and he disappeared from view.

A moment later, he emerged, shaking his head, and beckoned to Torc.

“You’d better make good your word, Highness,” he muttered, “or prince and steward alike—both our heads will on the morrow mark the Great Gate.”

King Sharroc, his grizzled hair caught in a nightcap, filled the boot-chair; his feet, slippered, were propped up on a stool.

How ghastly he looked in the blue agria flare. His face was blotched and yellow, his pale eyes sunken and bloodshot; his jowls hung flaccid as an old adahi’s.

Yet, thought Torc, they say I am now as he was when he became of age. Will I therefore one day look like that?

At Sharroc’s beckoning, Torc advanced, flanked by the chamber guards.

His father eyed him up and down, taking in his yesterday’s clothes, grease-stained and wine-soaked from the feast, that he’d torn off and tossed aside in his haste to mount Tanna. He’d had to shake them out and put them back on. It had been either that or put on his pilgrim’s gear—short of rousting out

the vigil-keepers guarding his ante-chamber to find him a new suiting, and that would never have done! Oh, whatever the old gont thought, he'd think again, soon enough.

"If this is some wine-begotten joke you'll go to Rm with something to last you your whole stay!"

"No, Father, I swear—"

"State your business."

"Only, Father, when we're alone."

The king's mouth tightened. Torc waited for the usual rush of rage, but instead, the king nodded the guards—and Gense—outside.

The moment the door closed, Torc knelt by his father's stool, pulled the shuktek and the gosheng piece from his pouch, and held them out.

His father took them, examined them much as he himself had done, then looked up. "Well?"

Torc told him what had happened, without mentioning Tanna, or his back door.

"Where is Aravac now?"

"In my chamber still, father."

"And your vigil keepers—they brought you here?"

Torc shook his head.

"I came alone."

"You came alone?" His father leaned back, his eyes narrowed. "You mean to say that they let that boy pass through to you, then they let you out—*alone*?"

Torc swallowed. "They heard nothing, Father. They—"

He stopped.

"You mean he came through the back way? You told him about the glory hole?" Sharroc actually stood up. "When you became crown prince, when you moved into those chambers and I showed you that secret way, what did I tell you? Answer me, boy!"

His father's face went a deep, dark red.

"That—that my life may depend on it some day," Torc

mumbled, looking down.

“Say it again, say it aloud!” his father cried.

Torc forced himself to look up. “My life may depend on it,” he said, loud enough to placate his father, not so loud that he’d be accused of impudence, or worse.

Sharroc sat down again with a grunt. “Do you know I didn’t even tell Brac and Feric,” his father said, quietly now. “As close as we were when I became crown prince. But then you haven’t half the sense that I had, I’ve known that all along.” He looked up from under his brows. “Who else have you told?”

“No one, no one at all,” Torc said quickly, too quickly, maybe, to fool the old gont, but Tanna surely didn’t count.

“Humph, so you say.” His father pulled his robe about him. “Well now. Your young friend came in on you, woke you, and bled all over your floor. Pity he couldn’t have chosen another night, boy. You need your rest. You’ve a big day ahead of you tomorrow. A nuisance, but a matter for the king? Perhaps you’ll explain why you had to bother me with it. With these.”

Sharroc held up the coin and the shuktek.

“They were in Aravac’s hand.”

Sharroc wagged the stick at Torc like an admonishing finger. “You’re sure that you weren’t gambling in your chamber, boy? You’re sure that Aravac lies not dead of a certain hot blade? And that these are not from a gambling tryst? It’s not the first time you’ve killed in wine-anger, boy. And over a lost wager.”

“I swear, sire—” Torc’s headache was coming back.

“Start again, Torc. Tell the truth this time.”

“Aravac came to me—”

“Bleeding all over your glory hole—”

Torc took courage, repeated his tale—minus Tanna. “And so here I am. Father, I am sure that Aravac was trying to warn me—someone in the citadel is working to no good end,” he said, but Sharroc only looked as skeptical as ever.

Torc lost his patience.

“What if it is to do with the riots in the Weald? What if the melks are bringing insurrection through our very own gates? If we ignore these things, then Aravac died in vain!”

Sharroc waved the shuktek between them. “Many like these were indeed taken in the Weald, and some may even have found their way here as souvenirs.” Sharroc peered up at Torc from under his eyebrows. “But their owners are gutted and their heads, poled. The trouble’s over, the Brandhouses are purged, and there’s an end of it. As for you—whatever hot-headed nonsense that went sour on you—we can’t afford a scandal on the eve of your pilgrimage. Have Aravac removed and get some sleep. You’ve a long journey tomorrow.”

Torc stood up. “I beg leave, sire, not to go.”

Anger flared in the king’s eyes then. “*Now* I see. This has all been but a ruse to keep yourself at home.”

Torc started back, truly stung.

“Father! You think for that my friend lies dead?” As near to friend as any Gngangar was like to have. “For a *ruse*? I beg you, at least defer this . . . farce until the throne is truly secure!”

Stiff with rage, Sharroc stood up again, and this time, Torc stepped back. “Are you suggesting, *fratling*, that the king can’t manage his own affairs? Do you dare come in here, disturbing our sleep, demanding that you *not go*! Since the first Gngangar king, the royal heir has gone to Rm on his coming of age. Not a day before, not a day late. Who are you, eh, that you’re exempt? Without his proving in the holy city the king is but a man like all the rest. Already the people line the streets to see their next king ride the route that will render him a demigod. What—shall you stand out there and tell *them* that you’ll not go?” He lowered his voice. “Farce or no—and that’s not for you to say—of course you’ll go tomorrow against a thousand conspiracies, and there’s an end to it.”

Before Torc could speak another word, Sharroc rang the

bell at his side and at once the guard—and Gense—reappeared.

One would think, Torc thought sourly, looking back as Gense helped his father back into bed, that they'd been listening at the door.

“By your leave,” he called over his shoulder, but Sharroc didn't even look his way.