

Passages from "The Cathedral"

Translated from the Polish by Michael Kandel

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So, then: the Cathedral. It's enormous, magnificent. You exit the biosphere lock, and you see it before you, above you, a ragged shadow against the stars. Light is needed for you to take in the architecture, but there is no light, for Lévie is distant now and Madeleine not yet close enough. Through the long period of the cosmic interhelium, the Cathedral is above all other things a Mystery. From the lock to the main portal a crooked track runs down the crater slope along a path cut into the cold stone. You descend with the required safety line clipped to your belt by the robot that mans the outer gate. Typically the descending visitor, curious, will switch on the powerful lamp of his suit. But the lamp's white finger can touch only separate spots of the edifice, moving from one to the other--here, there--like a feeble probe across an outer skin. It is difficult to keep the beam on the same point as one approaches, so the visitor stops, gawks, gropes with his pencil of light over the creation in rock. Covering the distance from the biosphere (two hundred meters) in this way can take an hour. It took me an hour. Father Mirton was

waiting at the tomb, not surprised, as he told me later: some sit down on the slope and fall into a kind of trance, wakened only by their suit alarm. I can believe it. The Cathedral is not a building, it's a sculpture. Not a sculpture either. Ugerzo, ordering this version of crysthorn, knew that what was planted here would be planted for no common purpose, that the Cathedral's function would be insignificant alongside what it evoked. One function only was specified: the tomb of Izmir and the altar. They are inside, enclosed in their own minibiosphere--for them a place must be kept intact, and access maintained for the faithful. The rest was left to the imagination of the designers and to the growth's ergodic algorithms. The sowing filled the circle around the tomb, some four hundred square meters. In the near weightlessness of the asteroid, the crysthorn has shot to a height of almost a quarter of a kilometer. From the lock of the crater biosphere one sees a hyperboloid corpus with crooked wings outspread, curved ribs in the middle. On the flanks are asymmetric towers topped with stone that sprouts jagged leaves, as if frozen in place by blackest vacuum at the moment of its explosion into carbon shrapnel. The form speaks of the flight of the soul, which to reach the starry void must tear itself, in agonizing pain, from the chains of matter. When the light begins to trace a profile here, an edge, a break, a rib of a cupola--sharp detail emerges from the gloom, a cluster of hard shadows, and the eye is pulled into a spiral, no end to the detail, the fractal nature of the crysthorn making self-similar shards of every shape, and the viewer is lost. Around the towers, stairways out of Escher soar to stop-motion frames of death, at a certain angle it looks almost like a path a

human being could take, but when the light takes in a larger piece of the Cathedral, you see that it would have to be a spider, not a man, and that even a spider could not reach there. Because of the asymmetry of the towers, all this openwork of the crysthorn appears to tilt toward the crater, toward the observer, and to the right. Meanwhile the deceptive, recursive algorithms responsible for the outer surfaces of the main nave make you think that you are watching the last, dying stage of the building--as if some tumor of stone were rankling within--and that very soon, in a day, maybe two, it will sink and fall into itself, rotten through: the tapering ribs will collapse beneath the weight of tortured rock; the spine, topped with a cross, will plunge into the dimness of the internal organs; and from between the jaws of the jutting portal will flow a slow avalanche of the Cathedral's brittle blood. The form speaks of the torment of dying alone, of the frailty of matter, whose doubts poison the unseen soul. And if you turn off your lamp and sit there for a moment on the slope, or maybe hesitate a while, with a step forward, back, by the safety line--the eye's hungry pupil might catch a ray or two of light coming from the high mass of shadow. Starlight pierces the Cathedral. It has no walls or roof, after all, they are not necessary to it as a building--indeed, this is not a building--and the transparent dome that covers the tomb of Izmir and the altar performs the functions of walls and roof itself. We are not dealing here with an ergonomic thing. The interior is not empty, filled with, though no human being will see it, the same mystery of crysthorn metamorphosis that has carved the parts visible to us. So at certain times certain stars send their light through

the Cathedral. The observer descending the slope registers flashes of light in that gigantic stain of darkness, very like signals of decay in a vacuum chamber: tiny firings, now and then, from nothingness. Then you enter the shade of the portal, frozen waves close around you like curtains, like a thicket of iron bushes, you wade through the waters of a lake of pain. A turn, a light--and you are standing before the tomb.

(...)

Madeleine was in view. Even inside the Cathedral, inside its biostasis, the rays of rich purple penetrated. I had been waiting for Gazma half an hour now. I took off my suit and set it in the first pew, beside the helmet. I prayed awhile. Still no sign of Gazma. I lifted my head without thinking and began to study the intersecting innards of the Cathedral. The feeling was not as strong as Mirton said, but I too had the conviction, every so often, that someone, Gazma, was watching me from that high labyrinth of shadows. I went to the edge of the biobubble to take a closer look at the crysthorn stone. The sculpting was highly complex, one pattern shifted into another, and the geometry of congruent figures kept drawing the eye away from the light. It was not sculpture, of course, since no one had hewn and worked this stone of the Horn. The form, commencing from the first seeds, had eaten into the asteroid's cold ground and heaved in a wave of nanotransformations until, particle by particle, there rose here the memorial of Ugerzo's gratitude. But how much can be contained in a seed's starting algorithms, in an architectonic

code of crysthorn? The face--it was definitely a face--and the silhouette, and the meniscus of stone, and the overhang of eyeless skulls, and the upper intestinal cortege on the string of darkness stretched taut across the loins of the Cathedral, a cortege of gaunt figures, a processional dance of alien skeletons--surely all this could not have been provided by the code of an initiating seed. I don't know the specs, but it seems unlikely that the planners had written into the seeds the future position of every piece of Izmir mineral, ergodic autoprogramming doesn't work that way, one must leave room for chaos. So if it wasn't the hand of the planners, whose hand was it? Whose was the talent behind this carving? Who gave grace to the fragile angels, put blood lust in the brows of the stalagmite demons, framed the illusion of refractive flow through the Cathedral's epithelium? Who was the author of this masterpiece? I decided I should read more on nanogenerative technologies.

From a pew I climbed up on a bony ledge of one of the Cathedral's curved ribs. Here, in the middle of the main nave, from the surface of the stone--as through a thick membrane deforming their features--heads of normal size emerge, peer out. Shadows gently cross their foreheads, their cheeks. I put out a hand, touched with the pads of my fingers. It was cold, extremely cold, making the skin crack. I pulled my hand away, fearing frostbite--that would cause trouble, fuss--but pulled too violently! Gravitation on the Izmirids is minimal, a light kick can send you up several meters. I went flying in a wide arc, hit my back against the barrier of the biobubble, which stabilized me a little as I then was thrown toward the tomb. I managed to grab one of the pews, somersaulted, hit the floor

with my left shoulder, and my head smacked into stone--it sounds like little now, but at the time I was certain it would be a concussion at least. I didn't lose vision, but pain filled me, shutting out all else. Blinking, I touched my head: sticky. I saw the red on my fingers. My hair was matted with blood. I staggered to my suit, put it on, the helmet too, sat and ran a diagnostic. The microprobes entered me: no fracture, but a long laceration. No important vessel had been hit, there was not much loss of blood. I waited for the dizziness to pass. Still no Gazma. To hell with him. The man was a lunatic, wasn't he, how could I have thought that he would come on time, that he would come at all? It burned when the suit sealed my wound. The sedative began to work. I returned to the Honzel Hotel.

(...)

Mirton left his quarters in the same mess as he had lived in them. When I entered, something fell to the floor. But there were changes: naked walls. Apparently he had taken with him the photographs of the Cathedral. I turned on the projector, but its memory had been erased. I started going through Mirton's things--a good way to kill time, to divert my thoughts: putting this place into any order would easily fill more than two days.

On a dresser I found a box with several dozen rolls of foil: etched enlargements of black-and-white shots of the Cathedral. I looked at them all in turn. Mirton had scribbled on them, made comments in large letters, arrows pointing to lopsided circles enclosing fragments of images, all this in red marker.

I taped a few to the wall to examine them more carefully. What was this about? Mirton had underscored certain architectonic details: the cornice of one of the towers, the pseudogargoyles at the portal. Near them he had written: 2 mos. excr.? Perilevium. And: mass transport? And: 3 mm/h.

He had also left books, not bound copies of personal notes but textbooks on nanogeneration: Crysthorn: Structure and Functions; Chaos Chained, or the Pathways of Life; The Programming of Open Negentropic Systems: An Introduction; The Self-Actualizing Language of Nanomachines: A Manual; and the like. I remembered the holo of his that I had almost stumbled into on the first day. So he had been studying the Cathedral from the fundamentals up: the architecture, building strategies, materials.

About crysthorn itself I know enough to be able to go through these books without feeling that I am banging my head against the wall of esoteric high tech. True, I never fully understood the theory of its programming, the mind rebels somehow, refusing the notion of planning what is unforeseeable, of calculating what is incalculable. But the applications I knew, I once even did some sowing myself. It was only a small gazebo by a lake at my parents' place in Hoolstalon. I sowed strictly by the book, following instructions: marked off a rough square, measured by pacing, opened the hermetically sealed crysthorn (the Gazebo Venice version, as I recall), poured the appropriate amount of seed into my hand, and strewed it along the marked lines. A little was left over, so I added that at the corners. I threw on top two buckets of mud prepared earlier. In one night the gazebo had grown nicely. How old was I then, thirteen? Even at

thirteen I was impressed by the allowable imprecision of the process: it didn't matter if I sowed exactly along a line or not, if I strewed the seed in a wide band or not; it didn't matter where they fell; it even didn't matter if I planted them all or not--a quarter of them would have served: the instructions said that a dozen seeds would work; the whole bag, twenty decos, was to bring as close to one as possible the probability of obtaining the ideal form of the purchased item. Clearly there is a tremendous difference between a commercial, closed crysthorn like the one that produced the gazebo of my parents and the one-of-a-kind, open crysthorn of the Cathedral. The difference lies in the preprogramming of the code. The crysthorn of the Cathedral belongs to the "incomplete" types: not all the data about the end form are provided. The gazebo, for example, would grow the same, down to the microscopic level, whether you planted its seeds on a volcano, at the bottom of the Lizon Sea, or on a rock of the Horn. The Cathedral, on the other hand, would grow very differently with a change in such minute parameters as the precise moment of sowing.

Over these books I forgot about the passing time (people can indeed contrive to control their thoughts), and only the signal of contact established with the planet returned me to reality. It was after their council.

"There is little I can tell you in this dark hour," said the bishop. "Two alternatives are left, and they are equally tragic. We here have no right to advocate either one. Possibly you will be returned to life on Lizon, should you decide to leave in the face of everything. But, truthfully, there is no basis in logic for depending on that possibility. Staying on

the Izmirids, you preserve your life, as they have assured me, for several more years. But then you must die a solitary death, in that most desolate place." He tightened his lips. "People feel that in suffering they are always alone, but that is not true, it is never true. Remember this, there, in the dark. God will not abandon you, my son." He blessed me. "Forgive me, that I sent you there."

Yes, in moments of extremity we return to the basic words, speaking as one speaks to children. At the beginning and at the end, that same honesty, certainty, simplicity.

(...)

A last look at the Cathedral. I took with me a few of Mirton's photographs on foil. What exactly was he after? I suspect that in this way he was tracking changes in the Cathedral's architecture, that he found some error in the crysthorn code, some gap in the subroutines of self-termination. The photographs confirm this. I have walked around the Cathedral several times, probing with my lamp at some of the pieces of the structure that he recorded, comparing them: they are different, they have altered, assuming shapes more or less related. The pieces that I didn't find, I didn't find no doubt because they and their settings have changed too much for me to recognize them from these photographs. How quickly does this take place? Mirton evidently tried to measure the pace. It is surely much slower than the rate of first growth, the Cathedral after all has been standing here for many years, people would have noticed something. But I think that even Mirton wasn't completely

sure. Or could he have been on the track of something else?

Gazma flicked past in my cone of light: I saw a quick movement in the upper section of the Cathedral's left tower. He must have hidden himself deeper inside, because afterward I saw only motionless shadow. What is he doing there? And how did he get there? The Cathedral--I don't need to remind myself of this, it's so plain--is not a building subject to ergonomics, its architecture is not in the service of human use, it has no stairways, no ducts or shafts, Gazma must have accomplished no little feat of climbing. The gravitation is weak, true, but if you fall from up there, bones will break, mass is mass, momentum momentum.

I went in. I am standing at the tomb of Izmir. What did that madman say? That there was an attraction? That you couldn't free yourself? Like iron filings. Maybe he. I have felt nothing like that. I take off my helmet and gloves. The stone marker is cold and smooth. The angular face of Izmir Predú fills my hand. I turned on the journal and once again listened to the recording of my conversation with Telesfer at the CFG laboratories. Let's say that the Black Wool is an artifact of the aliens. That it's a Hoan machine, though we have not been able to discover the medium of its action. The traces of a gamma burst suggest a cosmic catastrophe on a grand scale. The Izmirids have been crossing the interstellar void for hundreds of thousands of years. Is it possible that they were intentionally aimed into space before the explosion? For what purpose? Where are they headed? If not for the accidental encounter with Madeleine, they would have ended their voyage in orbit around Lévie. It's one or the other: there is a purpose or there isn't. But no. Take the crysthorn.

There are midway solutions. Except the time--such time--the vast stretch of millions of years--is surely outside the reckoning of any civilization! And even if all this is true, what then is the Wool? It keeps the asteroids in a group. To what end? For if that was its only function . . . The sense, the sense! The marker at my hand is so smooth, it's practically wet. Deo optimo maximo. That carving is lovely: fortunate, that at least it was not left to chance. It's really not hard to understand Gazma's fascination, esthetics is the first language of religion. A hundred ninety-five minutes. The reds, yellows, and blues of Madeleine shine like dawn through the ribs of the Cathedral, everything here is either in shadow or painted with viscous colors. I'll sit, I'll quiet my heart. I thought that it would be mainly fear, an animal terror, but I feel only regret now, a great, motionless, heavy regret, the squeezing weight of dark water. No thoughts, no instructions for the body, even my eyes are dry. There is only a little tightening in my chest. But why speak, silence is better.

„The Iron General“

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The train stopped, and the General jumped out. Through the billowing steam from the engine he could see the squat form of the gnome engineer already fussing among the wheels, which were four times higher than he. For some reason the gnome was beating furiously at the dirty metal with a long-handled hammer.

The General gestured with his cane, keeping his aide from running up to the tracks; he approached the gnome.

"Is anything the matter?"

The engineer looked up, snorted, set down his hammer. In his face, black with soot, gleamed yellow eyes. The gnome's matted beard was the color of tar; no doubt you could have combed half a shovelful of coal from it. He groped beneath that wild scraggle, pulled out a cigarette and a matchbook, lit the cigarette, and took a deep drag.

"It's OK, General," he said, having steadied himself.

The General took his watch from the left pocket of his jacket and glanced at it. "A quarter to two. Two clocks better than you promised. Not bad."

The gnome blew out smoke; the cigarette, stuck in the black thicket of his beard, for a moment glowed a brighter red. "That's not the point. My assistant's for shit. But don't you worry, General, Demon will go like hell, even faster."

"I'd like to see more cars on the train."

"That too, no problem."

"Good. Wonderful. I am pleased." He clapped the gnome on

the back with his left hand (gems flashed, metal gleamed), at which the gnome bared his crooked teeth in a broad smile. But the General was now looking elsewhere, at his aide, who had approached them nevertheless.

The General said good-bye to the engineer and stepped under the coal shed overhang, where a swinging kerosene lamp threw a pale light.

Major Croak stiffened and saluted as per regulations: heels together, jackboots polished, left hand on the hilt of his saber, right arm thrust forward and up.

"Come on, Croak. We're not on the parade ground."

"Yes sir, General sir."

And he assumed the regulation at-ease position.

The General couldn't do a thing with Croak. He didn't even try. The officer ways of the man would remain with him to the grave. As a teenage cadet in the Academy of War, Croak had gone with his squad to the Dun Mountains--they had a month's leave and wanted to check out the legend for themselves: it seemed an appropriate excursion-adventure for the army's future leaders. Of his squad, Croak alone survived: the Iron General, happening to pay a visit just then to an old necromancer friend, literally plucked the lad from the claws of the dragon. The General, who even before that had been a hero to all the thaum cadets, in the eyes of Croak advanced then to the rank of demigod if not higher. Croak grew up--he had hit thirty now--but in his private religion not a thing had changed.

"What is it?"

"Bad news sir. The Crawler's illusionists have opened Frog Field over the city. The people are watching it. The Bird is

letting the princes have both barrels."

"Vazhgrav was supposed to issue a decree."

"He didn't."

"Great thunder. Why not?"

"His Royal Highness says he will not stoop to censorship," Croak recited with a stony face. "But you sir, General sir, should take your mirror with you, to stay abreast, the polters are never reliable."

"Let me guess who told him not to stoop. Birzinni?"

"The prime minister hasn't left the Castle for two days," said Croak.

The General smiled a grim smile.

"You have horses?"

"Behind the warehouse."

"Then off with us to the Castle."

#

Riding, he calculated how long it would take the different divisions to reach their positions. In theory, the variables could not be approximated: for example, Nux Vomica, as commander of the Southern Army, might delay the whole operation three, four days, on a whim. The railroad itself decided nothing; the time advantage it gave could be easily thrown away by one unfortunate conversation at the Castle.

They galloped through the Wood of Even and hit upon the King's Green. Before them stood, in panorama, Dzungoon, capital of the United Imperium, since antiquity the seat of the kings at Thorth. The glow of city lights blotted out the stars, which were mostly blocked anyway by Frog Field. The me-

tropolis of two million snaked in dozens of arms along the tear-shaped bay. In the ocean's pure water the bloody defeat of the troops of the Princedom of Peace beheld itself. The General watched the image in the sky, trying despite the inconvenient foreshortening to follow the course of the battle. The perspective was of an eagle (a buzzard, rather) circling above Frog Field. Here and there close-up insets were screened, when some particularly fierce duel took place, or some particularly brutal bit of butchery, or some particularly cinematic clash of mages.

When the ad for Smith's Stores came on, the General asked Croak, "Who else is sponsoring this?"

"No secret there sir: the Crawler's steady customers, Sumac, Davis, the Xe Brothers, Southern Holding, JZL. But I don't know who's in it for political reasons--assuming there is anyone, because that might not have been necessary."

"How many of the Crawler's staff are on this?"

"Oh, I'd say everyone sir. They've been going at it a good three clocks, and it's nonstop."

"They've even closed the genie traffic."

"Hm?"

"Just look: not one chariot crosses the transmission. A block must have been set up. Half the city will be suing again. The Crawler was no doubt funded on the side. No way could he have pulled off such a spectacle on ads alone."

"I don't know . . . You see the terraces, balconies, rooftops, General sir. And the streets. Not many people are in bed. This is not a battle for some cow town: the Bird is mopping up the Princedom. And this is playing to a full house. The Crawler for sure will milk it. In addition the sons of

bitches lucked out, both moons are below the horizon, so the quality of the image is like looking into a distance mirror."

They came to the city outskirts. Here they had to crane their necks not to lose sight of the battle unfolding in the night sky above. Hell poured across Frog Field: dragons blazed in flight, volcanoes opened in the earth, lava spewed, people were thrown hundreds of cubits into the air; the torn space twisted them into pretzels, then untwisted, pulling them inside out; metamorphic beasts unfurled over the heads of infantry; Tatarean floodlights placed on the hills surrounding the field criss-crossed, fused, forked; the separate duels of thaums became mad displays of magic fireworks. Ur-thaums in the space of split clicks discharged in battle all the power, skill, and experience they had spent their lives accumulating; they rose cloudward, sank lower than a blade of grass, belched fire, water, vapors, nothingness, threw at their foes a hail of sharp objects and an avalanche of fatal rays, at the same time parrying analogous attacks.

The poor in the slums, lying on the bare ground or on cots they had set up, exchanged comments on the duels and rewarded the victors and vanquished with whistles, applause, curses.

The two riders came to Upper Villa, and the General pointed right. They stopped their horses by the six-story González Posada. When a stabler took the steeds, they proceeded to the service area. An old man running a chariot business rapped his pipe on a sign showing night fares. The General nodded to Croak, who paid.

As it turned out, the posada had only one chariot available; the others either hadn't come back yet or were out of service.

"The Castle," said the General to the genie of the chariot after they sat and fastened their seat belts.

"Specifically?" asked the genie, from the mouth of the bas-relief placed on the dash, as it lifted the vehicle into the air.

"The top terrace of Hassan's Tower."

"That's closed to unauthorized--"

"We know."

"As you wish, gentlemen."

They shot above the low buildings of the periphery. The Castle loomed on the horizon as a black fist thrust into the firmament. Raised on a steeply arched column of rock, fired from a single mass of stone-unstone nearly four hundred years before, it stood above Dzungoon in all its immutability, serving the succeeding kings of the United Imperium as a home, fortress, palace, and administrative center. The General well remembered the day when Skrl finally activated the spell that had been years in the constructing, pulling from the bowels of the planet the gigantic block of magma and shaping it amid flood and thunder, in clouds of steam that obscured all—shaping it into the nightmare dreamed of old: the Castle.

They dove toward Hassan's Tower, a black finger pointing at the heart of Frog Field. The beacons, streaming up from the tower on every side through windows small and large and other openings, created a kind of ladder of light. The chariot flew into one of this ladder's highest rungs, braked, and landed softly on the terrace, which was a jaw jutting over abyss.

"Here we are," said the genie. "Do I wait?"

"No," said Croak, reaching for his wallet. "How much?"

"Two eighty."

The General was in the vestibule before the major had finished paying. He looked up one more time at the sky. The infantry of the Bird Conquistador, shielded by the curve in space, was cutting off the last escape route for the troops of the Princedom of Peace.

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"Supreme commander of the Zeroth Army, general of the thaums of the United Imperium, permanent member of the Crown's Council, permanent senator of the Grand Plenum, honorary member of the Board of Electors, adviser to the king, twice regent, Defender of the Blood Line, First Nimb, dean of the Academy of the Arts of War, knight of the order of the Honorable Ebon Dragon, seven times Keeper of the Sword, abayer of the Castle, Count of Cardlass and Phlon, Raymond Kaesil Maria Schwentitz of Vazhgravia!"

The General entered and looked at the doorman. The doorman blinked. The General did not lower his eyes. The doorman tried to smile, but his lower lip began to twitch. The General stood and glowered.

"Enough, enough, you'll annihilate the poor bastard," said the prime minister, Birzinni, leafing through the papers heaped on his desk.

"He announces you like that too?"

"Not being the Iron General, I'm not eight hundred years old and don't have quite as many titles."

"True, not quite as many."

"You saw that?" asked the king, who was sitting in an armchair that had been moved to the open window. He pointed with

his beard at the sky above Dzungoon.

"I saw it, Your Highness," said the General, going to him.

Bogumil Vazhgrav was smoking a cigarette, tapping the ashes into a shell-shaped ashtray on his knee. On the parapet at his left elbow was a distance mirror that held an image of the Council Chamber of the palace of the Princeling of Peace in New Pershing; the mirror's sound ruby was pushed to OFF. The Chamber was no less a chaos than Frog Field.

"That whoreson Bird has the luck of a fruckin Gurlan." Vazhgrav crushed his cigarette, immediately took another from the pack and lit it. "Pike gets fruckin caught in a phase change, and the Bird hits precisely then, for a whole clock the thaums of the damn princeling had no backup, none, half of them died from no oxygen. I don't fruckin understand why that asspicker Pike didn't retreat. What, do they have gold buried under that eatshit Frog Field I ask you?"

It was no secret that the young king's mode of expression had departed somewhat from the standards of intercourse expected in aristocratic spheres, but this tendency of his to use gutter argot, which had intensified of late, indicated the poor, and worsening, state of the ruler's nerves.

"As I explained to Your Highness," said Nux Vomica above the three-dimensional projection of the field of battle, his back to the monarch, "they weren't able in time to open a channel to a new locus."

"But the Bird's thaums weren't either!" Vazhgrav snapped. "What's the diff?"

"The Bird has an army of a quarter of a million," the Iron General said quietly to the king. "He would like nothing better than to put all thaums out of combat. Then he could crush

the princes by the sheer number of troops thrown into battle."

"How come Ferdinand and I don't have a quarter of a million soldiers?"

"It doesn't pay," sighed Birzinni, stamping a document.

"It sure pays for fartfruckin Bird, may he rot in two."

"It doesn't for him either. That's why he must invade, conquer, annex."

"I wouldn't be too sure," muttered the General.

"You don't know fruckshit yourselves, and you're making up stuff! Let's have a general conscription, OK? That'll show the bastard. He has a quarter million? I'll have a motherscritchin million! Huh! I mean, this is the Imperium here, not some hickhole in the north! Gustav, what was the last census?"

"A hundred twenty million, four hundred seven thousand, two hundred fifty-seven citizens of age, Your Highness," said Gustav Lambraux, the Council Secretary and Exchequer, not missing a beat, because five demons sat in his head.

"And how many does the Bird have, may his dick wither, in all?"

"He himself doesn't know, most likely. The inhabitants of the lands he has captured number from two hundred fifteen to two hundred eighty million."

"So many?" Vazhgrav blinked in surprise. "Where did all that vermin come from?"

"There is poverty in the north, Your Highness. The poor multiply quickly," replied Lambraux, suggesting the obvious connection between these two facts.

"The natural consequence of demographic pressure," said the General, taking a seat on the parapet before the king, resting his cane across a thigh, his left hand on its knob.

"Sooner or later, a Bird must appear. He is carried by a wave of population growth, he is like the lightning bolt that releases the energy of the storm. It was your great-grandfather who issued a decree closing the borders of the Imperium to immigrants. A wealthy man is wealthy only when he has a beggar present to provide contrast. Thus the Bird's offensive, when one looks at the map, seems absurd: his lands, alongside those of the Imperium and its allies, if I may be allowed the comparison, are a flea to a leviathan. But that's not the way to look at it."

"And what, pray, is the scritch in way to look at it?"

"Almost seven hundred years ago all this Imperium was only Dzungoon, the bay, Lighthouse Island, which sank to the bottom during the Twelfth, and the surrounding villages. 'Twas in the midst of the Great Plague that Baron Anastasis Vazhgrav dared to foment rebellion. And Tsarina Yx looked upon the map, saw the flea beside the leviathan, and put off sending troops."

"What sort of half-assed analogy is this?" Birzinni was annoyed. He had completed a short call on his mirror. "That we're some kind of colossus with feet of clay? And that the Bird, with his band of rabble, is the next Imperium?"

"We can determine that in one way only," replied the General calmly. "By waiting. But do you really want to allow him to build his own imperium?"

Birzinni waved his deactivated mirror in the General's direction. "Your perspective on this is completely warped. It's from all those spells of yours: you live and live, and live, one century then another goes by, the history of whole nations is bracketed between your youth and old age. Even if you wanted to, you couldn't change that scale in your mind."

"For a king," said the General, looking straight into Vazhgrav's blue eyes, "that is the most appropriate scale, the most appropriate perspective. We should strike now, while the Bird is busy with the Princedom. Without sneaking up, without feeling out--with our full weight. Attack him by the Upper Pass and the Lower, attack from the west through the Fens and by the sea at K'd, Ozz, and both Frodgeries, and by air, cutting off his lines of supply. We should move now and at once."

Vazhgrav tossed away his cigarette and began to chew on a fingernail. "Attack him, just like that? With no reason?"

"You have a reason, the best possible."

"And what is that?"

"Today the Bird can be defeated."

"It's war you want?" cried Birzinni, throwing his arms above his head and wailing with his cry Sasha Quezatl, Lord Treasurer-Comptroller, who had been nodding by the fireplace. "War?! Aggression against the League? Have you gone mad, Schwentitz?"

For a long, a very long time, no one had addressed him other than as "General" or maybe "My Count," not even his string of paramours. The Iron General glared with an icy eye at the irate prime minister.

Birzinni stepped back. "I am not a doorman!" he said. "Spare yourself those tricks! I have a demon, you won't ensorcell me!"

"Stuff it, both of you!" said Bogumil Vazhgrav, and an immediate silence fell. "You, General"--the king pointed--"I remember now: you've been egging me on against the Bird for some time. Even back in Oxfeld you tried to get me to agree to that gnome railway through the Passes. You've been making plans.

I'm speaking!"--with a stab of the finger--"Don't interrupt, dammit, when the king speaks! I don't know what you were fruckin thinking! For years you haven't had a decent war, so you hope for a little fun, a little gore, is that it? Well, I don't intend to go down in history as the one who started a stupid, unnecessary, senseless, and totally unprovoked war! Do you hear me?"

"He built that railroad anyway," said Birzinni.

"What?"

"The gnome train."

"Out of my own pocket," murmured the General. "Not one red cent did I take from the state coffers."

"Great God, what's going on here?" roared Vazhgrav. "Is this some plot hatched by militarists gone mad?"

"I don't know whether it will happen tomorrow or a year from now, or in twenty years," said the General, rising from the parapet. "But I do know, for a certainty, that the Bird will eventually strike at us as well. And then, then it will be his decision, the choice of time and place that favors him. Let us defend ourselves while we still can, while the situation still favors us."

"You mean to say: favors you," gritted Birzinni.

The General leaned heavily on his cane and set his jaw. "You accuse me of treason?"

The prime minister showed confusion but in a controlled way. "I accuse you of nothing . . . How could I dare?"

The silver-haired minister of the treasury woke up completely. "Have you all taken leave of your senses?" he rasped. "Birzinni, you must have tripped down the stairs and fallen on your head. To suspect the Iron General of treason? The Iron

General . . . ? He who has had more chances to take the crown of the Imperium than that crown has stars! Your great-grandparents were not a gleam in any eye when the Iron General was stringing up those who disobeyed and conspired against the king! Twice he was regent; did he delay even a day in turning over full power? Twice he himself was offered the throne, but he declined! Of the heads of traitors he chopped off I could raise a pile higher than Hassan's Tower! You haven't nicked yourself more times shaving than there were attempts made on his life, precisely for his fidelity to the crown! Two families he lost in uprisings! For almost a thousand years he has stood guard over the line of the Vazhgravs! That line would not exist today at all, Bogumil, if your forebears had not been personally saved by him. Rejoice that you have such a man at your side, for no other ruler on Earth can boast of so devoted a servant, of whose loyalty there can be no doubt. I would question myself sooner than question him!" Having spoken these words, Quezatl subsided and again dozed off.

To escape the sidelong glances occasioned by this embarrassingly outspoken peroration from the minister of finance, the General retreated to a dim corner of the chamber and sat in a black leather armchair that had been set beneath the statue of a griffin. He lay his cane across his thighs and rested his arms symmetrically on the arm rests, though of course there could be no real symmetry here, for the eyes of anyone watching would invariably have been drawn to the General's left: the famous Iron Arm, the Hand of Magic Main.

For eight centuries, never ceasing to perfect himself in the arts thaumaturgic--even before the word thau came into usage, even before he was a general and before he set into mo-

tion the secret devices of his longevity--even then, at the very beginning, he was known for his limb encrusted with metal and with gems. Legend had it that, surrendering himself to the dark knowledge (and in those days the dark knowledge was dark indeed), Schwentitz entered into a pact with Ineffables so powerful that he could no longer control them, and after one of his meetings with them, a quarrel ensued and the creatures attacked him. With tremendous exertion of will he defeated them and by a miracle survived, but in the struggle he lost the use of his left arm, never to regain it.

Quickly realizing that all existing forms of therapy would be futile, and having no wish to be a cripple for the rest of his life (which would be a very long time, after all), he decided to resort again to magic, thus implanting psychokinetic rubies in the appropriate places of his arm, hand, and fingers. Thereafter it was not muscles and nerves that moved and guided his inert appendage; motion was accomplished without their agency, by the pure power alone of the mind of Schwentitz. In this way he had transformed a part of his body de facto into a magical prosthesis. Always hating half measures, this time too Schwentitz did not hesitate on the path opened to him by the operation. Other implantations followed, other fey enhancements and extensions that made his arm and hand ever more powerful and complex, a multifunctioning quasiorganic magioconstruct. For the process never ended; century followed century, but it continued.

Now the hand of the General, showing from the shadowy sleeve of his jacket, was a thing that pulsed with cold, inorganic life, a fusion of metal, glass, wood, precious stones, of gossamer harder than any stone--yet a thing of flesh as well. Le-

gend had it that a flick of the General's finger could level an impregnable fortress; legend had it that his clenched fist could stop the heart of his enemies and cause the blood in their veins to congeal. But that was legend only--the General would admit to nothing.

His hand lay still on the arm rest. He said nothing. There was nothing left for him to say. Having lived so very long, he recognized at once the moments of triumph or defeat when they came, he weighed his chances with the utmost precision, and he never confused the highly unlikely with the flat-out impossible. He sat and watched.

The king nervously lit another cigarette. Prime Minister Birzinni, standing by the large roundtable in the center of the room, conferred in whispers with his two secretaries, all the while tapping with a finger the long-distance mirror near him. Sasha Quezatl snored. The fire in the fireplace crackled. At the opposite wall, Nux Vomica and his staff officers, on the basis of recon reports coming in over the array of mirrors hung at an angle from the ceiling (twelve by twelve), followed the progress of the battle, which was depicted in a three-dimensional projection of the lands bordering the Princedom and the League. One of Orvid's people, responsible for the maintenance and manipulation of the illusion, dozed on the couch behind the mirrors; another, selecting and hooking into the audio channels as he was ordered, was stationed yawning beneath the bust of Anastasis Vazhgrav. The low murmurs from the prime minister and the secretaries, the mechanically muffled voices of the reconnoiterers, the monosyllabic grunts of the staff officers, the flapping of the fire, the roar of the night outside--all this made a person drowsy, so it was no

surprise that old Quezatl nodded off again in earnest. The General, however, had gone four days without sleep and had no intention now of shutting down his magical stimulants. He glanced at his watch. It was almost three.

Orvid entered with Blodgett, chief of the teleseers.

Birzinni silenced his secretaries. "What is it?" he asked.

Orvid waved a hand. "No," he said, "it has nothing to do with the Bird."

"Then?"

"Something the General wanted to know."

"Since you've gone to the trouble of coming here . . ."

Blodgett smiled timidly at the General, who sat in shadow. "We found her, sir," he told him.

The king frowned. "Found whom?"

"The General's planet," Orvid explained, approaching. "Your Highness surely remembers. It was right after Your Highness ascended to the throne. The General insisted and had me dispatch people to search space."

"Ah, yes . . ." Vazhgrav rubbed the end of his prominent nose distractedly. "The Solar Curse. The Holocaust. The other Earth. Yes. So you actually found it?"

"We did, sire," said Blodgett with a nod. "To tell the truth, we had begun to doubt. The General presented such a nice argument: the statistics, the billions of stars, and so on. Not possible that there wouldn't be a single planet with parameters close to Earth's . . . And yet it seemed there wasn't. Only today--"

"Well well," said the king, twisting his mouth at the General. "So you're right again, eh? And now what do we floppin do with this great discovery?"

"What do you mean, sire, what?" Orvid was excited. "It's clear. We fly there and take possession of the planet in the name of Your Highness, as part of the Imperium!"

"Where exactly is it?" asked the General.

"It's the second planet of system 583 in the Blind Hunter. You can't see it from this hemisphere. About twelve thousand farkls."

"Well, my dear General," said the prime minister, baring his teeth in a grin, "you're restless without a war, you need activity, some action--and here's a golden opportunity. Take a ship and go. What an adventure! General Discoverer! What will you name the planet? Wait, I'll make you--it won't take me but a click--Royal Envoy and Governor Plenipotentiary of Acquired Territories." He grabbed his mirror and barked the necessary orders into it.

The General lifted his eyes to the king. "Now hardly seems the time to set off on such expeditions," he said.

Orvid pulled an illusion prism from his pocket, placed it on the table, and muttered the code. In the air appeared a three-dimensional image of a planet. With a few words he enlarged and lifted the image.

"Pretty, no?" He walked around the planet, observing it with pride, as if by activating the prism he had in fact created the heavenly body. "You don't see them, because the illusionists took the picture too close up, but she has two moons, one large, three or four times the mass of our Collop, the other a mere wisp, hardly a moon at all. The continent at the terminator extends to the other pole. And look at that archipelago. Those mountains."

Even the king now was beguiled. Vazhgrav got up and, with

a cigarette dangling from his mouth, went over to the illusion. The General did also. Even Vomica became interested. The planet--half white and sky blue, half black--hung above them like the eye of a bashful deity peering out of a fifth dimension. The image was frozen, the prism retaining only one frame in its lens: the hurricanes were stopped in their spiral, the clouds were caught and fixed over a quarter of the ocean, the storms were stilled in the middle of their fury, the rotation of day and night was halted--but it sufficed.

"God," Vazhgrav whispered. "I wouldn't mind going myself."

Birzinni smirked.

The General put his right hand on the king's shoulder. "Your Highness, I beseech you . . ."

"Dammit, there will be no war!" yelled the monarch, spitting out his cigarette. He pulled away from Schwentitz. "What's your problem? What?! I tell you to go, and go you go!"

The General took a deep breath. "Sire," he said, "on this subject would you grant me a private audience, just the two of us, in the Quiet Chamber?"

"What are you up to now?" barked Birzinni. "What tricks? Do you think to intimidate the king? A private audience with the Iron General indeed . . . !"

"I am the king's adviser and Preserver of the Royal Line. It is proper for me to--"

"Out of the question!" The prime minister turned to Vazhgrav. "You have no idea, my lord, of what he is capable . . ."

"Did I give a fruckin order or did I give a fruckin order?" The king was livid. "Well? Well? Do it, then, without any more flapping of lips. OK? Enough!" He regarded the illu-

sion, scratched his chin, looked around, and let the air out of his lungs. "I'm turning in. Goodnight." And he left.

"What happened?" asked the minister of finance.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep," said Birzinni with a wave.

The General went to retrieve his cane, bowed to the prime minister and Nux Vomica, and made for the door. Birzinni twisted an end of his mustache, and Vomica clicked the stem of his pipe against his front teeth, deep in thought . . . They watched the General's back until he was gone. Orvid didn't watch, playing with the turned-off prism. Blodgett averted his face as Schwentitz passed, so as not to make eye contact; only later did he sneak a glance. Gustav Lambraux, eyes shut, was communing with his demons.

The doorman shut the door.

"For God's sake," sputtered Sasha Quezatl, "what's going on here?"

"Nothing, nothing. Go back to sleep."

#

"What??"

"By royal command. I depart tomorrow morning," said the General, taking a seat on the bench by the phosphorescent wall of Croak's office.

"Birzinni?" croaked the major darkly. "It's his doing, isn't it?"

The General didn't bother to answer.

Croak got up from his desk and paced fretfully. He checked the room's main antisurveillance system charms, then burst

out: "He's got him wrapped around his little finger! Doesn't even try to hide it! Anyone can see. Thunder and nails, does he think he can get away with this? . . . I just learned that re Dwin has taken controlling shares in Yax and Yax. Can you imagine, General sir? That's now two-thirds of the Royal Council! Birzinni has us by the throat!"

"Re Dwin? That was to be expected," mumbled the General, looking at the opposite wall, where a couple of invisible djinns were moving symbolic arrows, lines, triangles, and circles across a cartographic fresco. "Has he broken through?"

"What, the Bird?" The major stopped and regarded the map wall. "It's the same still. But nothing short of a miracle will keep him from finishing them off. I have here a one-way reflection from Pike's headquarters." He pointed at a desk mirror. "They're thinking already of ceding the Backwood and Right Port."

"Ferdinand is lying down," said the General. "Lying down and asking to be cut open. Withdrawing from a pact with the Princedom was Birzinni's biggest mistake. We will pay dearly for it. A sea of blood might have been avoided."

"Nothing you could have done, General sir." Croak returned to the desk, began tuning one of the mirrors. "Your dissenting vote at least made a few of them think. But Vazhgrav would have done what Birzinni wanted in any case, even if you had managed to convince the Council. Except there's no one now to convince, you know yourself the price of a vote from Spôt or Blummer. But the word of the Iron General still means something, yes, people are behind you sir, don't pretend to be surprised, the lowliest peons from the remotest jerkwaters know that the Iron General never breaks a promise and wouldn't

besmirch his escutcheon with any treachery or fast dealing, and it's true sir, that they believe in you, not the king, the king's a puppy, you're a legend, the people know the difference . . . Here. How many men will you need?"

"I'll take the John the Fourth with a trio of kineticists. Let's put Gould in charge of them. A full thaum crew, with heavy armor, landing marines, as many supplies as we can take, rations . . . no, forget the rations, they'll be in stasis. You know the routine. We must be prepared for every eventuality, since I have no idea what we'll be facing out there."

"Did you get that, Archie?" Croak said into the mirror. "The General takes off tomorrow morning. I'll go wake people. You have room there?"

"The Old Hall is nearly empty, since we set up extra places for those fleeing Crater," replied the mirror. "In a few dozen clocks we should be able to quarter a division here. The John the Fourth is in mothballs, hasn't been out for years, and I'll have to scare up djinns. Are you packing people off right away, General, or will there be some briefing, training? We're dependent on Earth for food, and with an additional hundred mouths here . . ."

"At most, one meal," said the General.

"At most, one meal," Croak repeated. "Any signals from Crater, by the way? The princes aren't leaving? How many ships do they have?"

"Four or five, and three shuttles, but I imagine they've been destroyed, taken, or blocked, because thirty clocks have gone by now without anything of the Princedom leaving the atmosphere. It's all politics ultimately, the Bird's thaums did some ambushing here from Subbermayer back in the days of Old

Luke, ghosts got in the woodwork, specters, no doubt undamped manifestations of bilocal feedback, of the fourth or fifth degree. You know about the attempt to land on Crow, General? They wanted to dig in fifty cubits and set up soulsuckers all around, I don't know why they pulled back, it would have given them a kind of jumping-off place; though, true, expensive as hell, everybody domed, the main construct all of living diamonds . . . But Crater won't surrender. And if the princelings were to evacuate the civilians out of simple fear . . ."

"I understand." The General went to the desk, entering the field of vision of mirrored Archie. Archie stiffened, bowed. The General nodded. "Whose order was it, about the Old Hall?"

"Oh, we figured that out ourselves sir, when the announcement came about neutrality. It was clear there would be no order to go back, and when the Bird takes New Pershing, Crater will be, in all the universe, the last free scrap of the Princedom of Peace. All hell will break loose there in a little while. They're preparing to die."

"And in Pershing no one said a word about those civilians? They forgot about them? You say there are a few ships left . . . Let's think: the right of asylum, with us or in the Islands . . ."

"No kineticists. They have practically no one. Of the thaums maybe two people are left, the rest are ordinary soldiers. With their big mobilization a gong ago they pulled everyone down from the moon. The poor bastards are getting killed right now in Frog Field."

"We must enter Crater, then," said the General, his jaw set, leaning over the major's shoulder to the distance mirror. "Now is the best time: before Pershing surrenders, but after

the defeat of the Princedom. Are you in a position to do that? You need to plant the flag of the Imperium there before the Bird's first ship shows."

Archie grimaced. "I don't like it . . ."

"Don't be stupid, Archie," snapped the General. "For what did you set up Old Hall? You'll be saving people, preserving buildings and equipment, because if the thaums charge, there won't be a thing standing, not one brick atop another. You know that. But the Bird cannot touch a base of the Imperium. Zero bloodshed."

"They won't surrender!"

"To the Bird, no; to us, yes. Believe me, they're praying for some honorable way out of this. No one really wants to die, no matter how glorious the death. I'll be there in the morning; in the meantime do this: make the proposal in my name. The terms of the surrender as honorable as can be: I'll accept it myself, in person. My word on it. You understand? No humiliation. We can even call it a temporary protectorate."

"You're serious, General?"

"Don't be an idiot," bellowed Croak.

"All right. I'll try."

Captain Archie saluted and switched off. The mirror showed the faces of the General and the major.

The General straightened, smiled.

Croak shook his head. "I can see the look on Birzinni's face. He'll crap in his pants when he hears this. Now everything depends on whether or not the son of a bitch has spies planted on Collop. Because afterward he won't be able to hand Crater over to the Bird, even the king wouldn't go along with that. And when the Bird's thaums get itchy, you may finally

have your war, General sir . . ."

Cold rage welled in the General. With a single thought he turned Croak and the armchair around to face him and aimed at the major a finger sheathed in glass and metal.

"You insult me, Croak," he said through clenched teeth. "The king and Birzinni don't understand, because they don't want to, but do you think, even you, that I require this war as an amusement or kind of exercise?"

"General sir, forgive me. I didn't mean it in that way . . ."

The General's wrath passed as quickly as it had come. "It doesn't matter," Schwentitz said, waving his cane. He turned and left.

#

The genie set down the General's personal chariot on the roof of his villa several dozen cubits from the chaise longue where Qasmina slept. She had sunk into slumber while watching the battle on Frog Field. In her fallen hand was a glass that still held a little wine. The General approached, stood over her, gazed upon her. She wore a white silk peignoir; its belt had come undone; white silk flowed over the woman's even whiter skin. The General looked: the head resting on a shoulder, the lowered eyelids, the half-open mouth, the loose hair covering half her face, the cheek with a reddish mark--she had obviously just moved her head to the other side as she slept. He watched her breathe, her breasts moving up and down, their nipples taut from the night chill. He put his right palm to Qasmina's parted lips. Her hot breath burned his skin. He saw her eyes move beneath her lids. She had three-quarters elf in

her, so it was not impossible that she could be watching him even through the lids. He bent and kissed her. Still asleep, eyes closed, she opened her arms and drew him to her.

"Old men, such as I," he whispered, "believe only such declarations: made unconsciously, spontaneously."

"How can you be sure who I was dreaming of?"

"Of me."

"Of you. You looked inside?"

"No. I saw you smile, and I know that smile." He took her glass and drank. "Did you like it?" he asked, gesturing with the glass at the sky.

She rubbed her ear, stretched, tied the belt of her peignoir. "Children, such as I," she hummed, "love shows bright and colorful. An invitation came for a banquet at Ozrab. Should we go?"

"No."

"You didn't even ask when it is."

"Tomorrow, the day after, it doesn't matter."

"You're off again?"

"Politics, Qas, politics."

She got up with such force, the hammock turned over. "Screw politics," she said under her breath.

He laughed, embraced her, squeezed her. "I had no idea you were such a rebel. Come inside, come; it's always coldest before sunrise."

They went down to the third floor. The poltergeists drew a hot tub for the General, but Qasmina said no, pretending she was offended, and went to gossip by mirror with her girlchums.

Half a clock soaking in piping hot water allowed the General to relax completely. He stirred from his drowse and made

several calls, using the ceiling mirror, which he hexed for the purpose, clearing it of condensation and hooking into the municipal net of distance mirrors. Then the polters rubbed Schwentitz down with big fluffy towels and wrapped him in his three-ply robe. He went to his office. No point wasting time on a meal: he took his energy directly from his hand, thrusting it into the roaring flame of the fireplace.

Sitting in his armchair, he activated his visispex: the most comprehensive of the standard charms of visualization. The spex had a built-in decoder, to circumvent the blocking spells that kept magic hidden to outsider eyes; one had only to know the password, for all this was Schwentitz's work. But there are spells and there are spells, passwords and passwords, different levels of secrecy and different kinds of spex.

Like gaudy flowers the constructs shot from the walls, from the artifacts lying on the desk, from the cabinet shelves, and from the desk itself, and the left hand of the General burst into a giant parti-colored bouquet that nearly filled the room. Cutting off the other visuals, the General focused on that. He calibrated and expanded the branches that were of interest to him, pushing back inside the other symbolic manifestations of sorcery. Three constructs remained: one counterspell, a wavering black twister with purple bands, went from index finger to door; the second, a lush rainbow, flowed from the wrist to the General's knees and the rug beneath his feet; the third, a spiderweb of stiff decision algorithms, grew from forearm to ceiling and settled over the General in a coverlet of dense smoke. Schwentitz in a reflex side thought called forth quasi-illusional operators in the form of pliers,

a knife, needles, and a silver spool of ribbon whose color, unique, couldn't appear in any spex display. He opened an orb of duration and set to work. The flame in the fireplace crept in slo-mo, like glass that has not yet hardened as it issues from a zero-g furnace.

It took him eighteen clocks, yet the sun was only just beginning to rise when he closed the orb. He put on his field coat. The mirror reflected several dozen incantatory ornaments, but he selected none of those. The poltergeists packed the papers he needed, the artifacts, the clothes, and carried the suitcase to the chariot.

Passing the bedroom, he looked inside. He shouldn't have. For the second time he saw Qasmina sleeping, her defenseless beauty, trusting nakedness, the tranquil breath through parted lips. He was enchanted totally by the whiteness of her feet. He warded off, had to ward off a second time, and only then was he able to take his leave of her.

When he stepped out onto the roof, there was not a trace of Frog Field in the sky, which meant the end of Ferdinand.

"The Academy of War, at Baurabiss," the General said to his genie.

#

A cold wind blew through the open roof of the hangar. Ugly clouds sailed across the gray rectangle of sky. A vile morning.

"How many?" the General asked Croak.

"Seventy-two," replied the major, looking through the office pane at a couple of magtechs who were giving the shuttle

a last scan for flight.

"We did two runs, with the Blue and the Black and the Red," said Thule, the bosun of Baurabiss. "Fifteen men each time. Now's the last."

"Gould?"

"He's already on Collop."

"Captain Boulder reporting," spoke the demon of the operational crystal that sat at a corner of Thule's desk.

The General glanced at his watch. "Half a clock," he said. "We should go. Was there confirmation from Archie?"

"Yes."

"Birzinni sent the papers?"

"Last night."

The General got up, stretched, fixed his eyes on the ceiling, and smiled a sad smile. "Croak," he said. "You're coming with me."

The major looked at him with surprise. "But General sir, here I--"

"You're coming with me," Schwentitz repeated, and Croak shrugged, knowing that tone: his fate had been decided.

"There's room," sighed Thule, with a crystal throwing a schematic on the wall opposite the pane: a sketch of the Black and the Red. "In the last one, only thirteen are going. With the rest of the equipment."

The General went to the crystal, placed his hand on it, and stood sightless for a moment. "Good," he murmured, removing his hand.

The bosun shook his head with displeasure. "You might have done that with more finesse, General; my demons grow stupid after such vivisection."

"Sorry. I haven't the time." The General leaned across Thule's pile of documents and shook the bosun's hand. "May God . . ."

"May God," said Thule with a wave, and then he was conversing with someone in one of the distance mirrors on his desk.

The major and the General went down the iron steps to the floor level of the hangar; the office door was slammed behind them by the building genie.

Croak hunted for a cigarette, lit one, inhaled. "Why?" he asked, automatically shielding them both with a quick anti-eavesdrop charm.

"Because there is more going on here than meets the eye."

"What more?"

"You're coming with me."

"Yes, of course sir. It's an order. But the demon in my intuition tells me to watch out."

"You have a smart demon," laughed the General. "You should always watch out."

"You won't tell me?"

"Later."

"Yes . . . ," sighed Croak and removed the charm.

They proceeded to the Black and the Red. The shuttle ship floated twenty cubits above the floor. It had the shape of a swollen cigar and was made of oak, much varnished and highly polished. At either end was a large symmetrical rose window composed of numerous crystals. The General squinted to see through his spex the visualization: the customized fourfold hermetic Labunski-Kraft spells that wrapped the hull tightly. He found no gap in them. Not that he expected to, knowing the

exactitude of Thule's magtechs--in any case he'd have to trust in them, there was no way to check every detail himself, the constructs of a spaceship were among the most far-reaching and complex. But he had had more than one close call with supra-stratospheric flight. Once, the ship he was on, in orbit, suddenly lost its seal; only the instantaneous artifactual reflex of his hand saved him from death by freezing and suffocation. Since then--and this took place eleven years ago--he never left the planet without repeated application of his personal safety hexes. Since he didn't encode these, the thaums accompanying him had occasion to admire his virtuosity: scaling down Labunski-Kraft to a thousandth of its original wattage and toxicity. No one could duplicate that feat. Such examples were the best proof that magic was not a science but an art, and that the Iron General was the undisputed master of the art.

At the levitation column of the Black and the Red, marked by a tube of green gas, with which one of the ship's djinns drew passengers on board, they met the pilot.

"This is an honor, General," said the kineticist, hastily swallowing the last bite of a sandwich.

"Your own?" asked the General, looking at the holstered sidearm on the pilot's belt. The handle of the pistol, seen through the lens of the spex, blossomed gold and black.

"Oh, that," said the kineticist, the green parting around him. "Rumors have started circulating in Baurabiss. Crater is only seven snakes from the Monk, and there's a war on, after all. You understand, General. But what can such a peashooter do, in any case? It's psychological, a crutch," he added, sailing toward the dark belly of the shuttle, which, obedient

to the djinn's will, opened in a six-lobed hatch.

The major and the General flew after the pilot. Inside, the walls glowed orange; it was even brighter here than in the hangar. The Black and the Red, like all shuttles, was really only a solidly built box used to convey people and packages into orbit and back. It was smaller than it seemed from outside, comprising two rooms: the pilot's cabin in front and the rest of the cigar, where passenger seats and freight hooks were bolted to the walls. To maximize space, that part of the shuttle was covered with a glamour that temporarily deformed gravity: "down" was always beneath your feet, wherever a foot touched the craft's glowing wood. The diameter of the cigar was more than twelve cubits, so your head wouldn't bump the heads of those walking on the "ceiling"--provided of course you didn't get too close to the rose window, where the walls of the Black and the Red converged.

Strapped to a seat, one of the assigned thaums was already sleeping, in half battle uniform, in a cocoon of defensive black magic.

The pilot, flying in, disappeared immediately into the cabin. Croak and the General sat near the rose window; through its panes they saw, from above, the slightly distorted hangar, the slightly distorted sky.

"I'm out until we reach Collop," Schwentitz informed the major, changing into a tar-black statue. Croak only raised his eyebrows a little. He took out his pocket mirror and entered into a long conversation with headquarters at the Castle, whose staff officers were analyzing the data that had just come in from the surviving spy specters. The Bird's block was tighter than anticipated, so there was not a great deal of in-

formation. The Bird was headed for Pershing. He was throwing his main forces at Tchatarakka, having vaporized Poison Lakes, the Big and the Little both. Panic among the populace of the Princedom had reached such proportions that no one now could control border crossings. Bogumil Vazhgrav faced the dilemma of, Let them in or keep them out? There seemed no solution: immigration quotas against the League would only increase the pressure of refugees from the other side. At the guild in Thorth the price of gold and diamonds had skyrocketed, also the price of land in the Islands.

Soon the other eleven thaums showed up. Croak knew one of them, Ensign Yung; he got into a discussion with him on the subject of the new entrance requirements at the Academy, which for the first time was allowing women to become thaum cadets. Yung disapproved, Croak disapproved, and they seconded each other in their indignation. Meanwhile the kineticist had lifted the shuttle above the city and was climbing through clouds toward the stars. Faint in daylight, the stars shone brighter and brighter as the Black and the Red rose; the anti-friction and clarifying spells made the view mirror-sharp.

The horizon darkened to the deep black of frigid space as they went into orbit. The few unfastened objects inside the shuttle began to float. In a wink the thaums pulled them down by kinesis.

The Black and the Red, changing course, began to chase the moon. The passengers didn't see Collop until the landing maneuvers--docking maneuvers, rather, since Collop, although the largest of the planet's natural satellites, was little more than a big spherical rock. Its gravity was hardly noticeable; those coming to its surface had to wear special boots enc-

hanted by molecular artisans so that they didn't accidentally "jump off" into space. The thaums, of course, had charmed their own footwear in advance.

No sooner did the shuttle settle into the deep lunar hangar than the General emerged from null time.

Captain Archie bilocated himself inside the vessel as the pressurization dome closed over it and locked. He reported to the General: "In one clock, we rendezvous at the halfway point. Re Kwäz will be there in person. I agreed to transmission to Crater; I trust you have no objection to that, General."

"None. Have the Bird's people shown?"

"Not yet. But we're up to our ass in specters, they're getting into everything like roaches, we're blanket-exorcising them."

"They're the Bird's?"

"Who else's? The League was never subtle in its recon."

"Where are you?"

"I'm waiting here at my post, that's why I couldn't come in person . . . You're taking off now, General?"

"Yes. You have the papers?"

"Following Major Croak's suggestion, I based the text on the surrender of the Sixty-Seventh Arcadian; demons copied it from the archive."

"Phantax it to me here."

Archie reached out a hand, and a file appeared in it. The General touched it with his left hand.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll peruse it en route. Were there any orders from the Castle?"

"Only confirmation by harmonogram."

The captain vanished.

The Black and the Red had come to a stop, and the thaums began to jump out. The General, Croak, and the pilot were the last to leave. They floated down to the hangar door. The entire military base was under a hermetic hex of the type Kraft III, which maintained an Earth atmosphere; the temperature was stabilized by a construct of living diamonds, which was double-feedback-spliced into the sixth dimension to channel heat directly from the sun.

The officer on duty had the General and Croak sign the arrival book and gave them directions to the chariot terminal--unnecessary, as both the General and the major knew their way around the buildings of the Monk as well as the officer on duty did. The name "Monk" came from the shape of the rock that loomed above the base: a cowed, bent figure. At a certain hour of the Collopolian day it covered the entire base with its shadow.

The General and Croak didn't proceed immediately to the chariots; first they entered one of the nearby hangars, which was filled completely with the hull of the John the Fourth. The ship was not remotely similar to a Black and the Red kind of shuttle; it was more than ten times larger. As for shape, it was difficult to speak of any: the John the Fourth seemed a random assortment of structures, several dozen, that had been erected by untested spells and then pulled in all directions without regard for gravity and attached here and there with no plan. From this riot of wood, metal, stone, fabric, and glass jutted, every which way, great masts and sails made of a strange, iridescent material, crooked spires, dented domes and spheres, even things like plants: leafless little white-barked

trees growing on the sides, below, above, and at angles.

The John the Fourth had been built at the order of Lucius, the father of Bogumil Vazhgrav, for the purpose of exploring the other planets of this system and neighboring systems. It had been given an independent network of living crystals so there would be no limit to the energy it drew upon in its magioconstructing. It was a self-sufficient habitat for more than a hundred people, who could live in it indefinitely, travel in it to the most remote spots of the universe, and in it face any enemy. An uncrackable nut of life in an ocean of icy death. The magninimb who had built the John the Fourth, on the vessel's maiden voyage, tested it--rather, he demonstrated the perfection of his work--by sailing through the core of the sun: the vessel, its living diamonds pumping energy in the opposite direction, deflected the heat.

"Stay here," the General said to Croak. "See to everything. Load the people and matériel. Check the provender. The moment I return, we take off. Muffle our link with the Castle. The order was public?"

"No. I recruited without telling; otherwise people would have enlisted in droves, hearing your name, because you're a legend, General sir."

"Enough of that. The destination coordinates go only to Gould. I'll tell the others myself when we're out of mirror range."

"Yes sir."

"For God's sake, stop clicking your heels!"

"As you wish."

"Can't teach an old dog," mumbled the General under his breath, shaking his head as he made his way to the chariots.

Shadows followed him along the rock, from Earthlight--a rusty green in Collop's starry sky--and from the innumerable ignes fatui that hovered desultorily over the base's hermetic dome.

The genie of the chariot was in fettle. "The Iron General himself, my my, the honor is too great."

"Shut up and fly."

They shot above the dome, and the chariot wrapped itself in a Kraft II bubble. At the same time it covered itself with a camouflaging mirror, the same sort that the base used: spy specters were everywhere, and there was no point handing them on a platter information about who was on Collop and what exactly people were up to.

For the first time in a long time, Schwentitz was swathed in weightlessness. His artifactual hand injected into his organism a series of quick physiological charms to neutralize the unpleasant side effects of gravitational discontinuity.

The chariot now flew just above the ground, leaping in unpredictable jerks to clear each rise and falling like a stone into each depression. The shadow thrown by Earth slid along the rock like a faithful dog, a wavelet of night. The great planet, hanging over the head of the General like a balloon lantern, gave the scene an unreal quality: an illustration from a fairy tale.

The chariot plunged into the next pseudocanyon of Collop. A translucent bubble, three-quarters of it in shadow, glowed there with doubly reflected light. "Stop," said the General, and the chariot, guided by the anticipating genie, dropped to the bubble and pierced the silver hemisphere with no problem, for the camouflaging hexes of both stationary object and flying vehicle recognized each other's identifying friend-or-foe

codes.

Inside the bubble were several dozen people, gathered around two groups of chariots. The genie landed by the group of Captain Archie.

The General jumped out. The captain went to him quickly.

"I've read it," said Schwentitz. "I like it. I have a few quibbles, minor points, but a quick decision is more important now than legalistic details, so I accept the document in toto. Re Kwäz is ready?"

"Uh . . . yes."

The two of them approached the Princedom's group. The imperial thaums turned to watch. When the General lifted his magic hand in greeting, they answered with salutes.

"How is their mood?" he asked the captain telepathically, under a mind lock, which made Archie blanch a little and miss a step.

"The princelings? They're not happy. No one would be. They insisted on consulting with Pershing."

"And?"

"You have to realize, General, that, for the Bird, New Pershing is like glass, his specters pass through it at will . . ."

"So?"

"I had a mute clamped on them," Archie admitted after a moment, reluctantly adding his lock to the General's.

"Very good," praised the General, sending him also by thought a half smile and gesture-expression indicating satisfaction.

"They think it's the Bird. I told them they could keep trying to reach Pershing until you arrived. We've been keeping

the mute on."

"Don't remove it until this matter is settled. After evacuation they can use our bands."

"That's not altogether fair," Archie squirmed in his thoughts.

"What can I tell you? Thinking is painful. Above a certain level in the hierarchy a man no longer has the comfort of simply carrying out an order . . . Major Archie."

"Mm. Thank you."

"I hope that your people have also run thorough exorcisms, because I wouldn't want to be in your shoes if even a single specter from the Bird or, worse, from Birzinni gets in here."

Re Kwäz came toward them. He was accompanied by a black-skinned aide with one or two regenerated eyes, which you could tell by the difference in their color.

The General shook re Kwäz's hand; in that same moment he saw, through the visispex, a side ribbon emerging from the aide's left eyesocket.

"Who is securing this transmission," he asked Captain (still Captain) Archie by telepathy, "we or they?"

"They are."

"Cripes."

"A shame, that when we finally meet, it is under such circumstances," re Kwäz began. "History--well, it's history . . ." He curled a mustache, winked, put his hands behind his back. "Yes. So, then, General, are you prepared to guarantee, with your word, that the terms of our agreement will be kept?" He didn't call it surrendering, since the Princedom was not at war with the Imperium. The arrangement therefore preserved the appearance of a contingent collaboration between neighboring

outposts of friendly nations--it did not, strictly speaking, affect the division of territory on Collop, nor did it raise any political issue: it was a voluntary declaration by a certain number of subjects of Prince Ferdinand regarding the receipt by them, on a temporary basis, of the Imperium's protection, extending unto their chattel and possessions. Actually, the arrangement had all the earmarks of high treason and could well have been interpreted thus by the prince's casuists. Those present were aware, however, that such a turn of events was unlikely: the Princedom of Peace existed de jure but no longer de facto.

"I am" was the Iron General's unequivocal answer to re Kwäz.

"Excellent, excellent." Re Kwäz nodded to his aide. The aide handed him a file with the document, and Archie took out his copy. As there was no surface to write on, with a quick spell the General produced a mahogany desk whose top was fixed at a convenient level by kinetic hex. They spread out the papers on this virtual piece of furniture, they produced their pens, and in the celadon light of the globe orbiting swiftly above them they signed the agreement. The different-eyed aide peered over their shoulders.

Dotting the last i, Schwentitz straightened. From the direction of the chariots that had come from the Monk, a little tentative applause was heard. Re Kwäz cast a melancholy look at the imperialists. "Would that I could peek into a history textbook published a hundred years from now," he said.

"I never peek in the book of history," stated the General, and snapped his pen in two for good luck.

#

The General had begun his search in space for a second Earth in response to the Armageddon Spell invented by Innistrounce of the Islands, an elfin master of the arcane arts. Innistrounce, doing research for the Southern Company on the commercial use of living diamonds for the safe and affordable transmission of energy taken from the sun, had developed a blueprint for a magiconstruct that, when applied to the diamonds, would lead inescapably to the explosion of the star, whose core was accessible to the quasibilocated biocrystals via a higher-than-seventh dimension. The full Armageddon or End of the World Spell--also called the Solar Curse--required, true, two arrays of diamonds and two stars (in order to pump energy from one into the other in real time), but the cost of that was nothing in comparison with the result: the total annihilation of Earth!

Innistrounce left the Company and went public with his discovery. Many criticized him, but the General felt they had no reason: sooner or later someone would have hit upon this. Whatever was possible invariably tended toward self-fulfillment; whatever did not yet exist had the will to; and once a thing was imagined, it was nine-tenths along the road to being. So grinds the mill of history.

The General didn't blame Innistrounce, but he immediately began to consider a shield that might counter so great a sword. In this way was born the idea of seeking out and colonizing a twin Earth. But the General found it difficult to move his project through the army bureaucracy, since the far-seers, under Colonel Orvid, the chief of the section of operational services of the General Staff (read: military intelli-

gence), took their orders directly from the Staff and so were not part of the chain of command in Schwentitz's thaumic ZerOTH Army. Moreover, besides the count no one seemed to believe that someday someone would be mad enough to activate the Armageddon Spell--inasmuch as he would be thereby causing his own demise as well. Some even said that the availability of a second Earth could actually encourage an enemy to work the Solar Curse, since the possibility would then exist for said enemy to survive the sun's destruction. The General pointed out that the United Imperium should therefore be the first to find an Earth prime, precisely to avoid becoming the target of such cosmic sabotage. The Staff gave up, finally.

The John the Fourth had not yet left the range of the distance mirrors and artifactual telepathy when the news came of the Bird's general assault on New Pershing and Ferdinand's flight to the Castle in Dzungoon, teleported there by his thaums. This development was final confirmation of the fall of the Princedom. The thaums of the League evidently had broken the defense and set up blocking spells; otherwise Ferdinand would not have agreed to be teleported, for that was still a risky operation: despite the labors of the nimbs and mages over many years, at best only every other sendee reached his destination, the rest perishing somewhere among alien mindscapes. Prince Ferdinand made it. He asked for asylum. Even by the time communication ceased between the John the Fourth and Earth-Collop, Bogumil had not reached a decision in this matter. His hesitation caused much dismay on board the ship.

"You don't think he's frightened?" Lieutenant Gould asked the General when the General joined the kineticists in the cu-

pola.

"It's politics, Max, politics," Schwentitz said, taking an unoccupied seat. "I imagine that Birzinni, as always, is trying with his slippery little ways to gain some advantage."

"On the other hand," put in a kineticist, not visible because he was mostly buried in the sculptured chair of the first pilot, "giving Ferdinand asylum might be taken by the Bird as a declaration of war against the League."

"You be quiet," Gould told him as he filled his pipe. "Watch out instead that we don't run into a star."

"You could put a troll in this seat. The probability of hitting a star is less than your setting fire to your beard with that stupid pipe," retorted the subordinate.

Gould cocked his head, used pyrokinesis to start a few sparks, took a pull, and blew out dark smoke. Leaning toward the General, he pointed with his eyes through the transparent dome. "Will this be an invasion?" he asked.

"Invasion?"

"You expect resistance from the locals? On that planet."

Schwentitz shrugged. "I don't even know if there are any 'locals' there."

"Blodgett didn't have a look?"

"You saw the images the illusionists took from the far-seers. This whole thing was done in haste. Of course Blodgett should have provided me with a complete report on the planet, terrain, landing site; simple logic would require first that cautious reconnaissance be done . . . There was no time. Birzinni pulled the king's strings, and before I could turn around, the order was given. So I must be doubly on my guard."

"Politics in this too? Unbelievable. It's a plague."

"An obsession, rather. A pixie crosses Birzinni's path, and it's a political problem for him."

"A problem for the pixie?" said the invisible pilot with a laugh.

They turned to him.

"Doesn't this come under lack of respect shown to a superior?"

"You told him to shut up. It's insubordination."

"He disobeyed an order. I'll cut off his head and demote him."

"Right. Let the rank and file learn a little discipline."

"Then I'll cut it off again . . ."

The General had known Gould even longer than Croak; they could joke in this way, in front of others, with complete ease. But tension was building in the men wreathed by the smoke from Gould's pipe. Gould read that tension also in the calm in the General's dark eyes. The General clearly expected--sensed--danger. The old lieutenant tried to penetrate the depths--was it a matter of politics? or locals?--but with no success. Possibly Schwentitz himself didn't know what he feared. Gould sucked thoughtfully on the stem of his pipe. At a certain age, premonitions took on the certainty of deductions, and the General was beyond any human age.

Soon they would see the planet with their own eyes; soon it would be reached by the recon subspells of the John the Fourth's construct. This was their fifth day out. The ship's light funnels collected stray rays from space and with them painted both the translucent and nontranslucent walls. The crew watched the constellation of the Blind Hunter part before their prow. Points of light ran away from the axis of the John

the Fourth, which was aimed at the sun designated 583 in Uttley's Atlas, the differences in their relative velocity enormous, and the constellation quickly lost all resemblance to what the crew knew from the sky maps on Earth.

The cupola of the piloting kineticists, as indeed the whole interior of the John the Fourth, was appointed with truly royal luxury: gildings, carvings, panelings, silks, tapestries, rugs, mosaics, frescoes, intaglios, coffered alcoves, paintings, busts. Only the "lower" part of the ship, which held the armaments, larders, the conservatory of living crystals, and the sleeping quarters, preserved a certain show of functionality, though Schwentitz would have loved to sweep from there a hundred ridiculous knickknacks. But that would have accomplished nothing: the John the Fourth had been designed for old Lucius Vazhgrav as a pleasure sloop. Any changes in decor now would prove more disadvantageous esthetically than advantageous ergonomically.

When the construct announced that a planet had hove within range, Gould and the General went to the upper mess hall. As this area was gravitationally opposite the cupola of the kineticists, along the way they came to a bend in the field and the tobacco spilled from the lieutenant's pipe. He had to collect it flake by flake, mentally, and was muttering oaths when he entered the hall.

The planet, the size of a dragon's egg, spun slowly in the middle of the room. A still-sleepy Croak stood by it, a cup of hot quok in his hand; he was whispering to a trio of thaums who sat rigid, their eyes rolled back, on chairs moved away from the table. Two other thaums were working on an operational crystal that hung above their heads, and four at a side ta-

ble were summoning a cohort of wraiths whose aura was not human.

"A little mobilization here, I see," said the General, eyebrows raised.

Croak took a sip of his quok and waved a hand. "I sent a polter to you, General sir."

"It must have got lost. Report."

"Aye aye sir. We dispatched a low-energy Follinger." The major pointed his mug at a color image of the planet. "Lieutenant Dram, on watch, put it on crystal and has assigned a man to analyze it. The demons wanted to do a multidimensional scope, which would give them full topology below the cloud cover. But the Follinger dissolved. The construct went into alarm mode, the needle tipped to 3.8. Dram sent me a polter and had all stations manned. I ordered the active subcurses and all interfering charms to be put under. We're now going at maximum passive McDowell-Karlinsky, recursively pleated and quadruply muffled. This"--he again indicated the illusion--"is a loop of archived images. The demons are now sorting through the data collected and trying despite everything to cobble together a map, and these three men here have been sorcelled as farseers with the help of the living diamonds."

"And the wraiths?"

"I intend to release them, blind, at a tenth of a fint."

"Whose are they?"

"I don't know. Whose?" he asked the four summoners.

"We passed a system of gas giants," replied one of them. "Devil take the ugly bastards. Can't understand a thing from them without demons, and I'm not sure we will even then."

"Shit."

"What do you conclude?" asked the General.

"It's plain," burst out Croak. "The Follinger crashed from a counterspell."

"So it's locals after all," said Gould, nodding.

"The demons took a profile of their magic?"

"Nothing to take it from, no data, the Follinger was cut off instantly."

"Any attempt made to probe our ship?"

"We have registered nothing like that."

"And they?" Schwentitz jutted his chin at the sleeping thaums. "Have they found anything?"

"They found someone," Gould murmured as he watched the illusion of the planet spin. "Not something, someone."

Croak made a face. "I can't extract boo from them. It's a block for sure."

"The construct, is it shunting them?" asked the General.

"It should be," admitted the major and went quickly to the thaums working the crystal. "Give me all three," he said, pointing to the left of the planet, where the ceiling and the wall met.

"Coming up."

After a moment three knots of darkness roiled in that spot.

"Blast."

The General quickly went to the unseeing thaums and with his left hand touched the head of each. They slumped out of their chairs, unconscious. The clouds of darkness disappeared.

"Someone should have been put here to monitor them," he said. "They fell into a spiral. They would have pulled free if you hadn't given them the help. The diamonds could have pumped

half a galaxy into them, it's a geometric progression, and the resonance would have turned us into plasma. Why didn't you think of that, Croak? Three-quarters of the cities in the Imperium have similar traps for farseers, it's the Privacy Ordinance."

"My mistake," said the major. "But how could I have known? The last thing I would have expected is another Imperium."

"Major, sir . . . ," called one of the thaums engaged with the crystal.

"Yes?"

"We have a complete map."

"And?"

"Nothing. A wilderness, a desert. Throw it on visual?"

"No cities? No . . . beings?"

"Nothing. You want to see?"

They took a long look. Gould tapped his teeth with the stem of his pipe. "Nice work," he finally said. "A total fake. At such a distance and for the whole planet . . . a masterpiece. With an illusion like that"--he regarded the phantom orb--"the Crawler had better look to his laurels. Ah, this will be a tough one, General, a tough one."

#

Since they had mastered the wraiths only at the last moment, there was no time for any real reconnaissance, so the General had them verify a few places chosen at random: each turned out to be in conformity with the map drawn under the subspell of the John the Fourth's construct. Which came as no surprise, since falsity was not anticipated in every detail. Anticipated

were a few lies submerged in a sea of truth.

As the ship entered the planet's gravity, its glamour scanned the moons. The demons made a multiscale map of the system: six planets. The four more distant were frozen rock, the one closer to the sun was molten rock.

The four thaums who had been cursed into telepassives eavesdropped on the minds of the locals. They in turn were monitored by both men and demons, and when the foursome encountered the first threads of the Brain Spider, the connection was immediately severed. The Spider was powerful, its net covering every continent. The reverse spells sent along those threads of might looped at the first nodes. It had been brilliantly designed: by spinning its web spherically, the Spider concealed the source of the curse, which lay inside, either above or below the planet's surface. The thing could not be tampered with.

A landing site had to be chosen. The General asked Gould, Croak, also a damned shade, a medium modality that was an almost pure vortex of thought, this to introduce a more rigorous element of necrompircism. They played a three-dimensional obi mumba drum. The crystal transposed its results to a map of the planet's surface. It pointed to a promontory on the largest continent, near the equator: a tropical savannah broken by groves of something like trees, with shores on a shallow gulf. Right at the terminator. The John the Fourth pierced the night.

Charms were activated to counter air resistance. The explorers entered the atmosphere in a protective field produced by the ship's construct; the living diamonds pulsed at an ultrahigh frequency of energy consumption. The crew felt no g's,

because the inertial deformation enchantment was still in place. Neither did they feel, for that reason, the braking of the John the Fourth, which was executed only fifty cubits above the ground, with monstrous deceleration. The ship hung over a sea of red grass.

The Iron General, who had hooked himself into the main system through an operational crystal, now released a hundred thoughts that had been previously primed and aimed. Observed through spex, it would have looked like an explosion. Spells sped in every direction. The power gauge climbed eight units as the John the Fourth raised around itself battlements of magic.

A split click later, at a telepathic nod from the General, the thaums activated the temporal thrusters of their suits and in streams of accelerated time fell to the planet's surface through holes that the John the Fourth opened in a double-digit dimension. The constructs of their armor maintained reduced Labunski-Kraft fields in readiness, to snap shut around them at the first whiff of danger.

This landing too was like an explosion. With the thaums burst forth hundreds upon thousands of charms and curses and nimbic runes, until the whole area throbbled with a wild tangle of interfolding, interpenetrating pneumas, glamours, and astral weirds. The thaums, still astride their thrusters, carried by teams of djinns and their own psychokinetic rubies, flew to their prearranged positions. A few rose vertically, straight as a candle, to seal the top of the protecting dome.

Meanwhile the demons of the crystal analyzed the information taken directly from the surroundings and announced that they could find nothing off or bogus in the earlier image ob-

tained by magiorecon. Schwentitz therefore advised that the level of combat alert be lowered a notch, and he sent spirits to do a regular scope of the vicinity, in an expanding spiral. Then he himself emerged.

Croak, in full battle gear, stood at the base of the levitator column. He resembled a petrified insect. His codestruct familiar turned slowly above his head, baring at unseen foes its fangs of mortal curses.

The decisional lethals, fully autonomous, released from the merlons of the John the Fourth, swarmed in the quickly darkening air like carrion birds above a future battlefield; seen through the visispex, they were blazing diamond hearts, from which issued spherical waves of ectoplasmic poison.

The General landed in the grass and stood on legs spread wide. He stamped the ground as one tests the integrity of a floor in an old building.

"So, it has come to pass."

Croak, deep in a conversation with his demon, through which he was supervising the actions of the thaums, answered Schwentitz with some vague thought.

The General inhaled; the air smelled of fresh paint and the stink of an extinguished campfire. He looked around him through his spex. Spells obscured the horizon; the poltergeists tearing through the grass, the artifacts of defense and attack spreading everywhere made one dizzy. He seized time-space in his left hand, tore it, and rode a wave two versts to a grove by the gulf. A thaum who had levitated atop a cliff, seeing Schwentitz, flew down.

"General."

"I only wanted to have a look at the water."

The sea was like any sea on Earth: the same billows, the same roar, the same limitlessness and might of nature.

"Do you have an idea who they are?" asked the thaum, clearing his visored helmet. He was young, blond, with a hooked nose and red eyebrows.

"Who?"

"They."

"They are the enemy."

"I mean, what they look like, what kind of creatures they are . . ."

"No."

The General visited a few more outposts and returned finally to where the John the Fourth stood.

The sun had set; everyone had switched to infrared. The thaums who weren't serving in the cordon of sentries had spread out in the area. In the blue light of the phosphorescent belly of the ship a table had been set up and several chairs. Someone had started a campfire. Farther off, they were showing, by illusion prism, the last episode of Ajarvina. A half-naked fairy was singing, under alien stars, an incomprehensible song in a dying tongue.

The General sat down beside Gould.

"Croak permitted this picnic?" he muttered. "Doesn't make sense. It's dangerous to relax in the middle of a military operation."

"You exaggerate." The kineticist waved his pipe. "You can see for yourself how surrounded with charms we are. The Bird with his whole army couldn't get in here."

"The Bird could."

Gould looked askance at the count. "What's eating you? Why

are you so low? You found your planet! Have you decided what to name it?"

"I haven't given thought to that," the General lied.

Poltergeists brought supper from the ship's kitchen. The culinary genie had made, for the occasion, a savory game dish. Croak turned a blind eye to the keg of ale that had been smuggled in.

Ajarvina was no longer singing, she was in tears. Someone clapped. Someone else began humming "The Lot of a Thaum." All this increasingly annoyed the General. He flexed his magic hand, setting up a rhythmic spasm in that gleaming hex machine. "For God's sake, these are soldiers, the veterans of many battles!" he growled. "No one yet has declared victory. We haven't even seen the enemy! We're on territory that couldn't be more alien, farkls from home--and they are having a party!"

Gould gave him a look. "Qasmina, I see, hasn't helped you. Those eight hundred years are a weight."

Schwentitz glared at the lieutenant much as a graybeard glares at a tot, with stern eyes and a raised finger.

Gould winced. "Tell me instead what your plan is."

"The plan is simple," said the General. "We find the origin of all these snares and blocks. Then we'll see."

"Simple, yes. And how do you intend to find the origin?"

"It's only a matter of time. The ghosts will hit a wall somewhere, and there we strike."

"You're prepared to start an interstellar war with a hundred men?"

The General didn't reply to that. He finished his ale, took another bite of smoked ham, and walked away into the

darkness.

He disconnected his spex and shut down all the nonvital functions of his magic senses. Now he could hear the whisper of the high grasses that brushed his legs like faithful dogs. He broke off one blade of grass. It shriveled in his hand: in a few clicks the blade had blackened and shrunk into a tight coil. He threw it away. He walked on, and from the ground the whispering continued. Sh, tsh, shhh. Above a hill he saw a flat shadow against the sky. He put the light eater on his eyes. The shadow was a tree. That is, not a tree but its counterpart here. The crown was leafless, a pink cotton ball all of breathing pulp. Nothing there moved in the wind--the throb only of a dense rose. The General drew closer to the plant. Was it a plant? With his magic hand he touched the trunk. He felt life. He felt thought. The deep overhang of quivering fluff dipped even more over Schwentitz. The General released a demon. The demon gave a mental shrug: smoke through one's fingers. The pseudotree breathed. The General stepped back. Not my life, not my death. It withdrew too, a fold of its pink. Did you wish, as I did, only to touch the unknown thing? Or did you come to kill me, swallow me, destroy me? Are you my enemy? Well? He smiled; the pulp pulsed. The General switched off the light eater, and night again dimmed his vision. A few dozen cubits from the thick trunk, he sat down on the warm earth, the sharp grass. The breeze washed his face with an unpleasant odor. The clenched fist of the silhouette shook at the sky. You hate me, eh? But what does your hate signify, if you are only a tree?

#

It was a massacre: the way a bug is crushed between finger and thumb. A massacre until the beginning of the second quarter of the click, when the Iron General stepped in. The killing continued, but the vector of deaths was reversed.

For that first quarter of a click, the defeat seemed total. The power of the magic unleashed on the John the Fourth's shields was so enormous, all four operational crystals on the ship shattered. Their demons, unexpectedly freed, only added to the confusion.

Fifteen of the eighteen thaums standing watch just then at the edge of the protective bubble were vaporized to free plasma before they had any inkling. The enemy's battle djinns entered in wedges of multilevel retrocurses amplified by three equidistant independent arrays of living diamonds that without letup sucked from the heart of neighboring stars their burning blood. A fourth diamond array suspended its thermodynamic function to point-place through the breeches that had been made the undiluted fury of solar fire.

Against such an attack the thaums should have been protected by the reflex-rebound algorithms of their armor, algorithms that automatically entered the mode of maximum time acceleration and bilocated their possessors over a probabilistic smear in space double curved to allow their immediate escape. They should have been; they were not. The invasion constructs, pulled in after the djinns, struck with eight-dimensional chaos fields, developing these with power witched by living gems into narrow entropic matrices. The charms of the thaums all fizzled. Some thaums, already in the plasma state, bilocated their scattered ions over the horizon. The djinns on

their wedges of burning constructs passed through the defense envelop of the ship as if it were not adamantine but butter.

At that moment all the countercurse of the John the Fourth construct were working at the highest pitch--that is, all those that did not require the constant monitoring of operational crystals. It was magic against magic. The infernal ovens of stars, turned into cold-steel energy, coursed across the battlefield in ripping torrents. The tension jumped the N'Zell-Mâ Barrier; the living diamonds were twisted in their settings. Their resonance opened above the peninsula hundreds of so-called damaged spells, which arose from the mindless permutation-recombination of formula fragments. Thus colors began to reverse in land and sky, the clouds and sun became negatives of themselves. One looked at one's outstretched hand as if through the wrong end of a telescope, its thick lens marred by an overwhelming defect. Winds arose, hurricanes tore the pink trees from the ground, roots and all. Through the air came the scream of changing frequencies, from barometric plunges where the interstitial seams were ripped asunder and gravitation crushed stone. Two thaums perished thus, torn to pieces barometrically.

The response of the other defenders was perforce slower than that of the John the Fourth construct--even with their tempo pushed to the limit. There was little they could do. The battle scopes showed such almighty pandemonium to their senses, such a tangle of spells from the enemy, the ship, the lethals, with a mass of nested obicadabras, magivariations autonomously generated on the theme of Annihilate--that they simply were unable to plug themselves into the fight. Without the help of the demons of the operational crystals, they had

to fall back on their genies and analytic amulets, their personal artifactual shielding. Moreover, the entropic matrices unfolded by the invasion constructs ate into the most fundamental structures of the spells inadequately fortified against them, and now these eroded curses only added to the confusion. Some presented to the thaums their comrades as the foe. In fractions of a click, fratricidal duels flared and died. Another seven corpses. The lethals began to malfunction; because not one genuine, physical enemy had yet shown himself, the only objects recognized by their algorithms as living were the bodies of the imperial thaums, so the lethals attacked them instead. Another twelve thaums expired, therefore, from the sudden turning of their blood to dust, from the freezing of their brains, from the infusion of toxic doses of hormones, from the instant rot of liver and heart.

At the moment when the Iron General entered the fray, only those thaums lived who had been quartered for the night inside the John the Fourth. But in that same moment the pikes of the intrusion phalanx had already reached the ship's last integument, and even the soldiers within had only split clicks left to live. The sword is invariably mightier than the shield.

With his first thought the General activated the entire artifactium of his corporeal persona. For his hand was only the most visible part of the transformation that had perfected his panoplied organism. What people saw, even seasoned thaums, even Croak--the Count of Cardlass and Phlon in the field dress of the leader of the Zeroth Army--was the head of the dragon only, raised above the mirror of the lake, above its wavering, flat reflection in flowing water. At times something glimmered there below the surface, an enormous dark monstrous shape--but

they forgot it instantly, put it out of their mind, because it was unlike anything, it could not be named, could not be compared, a strain on the imagination. They went no further than the legend: the deathless Iron General, the archetypal thaum. But the legend was but a fraction of the reality.

He bent time and space. He entered the chronosphere of maxtempo. Again he bent the continuum, creating a second chronosphere. Four times he repeated this. At last, enfolded in a temporal onion, he was so in advance of the rest of the ether that only a handful of photons reached his eyes. In the outer shielding he relied on the algorithms of his hand's hard curses and opened for them a path to his living-diamond tetradon. This was a quintuple infinite series of crystals connected in phase, each up one dimension. It ended and began in the "finger bones" of the General's left hand, except for the thumb, which played another role. Inert, the tetradon, as a closed system, was completely hidden. Engaged, it could implode quasars, explode pulsars.

The General flexed his left hand: the John the Fourth coiled into a torus, spun, shrank to a grain of sand, and disappeared. The General unflexed his left hand: the first layer of the temporal onion was blown away, along with all the other chronal and entropic charms. He made a fist: the environs, to the horizon, were reflected hemispherically on Schwentitz's body and thrown to the other side. Thousands of tons of earth, air, water, plants he crushed in his clenched hand. He stabbed with his thumb, and they were consumed by the black hole of a galactic core.

He stood now at the bottom of a vast crater of destruction, a black saucer of the planet's interior brutally scalped

of its biosphere. Rubble trickled, rocks fell, sand flowed, lava rumbled. The rays of the rising sun pierced with difficulty the dust and ash that hung in the air. If not for the whirlwind produced by the sudden hole in the air, he would not have seen the sky. Through his spex he observed the cold flame of the tetradon pulsing at an undreamed-of frequency, brighter than forked lightning, brighter than a naked star.

Before the first of the broken rocks reached in its fall the bottom of the crater--so slowly, slowly did it fall--the General spread across the entire planet, enclosing it in the mirror of his temporal onion. He was now all-time, the clepsydra of all clepsydras. In the palm of his hand turned with wormlike sluggishness the life of the planet. He saw everything. Gigaspex revealed to his eyes the lines of power. He observed and made another fist. The planet imploded. Before he had removed the last layer of his temporal onion, the black hole had evaporated.

The General opened his hand. The John the Fourth was spat out. He folded himself to enter it.

At the sight of him, Gould yelled, "Arrrr! What--?!"

The General quickly assumed the illusion of his normal shape.

"Ah . . . it's you," said the lieutenant with relief. "Good God, Schwentitz, what's been happening is--"

"I know. How many on board?"

"We're in space!" exclaimed the kineticist from the seat of the first pilot. "Autoherm! Purple alert! Evasive maneuvers, lieutenant?! Do we . . . ?"

"Right. And full throttle." Gould gave the orders, then turned again to the General. "You have no idea what--"

Croak bilocated himself into the control room.

"You're alive, General sir!" gasped the aide-de-camp. "The crystals all cracked, and--"

"Eleven," Schwentitz told them.

"What?"

"I counted. We have eleven thaums with us on board. That's how many survived."

"Lieutenant, the planet has imploded!" cried someone outside the room, possibly by phonic hex.

"What planet?" snapped Gould, disoriented, patting his pockets for his pipe.

"The planet Treason," said the Iron General.

#

"There's no doubt. Consider, gentlemen. They were waiting for us."

"Who? But you collapsed that globe, General."

"Not a living soul is left," said Gould. "Yes, treachery, of course, it's obvious. But now all the evidence has been destroyed, and we're nowhere."

"If not a living soul, then a dead one," said the General, and he opened his arms to summon. The others quickly shut their minds. Schwentitz spread the net of his thoughts, luring ghosts into it. "We're sufficiently close," he explained, "and not enough time has passed for them to lose their identities."

"But this is dangerous," Croak put in. "Because if they aren't human, and if it wasn't treachery . . ."

Just then Ensign Yung materialized between the arms of Schwentitz.

"Not you," the General whispered. "Go, forget, go."

"Hurts hurts oh it hurts," sobbed Yung.

Schwentitz clapped, and the specter vanished. Again he stretched forth his arms and repeated the summoning.

They waited long. Finally a few shadows churned and solidified into the silhouette of a man. The face did not belong to any of the fallen thaums of the Imperium.

"You are mine!" the General shouted at the ghost. "Serve me!"

The veins stood out on the neck and temples of the specter, but he bent over in a bow.

"Who are you?" asked Gould.

"I . . . am Haasir Trvak, Blue Company, Assagon . . . Let me go."

"You were a thaum of the Bird?"

"I am . . . was . . . yes."

"The Bird sent you here?"

"We lay in wait . . . those were the orders. To kill everyone. That there should be no trace left, no witness escaped. We . . . carried out our orders . . . God's punishment on you . . . Let me go!"

"How did you know we were coming? Who sent that information?"

"I don't know . . . don't! It came directly from the Leader's office. We trained . . . then were teleported . . . eleven hundred didn't make it. We were to wait and . . . Those were the orders, I know nothing."

"A suicide mission," mused Croak. "The Bird doesn't have interstellar ships, so he resorts to the crapshoot of teleporting. They would have lost plenty coming back too. But no, there were no plans for their return: no witnesses means no

witnesses. Most likely they would have been teleported afterward into the heart of a star."

Schwentitz clapped; the spirit disappeared.

"So?"

"Treason."

"Treason."

"Who?"

"Blodgett. Or Orvid," said Croak. "It's clear. Orvid was the one who announced that they found a planet. And the Bird's thaums even had time to train for this."

"A setup, the whole thing," agreed Gould.

"An attempt to assassinate you sir," said the major, nodding. "I see no other explanation. None of us is important enough to warrant such costly measures for liquidation. Whereas killing the Iron General, that is no little thing. They laid their trap with care. Cut off from the Imperium, without communications, taken completely by surprise . . . we really hadn't a prayer. Their scheme should not have failed."

"And yet," said Gould, looking over his pipe at the silent General, "and yet it failed. What are you, Raymond?"

"What I must be to survive," replied the count. "Nothing less. And it is growing harder to have my successive assassins take me for a doddering old man. Next time, they'll blow up the sun to kill me."

"What do we do, General sir?" Croak quickly asked, to change a subject that was clearly painful for Schwentitz.

"What else? We fly to the contact point with full masking, and we listen in. And then we see."

Gould, puffing serenely on his pipe, had opened a telephatic canal to the General. Securing it with a heavy mental

block, he asked:

"See what? You know it's a plot. The Bird in cahoots with the Castle. I'll bet you anything that Bogumil no longer lives. You really shouldn't have allowed them to horn in like this."

"There was a royal order."

"I know there was a royal order. But on whose initiative? Not the king's. I can guess: Birzinni. Well? You think I'm mistaken?"

"I must be sure."

"Sure? It's all so plain. How could they have been so stupid."

"You suggest a plot behind the plot?"

"I suggest nothing. I simply know the legend of you, and they do also. If Bogumil is not alive . . ."

"Then what?"

"May it be on their heads!"

#

"Come in, Archie."

"Where are you?"

"Close enough to converse. Speak."

Major Archie on the large distance mirror in the mess hall of the John the Fourth wiped the sweat from his forehead. He was in his office on Collop. The ugly rock of the Monk, visible in the window behind him, stretched the gnarled claws of its shadow across lawns of gray.

"A coup, General. Birzinni has crowned himself. He has the backing of the Bird. He gave the Bird the Hills and all of

Twa. And Magura with the neighboring islands. The Bird will secure the new borders. They signed a treaty. In the armies now people either take the new oath or they're out on their ass."

"All have sworn allegiance?"

"Some have."

"The Zeroth Army?"

"No."

"And what of Bogumil?"

"Birzinni denies it. But no one has seen the king since the assumption of power. Most likely the Bird's thaums teleported him to his death."

"How is it for you at Collop?"

"They've just reminded themselves of us. We have seven clocks, no more, to submit. Then . . . God knows, they'll grind us, to dust no doubt."

The General turned to Gould. "How soon can we be there, at top speed?"

"Top speed?" The lieutenant laughed. "This ship has been tested often, but its limit is determined, each time, only by the timidity of its testers."

"The diamonds were dislocated during the attack on planet Treason," said one of the thaums.

"Undislocate them."

"Hang on, Archie," the Iron General said to the mirror.

"Yes. If I only knew what to hang on to," said the captain gloomily.

"To me, Archie, to me."

#

They arrived in the nick of time. Hardly had the Labunski-Kraft field of the Monk closed around the John the Fourth when a mighty soulsucker clamped shut on Collop. Archie's spy shades retreated along the giant's lines of force and reached Grough, one of the main cities of the League--a good sign, because Collop had not been mentioned in the treaty signed by Birzinni, evidently the usurper didn't have many thaums of his own and needed to use the Bird's; in that way he had incurred a debt, revealed his weakness, and lost his equal footing.

The soulsucker, an automated invoker of all souls in living bodies, made it impossible for anyone to leave the moon alive, but it also made invasion impossible: only polters, demons, djinns could pass through it--either lower creatures or, as people put it, spirits already liberated from the flesh.

"Although . . . we can go around it," said the Iron General during a council quickly convened after his arrival. Besides him, at the table were Gould, Croak, Archie, and the small staff, subordinate to Archie, of the moon's imperial outpost of the Zeroth Army. Also attending were two of the crew of Crater, a protectorate now of the Monk: re Kwäz and a woman civilian called Magdalene Lubicz-Ankh, supposedly a blood relative of Ferdinand himself.

They represented the 280 former subjects of the Princedom of Peace who now found themselves in this fatal trap--thanks to the Iron General.

"And if they start tightening it . . . ?" asked Lubicz-Ankh, clearly occupied with her own thoughts.

"Our diamonds should be able to handle that," said Archie with a shrug.

"Can't they block our diamonds' access to solar energy?"

"Too many variables," the captain said, turning his head. "We can dodge their blocking, without even a noticeable pause in power."

"The General was saying," Croak interrupted, raising his voice, "that he knows a way around the soulsucker."

"Really?" Re Kwäz raised his eyebrows.

"It's simple," said Schwentitz. "Teleportation."

"Uh . . ."

"Playing roulette with death."

"Is there another suggestion?"

"We can wait."

"At least we're still alive. They aren't exterminating us quite yet. Why put our head in the noose?"

The General loosed a short acoustic charm. When the gong died to silence, he said, "I will do the teleporting."

"You mean, you guarantee it?" asked re Kwäz.

"Yes."

That made an impression.

Lubicz-Ankh leaned over the table. "You guarantee, a hundred percent, that we will survive teleportation?"

"That is correct."

In a single moment the mood changed from grim fatalism to guarded optimism.

"Is that . . . the plan?" asked Croak. "Flight?"

"Plan for what?" shot re Kwäz.

Not answering that, Croak turned directly to Schwentitz. "Are you giving up, then, General sir?"

The Iron General smiled, for Croak's response was exactly as he had foreseen: Croak alone never lost faith in his god.

"This is not a matter to discuss in such large company. How many thaums do we have on Collop?"

"Thirty-two, counting ours and the moon's," answered Archie.

"That will do."

Re Kwäz guffawed. "With such a handful you would take on the Imperium?!"

"Don't forget all the thaums, below, who haven't sworn allegiance to Birzinni."

"How do you know, perhaps they have by now, or else are dead. We have no communications, no idea what's going on there, all transmissions are scrambled, and the spirits too have been taken care of."

"We'll find out. Where should we place you? On the Islands?"

"I suppose."

"Good. In that case . . . we'll see you in hangar 4 in two clocks."

Re Kwäz and Lubicz-Ankh bowed and left.

Archie locked the door and turned on the room's antibug construct.

"You can do this, General? So many people, individually?"

"I have teleported whole armies, son."

They recalled the legends.

"So--what is the plan?" repeated Croak.

"I move everyone here to Earth. There we take stock of the situation. I might mobilize the Zeroth Army, what remains of it, and launch a surprise attack from Baurabiss. As this is only an initial stage of the coup, the organizational structures are not yet in place, things still depend on a few dozen

traitors. Before the attack, I take out Birzinni and his band. Then the thaums occupy the Castle and the key positions in Dzungoon. It might also be a good idea to make the Crawler provide us with direct transmissions."

"You make it sound so simple."

"Basically everything hinges on our removing Birzinni and the cabal. The Bird's troops are far from the capital. People will need to take the lead from someone. The Castle is the easiest: its bureaucratic inertia will serve us as it has served Birzinni. As for the rabble, one can never be certain there, but I doubt that the populace burns with love for Birzinni. Bogumil has not yet managed to offend his subjects, whereas Birzinni undoubtedly had to act decisively during the takeover, so we can expect a certain number of new corpses. And even if not, the Crawler should be able to handle that. When they see Birzinni in the sky as a prisoner, humbled . . . it will suffice."

"Still, so horribly simple," said Archie, shaking his head but grinning.

"They didn't exaggerate," remarked Gould. "They ought to have blown up the star of planet Treason. And even that would have been a cheap price to pay for your demise."

#

Birzinni was just leaving the bathroom on the royal floor of the Castle when from a wall mirror with a gold frame the Iron General stepped out and blocked his way.

"A phantom," Birzinni thought.

"No phantom," said Schwentitz, whereupon he grabbed him

with his left hand, squeezed him, tossed him in his mouth, and swallowed him. Then he went back into the mirror.

A click later he burst into his office in Baurabiss. Croak was waiting for him there, with practically the entire staff of the Zeroth Army. The Iron General emerged from a point of light, in a thunderclap of expanding air.

Exchanging bows with his men, he checked the constructs of the tower. They were untouched. He could feel safe here: for several centuries he had been continually building and perfecting them.

"Bad news, General," said Colonel Tube.

"Speak."

"You may already know. Birzinni had Qasmina far Nagla killed, her body incinerated, her ashes scattered across several planes, and her spirit cursed with summary and irreversible depersonalization."

"Yes, I know."

"He apparently did the same with a few hundred others."

"Yes." He spat. "Here is Birzinni." He spat. "Here is Orvid." He continued spitting. They popped open three-dimensionally and fell senseless. The thaums blocked all five senses of each. "Keep them alive. They may be of use."

The thaums saluted.

"Croak explained the plan to you?"

"Aye aye sir."

"There are no changes; everything according to the harmonogram. The clock is thirty-seven and a half. The djinns and polters are in harness?"

"Aye aye sir."

"Where is the Crawler?"

One of the thaums gave a telepathic order.

"He'll be here in two trices."

"Good."

"Count." General Wiggins came forward, after Schwentitz the oldest and highest-ranking thaum. "You know about Bogumil. You know about Anna and the little Urmatrix. They too were on the list. We have confirmation from the High Invisibles. All are dead and unresurrectible."

"And so?"

"Birzinni is finished, that is good. But what will follow him, seeing as he has severed the dynastic line so thoroughly? Who comes after, who? The Bird is at our doorstep. He may remember his collaborator when the throne of Thorth is empty."

"And so?"

"In your veins, Count sir," Croak put in, coming to the aid of Wiggins, "flows the blood of the Vazhgravs. True, the point of consanguinity goes back hundreds of years--but for that the blood is all the more noble."

In my veins, thought Schwentitz, amused despite himself. In my veins. They are not veins, nor is there blood in them, and certainly nothing of the Vazhgravs.

"The major is right, he has convinced us all." General Wiggins bent at the waist, in a bow reserved for the monarch. The others without hesitation made like obeisance. "For the third time the people put the crown on your head, and this time you may not, you do not have the right, to refuse it."

"Croak, Croak," sighed Schwentitz. "What have you cooked up? I should have collapsed you when I collapsed planet Treason."

"You may collapse me at any time, sire," said Croak. "But

first accept the crown."

The Iron General waved a hand. "Not now, not now, it's too early for this. Let us not divide up the treasure of a dragon that still lives."

"There may not be time later."

"We have little time now. End of the meeting! To your places!"

The thaums departed. But as they left, they exchanged a secret smile: He didn't say no.

In the office doorway the Crawler passed Birzinni being removed by the polters. His face showed nothing. But entering, he practically stood at attention, silent and unmoving until Schwentitz spoke first.

"I have reason to believe that you were in on this."

The old kobold blinked. "I wasn't," he said.

"I'll give you a chance to prove it."

A flutter of the eyelids. "Thank you."

"I want the best that you and your illusionists can do."

"Over all Dzungoon?"

"Over all the Imperium. Every shrop and shire."

"It's not possible."

"It is possible."

"Yes, of course. When?"

"Tonight."

"Of course. May I go?"

"My demons will go with you."

#

The night went on and on. From the passage of the terminator

through Dzungoon, at which instant the General commenced a series of quick teleportations, until two clocks before dawn, when the sky blazed up with the Crawler's illusion, the capital's ordinary night life filled the streets, alleys, parks, port, and buildings. The inhabitants took in their stride the change that had occurred at the top floor of the Castle, showing the aplomb of those accustomed to eating the daily bread of politics. An outside observer would not have guessed, from their behavior, what had transpired over the last few days--or what was transpiring now, since none of the persons teleported from Collop manifested themselves on the street until Operation Flash Flood began, and the operation itself lasted no more than several clicks and there were hardly any eyewitnesses to what the thaums did. The thaums preferred on principle to act in a sudden and covert manner; moreover, their actions were by and large unobservable by nonthaums or people without artifactual implants or aids like spex.

In the moment the Iron General appeared with his division from Collop, there were almost a thousand thaums within the walls of Baurabiss who had not yet sworn fealty to Birzinni. In the neighboring encampments as well as in their homes downtown there were another five thousand. All in all, over a third of the Zeroth Army--the branch of the Imperium's thaum forces that from its inception had been led directly by the Iron General. For that reason, could he count on each and every thaum? Of course not. But with a respectable degree of probability he could count on them as a group: tradition, of which the Iron General constituted an indispensable part, formed the image and concept of a thaum every bit as much as did the ability the work martial magic. Trampling on that tra-

dition, a thaum would have to trample on himself.

Until the Iron General's appearance, negotiations between Birzinni and the staff of the Zeroth Army had reached an impasse, the point when the word "unacceptable" is used, each side feeling that it will gain nothing by changing its position, and that the least concession for diplomacy, even one step, will lead to its destruction.

Birzinni knew that he lacked the wherewithal to crush the thaums: sending ordinary troops against them made no sense, and the trained thaums who stood behind the usurper numbered no more than a couple of dozen. They were mainly recon people, taken from the Zeroth and placed under the command of the General Staff, people not as influenced by the Iron General--more theoreticians, more technicians than your basic thaum.

Whereas in Baurabiss there was the realization that any radical move against the power structure at Thorth was pointless, inasmuch as in the present geopolitical context no such enterprise could possibly succeed for more than a week or two: the Bird was at the border, the Bird was crossing the border, and the Bird--as had become abundantly clear in the light of the most recent communiqué--was hand in glove with Birzinni and without a doubt had at his disposal more than enough battle-ready thaums. Prospects were therefore not promising, in the view of Wiggins and his subordinates: time was against them. The Bird would eventually send the traitors reinforcements; and that could happen sooner than Birzinni expected or, indeed, wished, because in the end it would occur to the Dictator, given the persistent weakness of his partner, that in one move he could have it all--ordering his thaums to take Dzungoon to "secure" the city against the rebels in Baurabiss.

Did Birzinni too feel the knife at his throat? And if so, what more could he do, what concessions could he make, if in the negotiations with Wiggins his back was already to the wall . . . ?

The Iron General's arrival on the scene changed the situation to a degree that astonished even Croak and Gould. For in one way or another the thaums would have to include the return of Schwentitz in their calculations. True, rumors were circulating about his death (rumors no doubt begun at the behest of Birzinni), but such rumors had accompanied every disappearance of the General. It was evident, in any case, that if the John the Fourth had gone outside the range of the mirrors, all such information was unreliable.

Still, the return of the Iron General made such an impression, it was as if Lucius Vazhgrav himself had risen from the dead. No sooner had the news spread than the thaums of Baurabiss began to gird for battle. It was obvious to everyone that at the present pass there was no point in waiting, that whatever had to be done should be done quickly, because Schwentitz's presence would not remain a secret for long and then they would lose the trump card of surprise. Accordingly, the Iron General set the attack for that very night. No one protested.

"They needed only a leader, a name, a flag," Croak said later. "The General restored their faith in a future, offered them an alternative to Birzinni and the Bird. Legends don't die, Impossible, We'll manage, It'll all work out, He can't lose. That was how they thought."

So there was no hesitation, and no elaborate preparation. It would not be a long campaign but precisely a blitzthaum

raid: Operation Flash Flood. At the synchronized signal the divisions moved out. Everyone in full battle gear, everyone with a temporal afterburner, in spheres of invisibility maintained by demons, in camouflage clouds of microlethals, in cryosnake array. Tens of thousands of djinns and polters had already risen from Baurabiss.

"The city will be ours tonight," the Iron General told his army by telepathy.

Not one inhabitant of Dzungoon saw the thaums threading their way across the starry sky among the chariots, tearing through the night like ultrasonic comets, tails braided with enchantments. No one happened to look in the right direction through spex or some artifactual equivalent, and no wizards were on their guard.

Schwentitz went with the division assigned to the storming of the Castle. Storming--too strong a word. The whole idea was surprise and taking out those few thaums and merlinists who had sided with Birzinni. The rest was a matter of striking fear into hearts--at which the thaums were uncommonly good.

Those victims tracked down by the djinns in their homes, most of them asleep, were killed or frozen before they could even form the thought of defending themselves. Only in the rooms of the General Staff was there combat. Its few witnesses, nonthaums, heard no more than a cry cut off, saw no more than a sudden jerk or two. A blink, and it was over: everywhere blood, bodies, ashes. Gradually on the field of battle, stepping from illusion, appeared the thaums in their armor. The bat swarms of the lethals flitted over the parquet floor from room to room, down corridors and stairwells, seeking persons who fit the image given them. Death rattles were

heard. Around the captives taken blue cryosnakes writhed, the chill from them freezing and cracking the blood that had flowed. Some of the thaums, still temporally onioned, flashed past in colors as they sped to their destinations, shielded by polters from obstacles moving and nonmoving.

"Aargh!" aarghed Lambraux when the Iron General plucked from his head, one by one, all five demons.

Nux Vomica in his chambers on the highest level of Ivo Tower tried to commit suicide, but the microlethals found him and covered him like flies. They burned out the nerves in the muscles of his arms and legs, then the personal polter of Schwentitz brought a cryosnake and iced Vomica.

Several people jumped from the castle windows, but the djinns caught them in midair. One of the jumpers, a thaum, rocketed toward the sea. Chase was given by two thaums of the Iron General, and over the bay filled with ships a brief battle ensued, of curse and countercurse, lost by the one pursued before it was begun, for he wore no armor and, unaccessoried, fought at a significantly slower tempo than the pair in full gear. They turned him inside out through his backbone, and he fell to the water like a bloody octopus of bone, vein, tendon, and flesh. They sent a pneumolytic after the traitor, to dissect and disentitize his soul.

"The city is ours," said the Iron General when he received reports from all divisions. "Now, administration." He turned to Croak. "Communications. Intelligence. We have a hole here: what the Bird is doing. A second loyalty oath from the troops. Mobilization. Keep an eye on the Crawler. Also, have him calibrate this balcony. Staff the castle. And so on. Where is Wiggins?"

"He flew off to talk with the regulars."

"Good. Find re Kwäz, let him know what happened and let him tell Ferdinand. The offer to negotiate remains open. I give my word. He knows, after Collop he'll have no qualms, he'll vouch for me, that Lubicz-Ankh woman may also. Let the prince come out of hiding. This is his country, after all. There's an alliance to repulse. If that doesn't interest him, nothing will."

"Yes sir. One of Orvid's men requests an audience, General. He gave the password."

"Who?"

"Blodgett."

"Send him up."

The Iron General went to the adjoining room and shut the door after him. From the balcony wafted a nocturnal breeze. The General was still in full gear, which, though fundamentally different from the standard-issue suit of a thaum, made a similar impression: the asymmetry of the weaponry; its stems, spouts, sprouts, tentacles, nozzles; its tiny wings made of unknown material and serving no obvious function; the body hidden in wart-covered armor--a two-legged insect. The General took off his helmet and set it on the table. With creaking and crunching he eased himself into a chair, and the chair too creaked and crunched. Through the open door to the balcony he could see the sky over Dzungoon, the stars, the clouds veiling the stars as they scudded inland.

Blodgett entered.

"Close the door."

Blodgett closed the door.

Schwentitz activated the antisnoop.

"Did you plan all this, General?" asked Blodgett. Having crossed the threshold and taken two short steps, he stood motionless, separated from Schwentitz by half the empty room, by light and shadow, his sullen gaze on the count, who sat by the table piled with papers and whose face held absolutely no expression as he watched the dark clouds cross the night.

"Did you? I must know!"

"Why must you?"

Blodgett clenched his fists. "Traitor!" he rasped in a strangled whisper at the back of his throat. He cocked his head, glared at the calm General with half-closed eyes of rage under raven-black brows, his face swollen and flushed.

"What do you want, Blodgett?"

"You knew everything! I was your informant for a year. You knew all Orvid's plans, knew that we found that 583B in the Blind Hunter months before and that Orvid was only waiting for the word from Birzinni. You knew, you knew it was a trap, a plot hatched by Birzinni and his cabal. And what did you do? Nothing! Spurring them on by doing nothing. You didn't warn Bogumil. You didn't warn anyone. If that is not treason, what is?!"

"And had I warned people--and I tried, God knows I tried--what would that have accomplished?"

"Bogumil would be alive!" Blodgett spat. "Do you think I don't see what is going on here? Do you think I don't hear what people are saying? In their hearts they have already crowned you!"

"Ah, so I did it for the crown, is that it? To exalt myself?"

"You deny it?"

"God, Blodgett, you amuse me."

"You mock me!"

The General for the first time turned toward the farseer. He crooked a finger, and the space between them folded: Blodgett suddenly found himself within arm's reach of Schwentitz.

"And if Bogumil were alive," said the count between his teeth, "what would that accomplish? Would he remove the danger? Would he destroy Birzinni, crush the conspirators? Move against the Bird? You know he wouldn't do any of those things. He was a weak ruler. A bad king, because he feared to use his own power. With his every word, his every decision, he asked to be betrayed--if not Birzinni, it would have been another; if not the Bird and the League, someone else would have attacked. This is a matter not of persons but of moment and circumstance. The realm now finds itself in a period of feeble senility. And Bogumil's reign marked its death, the death of the kingdom. We are food for political predators, who even now tear pieces of quivering flesh from the body of the Imperium."

"So the scepter must pass into the hands of the Iron General, who alone can save the country."

"Yes. Yes. I couldn't wait any longer. Bogumil with Birzinni--both fruits of the same tree, the same time--would have destroyed, squandered the heritage of dozens of generations of Thorthians."

"Then death to them, and for you the crown."

"Can't you understand? For hundreds of years I served this nation, did everything so it would grow in strength and prosperity, protected it from misfortune, guided it to still waters, led it in war, sustained it in times of woe. The people believe in me, in their Iron General; I am their talisman,

banner, hymn. How could I let them down, let them fall into ruin?"

"The people?" Blodgett laughed. "And you say that, eight-hundred-year magus? And what sort of people are they? Thor-thians? Think back to the beginning, remind yourself. What do the millions who inhabit the lands of the Imperium today have in common with the tribe by the bay that gave its name to the realm? Language? Religion? Tradition? Culture? An ideology or worldview? Nothing, nothing is the same. To whom did you swear loyalty, to what? To the Vazhgravs, the blood line! Not to any abstraction, which you cannot even define and in relation to which such things as love, fidelity, and treason have no meaning. One can be faithful only to individuals, and you pledged yourself to serve individuals. To serve the dynasty! That is your faith and your motto: Defender of the Line. It is a truth that has been held to, unshakably, by beggar and baron alike; it has been taught to each successive heir, from earliest childhood repeated: This is your shield, your shelter, true since time immemorial and for all time, he will lay down his life for you, trust him, trust him. They saw your face above the cradle, and you taught them, wiped their noses when they wept; and Bogumil too, who as you say was a weak and bad king. He fell asleep in your lap, I saw it myself. And you, Iron General, what did you do?" Blodgett sneered. "You betrayed him, turned him over to his killers. For the realm, for the people--for your power! Knowing you could not survive the defeat of a land with which you are so bound, whose might is your might. The Imperium and the Iron General, they are one and the same.

"So it was out of pride, self-worship. We, the short-

lived, had to dip our hands in blood, wield the sword, while you simply waited: eventually everything would come to you. It was a matter of probability, the calculation of chances, and even if a given circumstance was unlikely, you had time, it would come to pass, and did. Because you were not interested in a coup in the style of Birzinni, you didn't want the crown by force or intrigue, no, you aimed higher, you wanted the crown without having to pay for it. You wanted to betray the king, seize power, and all with your honor intact, the loyalty, the patriotism, the reputation of the Iron General unscathed. Could anything be more monstrous? . . .

"The people! Yes, they are born, they multiply, live, die. In this nation or another, under this rule or another, and there are more and more of them. Do you really consider them? No, what you see is a multitude: faceless millions. The people! How could you"--he cried in sudden despair--"how could you have trampled on such a lovely legend?! What are you anyway? A man? I doubt it. I remember what you said to me. In the beginning it was the hand, but the centuries passed and you kept improving yourself. I tried looking at you through spex: I was blocked. For gongs and gongs I built a powerful metavisi with dozens of deciphering gems; I came with Orvid and the ring ready--and beheld you as you left the room. Spells, spells, nothing but spells. Your body a knot of psychokinetic and sensorial hexes, your thoughts a roil of demons, you are one great walking curse, a homeostatic vortex of magic! Yes! Stop laughing! I spit upon you, monster!

"First the hand, then the arm, then the whole body was redone, then the mind. The bones are weak? Replace them with gravitational cryos. The thoughts slow? Accelerate them with

crystal operators, fortify them with demons, and with more, and more again, and arrange all this in a hierarchic logical megametamagicoconstruct. The heart is unreliable? Let corpuscular nanopolters move the blood in your veins. But veins age--so let us assist them with directional runes. But why even blood, when one can find a better, eldritch substitute? What then was left of the original? The basic instincts, the spectral dominants written into the algorithms of operational enchantments. The thirst for power. Pride. The name: the Iron General. An analogue of a man. An illusion. That is what you are, a self-maintaining illusion, for those around you as well as for yourself, since you continue to believe--rather, it still seems to you that you believe--that you are human. But it is not you, not you. Raymond Schwentitz no longer lives, he died, dissolved, dwindled to zero after the nth spell cast upon himself, not even noticing his disappearance, his melting away in that thaumatorium of thaumatoria. Whom do I accuse, whom do I blame? How can I demand decency from you, when a conscience is not compatible with a calculator demon? Upon what do I spit? The wind, an apparition, a mirage. Avaunt, be-gone! Tfu tfu tfu!"

The Iron General tightened his left hand, and Blodgett shrank to the size of a speck of dirt. Schwentitz extracted his soul and tossed the rest into the sun's core. The ghost inveighed and imprecated in his mind. The General spread out before him Blodgett's personhood, analyzed his memory for potential threats and wiped it completely clean, after which he released the empty spirit over Thorth. He then wove a five-sense illusion of Blodgett's body, placed a demon in it, instructed the demon how to act and respond as Blodgett, added

an antispex block--and ordered the illusion to leave the room, leave the Castle, and drown itself in the bay. The illusion departed.

Through the door left open by it, Croak peered. "May I?"

"What is it?"

"Ferdinand has replied. He is ready to parlay, re Kwäz has vouched for you. He wishes to know what the status is of the succession."

"Which means?"

"You know, General sir, what it means. He inquires about the crown."

"Ah Croak, Croak, you will never give me peace."

"Never, Your Highness," said the major with a happy grin.

"Tell him whatever will make him agree."

"So, yes?"

"Has Wiggins laid the ground?"

"After the official proclamation, there should be no problem. The sooner you do it, the better."

"Don't rush me. The Crawler opened the links to his mirrors?"

"Yes, it's now under his icon."

"Contact my railroad gnomes and have them start sending matériel and provender across the Pass."

"For how many men?"

"For an army, Croak, for an army."

"So there will be a counterattack."

"Of course there will. The Bird won't keep one inch of Imperial soil, of that you can be sure. I understand that Birzinni has already called for mobilization; we'll continue that. Start thinking about the concentration of forces, the

deployment of people and demons, logistics. I want us to move like lightning."

"Yes sir-sire! Highness!"

"You may go, count."

Croak blinked to hide his emotion, bowed low, and left.

Croak, Croak, Schwentitz sang sadly in his heart, what would I do without you? Of whom else could I be so certain that he would instantly recall my blood connection to the Vazhgravs and start agitating for the throne for me, before I breathed one word on the subject? And of course I may not breathe that word. Truly, you have placed the crown on my head, you, major, now count, soon senator and then High Chamberlain. You had to live, you were as indispensable to me as Birzinni, maybe even more so. A pity, though, that I couldn't hide Qasmina or take her with me on board the John the Fourth. Her little childish pouts, her whims . . . If her soul at least . . . But no, Birzinni was thorough there; it was to be expected. Unavoidable losses. Blodgett too. A pity, a real pity, a truly honest man, sterling, it didn't even enter his mind that I would obliterate him, so he hadn't protected himself with any afterlife backup.

Through a wall mirror the Iron General opened his connection to the Crawler.

"Track this form." Schwentitz pointed at himself. "Begin when I step out. Don't wait for a sign."

"General," said the obeisant Crawler. "You wish more than the picture, I gather."

"Exactly. I would handle the sound myself, but I can hardly multiply my person and reach all the towns simultaneously, whereas you have ether links practically everywhere."

"It's night. This will wake people. There will be confusion. To cover such space I must use a strong wave. There may be damage."

"Don't worry about it," Schwentitz said, ending the conversation. "I take full responsibility."

Closing the connection, the General removed for a moment the mental block from the room and gave a brief thought command for Birzinni to be brought in. Shortly the door opened, and the usurper flew in headfirst. Schwentitz dismissed the polters and took direct control of the paralyzed prisoner. He unlocked his vision and hearing, returned the power of movement to the muscles of his face. Birzinni batted his eyes furiously, bobbing in the air at the height of the General's shoulders, and tears began to flow.

"Ach," he groaned. He looked up, made a face. "And what now?"

The General crooked a finger, and on the table materialized the crown of the Imperium and the red-gold ceremonial robe of the kings of Thorth.

Birzinni swore.

"Glutted on triumph, are you? The Bird didn't get you. Ha. Vazhgrav, Vazhgrav. And what next? You'll strike at him now, start a war? Yes, of course you will . . ." He turned his head, a bitter smile twisting his mouth. "There will be a trial? You'll condemn the traitor? Let me tell you . . . You people are the traitors! Imperialists from the time of Lucius, Xavier, the Antoniuses. Don't you see where all this is leading? Self-destruction! I had to remove Bogumil, because he never would have understood; he grew up in your shadow, he thought in your categories, and even when he went against you,

he did it sullenly, always in reference to you. I never would have been able to control him completely. It would have ended, that way too, in disaster. Now the disaster is certain. You'll unleash a war we cannot win. Even you, the Iron General, will not win it, for that is impossible. If there were more continents on Earth . . . but there is only this one. What will you do? Level everything that lies beyond the borders of the Imperium? You'll need to exterminate four-fifths of humanity. Will you do that? Yes, I believe you are capable of such a thing.

"But even then, even then you cannot maintain the status quo. Because this is a completely different Earth. Can't you grasp that? How can you be so blind? These are no longer the days of imperial expansion, of annexation and discovery, of the politics of struggle for land, privileges, prestige. That epoch has passed. We have reached limits in our development, horizons have closed, the whole planet lies in the palm of our hand; we are now--humanity, civilization--a closed system that no new variable can enter. There is no longer any elsewhere. No more others, no aliens. An empire now cannot be self-sufficient, independent. Famine in the Princedom, plague among the peoples of the League--they affect us as much as if we too were the victims. If only you had studied a little economics! But that was always beneath you: numbers, papers, bookkeeping, miserable commerce, let the peons and the gnomes see to that. Another conceptual archaism, another inanity of the old time. War, it must be war!

"What world are you living in? Now I, and those like me, the aristocracy of money, the CEOs, we are waging war in the name of the Imperium, we and not those thaums of yours. If you had spent even a moment thinking about the economy . . . An

agricultural collapse awaits us, a pit we will not climb out of. It is impossible to keep running the Imperium in the form that you nurture so fondly in your heart, impossible for us to close ourselves off like a single organism that eats its own excrement. We need precisely to experience a Bird, the League, a powerful League, the hungry mouths for our surplus and the cheap-labor workforce of hundreds of millions and the secondary markets and the economic enclaves on their lands.

"And what do you do? Start a crusade to defend the values of feudalism! You would make slaves of them? Slaves? That will kill us! For two generations now the Imperium has been rotting like a corpse. It is a corpse. For God's sake, General, think for a moment! We need the Bird, the League! Give them land, access to raw materials, open lines of credit! . . . No, I waste my time. You are deaf to me. No new idea can reach you. You reason in the same rigid formulas of yore. You are old, I know, old, yet old age need not mean stupidity, especially as you do not actually age--but then why can't you revise your views a little, allow a new era to influence you? When you created the Zeroth Army, after all, you showed enough flexibility to adapt to the new strategies of thaumic war. Though true, that was centuries ago. After, it's been as if someone froze your mind in place. You can only pile curse on top of curse, improve those spells of yours. Yet to see what's going on in the world, that exceeds your ability!

"General, make an effort, at least once! Don't destroy the Imperium! But I see I am talking to a wall, such an unyielding wall. So rejoice, you bastard, you've caught the traitors, yes, yet another triumph for the unsinkable Iron General, for honor and the blood line, the banners wave, hymns resound,

hurrah thaums, God will bless us, ever onward, in the name of the General, for the Imperium, honor above all"--Birzinni frothed--"you idiots, morons, benighted retarded dense--"

"We are all heroes and martyrs here, I see," muttered the Iron General, then numbed Birzinni's throat.

He rose. He counted to three. He went out on the balcony.

The sky boomed with the General. His person had swept aside the stars, moons, clouds. There was only he. An enormous, angular form in quasithaumic armor, an effigy of metal and glass that covered the cosmos. When he opened his mouth, the force of his words tore leaves off the trees.

"Thorthians! Citizens of the Imperium! The rule of the traitors is at an end! The conspirators have fallen into the hands of justice, and their punishment will be swift!"

Birzinni, bent in half by psychokinetic field, on his knees, his arms pulled before him, crawled out on the balcony. The Iron General grabbed him by the hair and jerked the head up, to show, in the sky above the city, the face of the former prime minister. Birzinni grimaced and writhed in helpless fury, bared his clenched teeth, batted wolfish eyes.

Schwentitz waited for the streets to fill with people. He waited a moment more in case some were late in other cities, cities whose inhabitants' responses he did not know.

"Behold the traitor! The murderer of King Bogumil!"

The people roared.

"What am I to do with the regicide? Should his life be spared?"

The people roared. Words could not be distinguished, but the sentiment was unmistakable.

The General lifted his left hand. A sword of blinding

white shot from it--the sky blazed brighter than the sun, Dzungoon was transformed into a maze of light and shadow. The General swung his arm and cut off Birzinni's head. The sword vanished. Dazzled, the spectators saw only after a moment or two the head held high in the right hand of Schwentitz. Though the cut had been cauterized by the fire of the magic blade, blood flowed. The Iron General stood motionless, his arm raised. A gray statue. Blood dripped.

Again the people roared.

"Death to all enemies of the Imperium!" cried Schwentitz.

"Deeath!!"

"Death to the Bird!"

"Deeeeath!!"

"Lo, I am the Iron General, the last of the Vazhgravs!" He cast away the head of Birzinni. From his room fluttered the crown and the ceremonial red-gold robe. The crown alit slowly on Schwentitz's brow, the robe buttoned itself around his armor, flapping in soft folds across the horizon. "I will wipe away your foes, regain your lands! I will return to you the days of ancient glory! On my honor I do swear this!!"

The people roared.

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