

The Dark Symphony

by Dean Ray Koontz, 1945-

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THE FIRST MOVEMENT

The Arena.

FIRST:

Loper hung five hundred feet above the street, his twelve fingers hooked like rigor-mortised worms over the glassy, featureless ledge.

The wind was brisk but not bully, a piper not a trumpeter. It chirruped down the canyon of the street and swept over the facade of the Primal Chord, the genetic engineering center of Musician society, teasing the birds that lived in the offal and straw nests anchored stickily to the precarious shelves.

Searching, he could feel no crevice for his fingers, just as he had found none on the previous forty-seven ledges. And now he had lost his rope and grappling hook. The hook had slipped as he had pulled himself up, and he had leaped convulsively, catching the last inch of the ledge as the rope and hook tumbled away into the night. Now he hung as the wind piped the darkness and tickled the hairs on his thick legs.

Blinking away perspiration, Loper put all his strength into his arms. He would have to muscle himself up, rely solely on the corded flesh of wrists, then arms, then broad shoulders. He had done it before, except... But he had not been dead tired before. And now every ounce of his flesh ached and throbbed dully.

No sense in delay. *Push damn you!* he told himself.

For a moment, the weight of his huge body pulled his sweat-slicked hands over the stone. He was plagued with visions of dropping, colliding in one bright yet unfelt moment with the cold shimmer-stone pavement. Then his palms were still, his wrists cording. Soon, his enormous biceps were brought into play, and he forced himself to waist level with the ledge. He swung a knee up, skinned it. swung again and got it on the shelf. Then he was up and safe.

He rested, his legs dangling over the side, and he watched the nine phallic towers of the Musician part of the city-state, all of them glimmering brightly orange or red or blue or green. It was odd to think of them as sound waves, as structures constituted of interlatching waves that formed a solid substance. They looked more like glass. He tore his gaze away from the city and looked down at the streets so far below. *Now what?* he wondered.

There was no way down but to jump. And though it was five hundred feet to the street, it was another two thousand to the roof. When the Musicians built, weaving their walls and floors of sound, they ignored the laws of gravity, the doctrine and dogma of engineering, denying the old lexicon and establishing their own

dictionary of the possible. He had no rope to climb it. His best chance was to enter a window here and ascend to the floor he wanted through the inside.

Moving along the ledge, he found a corner window that looked promising. The sheet of slightly opaque glass hummed and tingled his fingers when he touched it. It too was a creation of sound. Yet Strong had assured him that it would cut like ordinary glass, would give him entrance. Loper reached into the leather sack tied to his breechcloth and took out the diamond. He placed it against the glass, stroked hard. A thin, frosty line followed the movement of his hand. Strong was right.

He made a tape-hinged doorway in the glass, swung it inward, and stepped into the room. He pulled the tape loose and lifted the cut square out. It vanished from his hands the moment it became unaligned with the rest of the window, and a new section appeared where it had been. Humming...

Loper's heart thumped despite his avowed stoicism. He was very likely the first Popular to enter a Musician building, the first mutant on what might be considered holy ground. He saw that this was a chapel, and that made the excitement all the worse. Up front was a bust of Chopin. He went to the altar and spat on it.

Aside from the thrill of the danger of his position, only one thing impressed him here: all the objects in the chapel were made of common substances. They were not sound configurations, but real objects that would not cease to exist if the transmitters and generators were shut off. But, of course, this was a chapel, and the Musicians wanted to make it something special. He spat on Chopin again, stalked to the rear of the room where the door to the corridor lay. He was a dozen feet from it when it opened...

Chapter 1

The boy Guillaume, whom everyone called Guil for easily understood reasons, looked to the white-faced clock, saw that there were only four minutes—only four unbelievably agonizing minutes!—until the session would be over. In turning his eyes from the piano, however, he missed the last third of an *arpeggio* and heard the familiar *tcch-tech-tech* of the instructor's tongue as it clicked against the roof of his mouth. Involuntarily, he shuddered, for he knew that that sound invariably meant trouble.

He turned his eyes full on the keyboard and concentrated on his exercise. It would not have been too horrible to have been a Class IV Musician if only his instructor had been someone understanding like gentle Franz, someone not so demanding and able to see the boy's side of it when an occasional note was missed or a chord slurred. But this was Frederic, and Frederic had been known to use the leather sting-strap on young knuckles when he felt a boy had not been practicing. Guil, not daring to look away again, approached the next *arpeggio* with care. He had the span to reach the keys, to do things boys born with even slightly smaller hands could never do. Indeed, perhaps that was his very problem. Perhaps the

genetic engineers had erred and given him hands too large for the keys, fingers too thin and long and bony to be graceful or adept on the board. *Clumsy hands*, he thought *I was born with cows for hands and big, floppy teats for fingers!*

Despite his teatlike fingers, he made it through the trouble spot without difficulty. Ahead lay easy bars of music, things he could cope with. He risked a glance at the clock, careful not to move his head from its bent and proper angle. Two more minutes! In all that infernal, godawful self-inspection and tricky finger work, had no more time passed than that?

Suddenly, his fingers stung with the bite of Frederic's strap. He tore them from the gleaming ivory-white keys and sucked them to draw off the pain.

"You murdered that chord, Grieg!" The voice was thin, yet harsh, strained through a scrawny throat and sharp, pointed teeth.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, licking the two fingers that had taken the brunt of the blow. He was sniveling again, acting miserably subservient, and he was ashamed of himself. He longed to wrench that strap from the old weasel's hands and use it across his face for a while. But there was his father to think about, all of the things his father expected of him. A word from Frederic to people in the right places, and Gull's future was so much gray ash. "I'm sorry," he said again.

But Frederic was not to be appeased with apologies this time—he rarely was. He stood, his thin, long-fingered hands folded behind his back, and began pacing behind Guil, reappearing on the right for a few steps, turning again and stepping out of sight. His face, a bird face, was drawn tight in sour disgust. *Did you get a bad-tasting worm, you old crow?* Guil thought. He wanted to laugh, but he knew the strap would sting neck, cheeks, or head as easily as fingers. "This is perfectly simple," Frederic said. "Totally fundamental. Nothing new in this exercise, Grieg. A review lesson, Grieg!" His voice was like a shrill reed instrument, piercing, somewhat painful-to hear.

"Yes, sir."

Then why do you persist in your refusal to practice?"

"I do practice, sir."

The strap burned a red welt across the back of his neck. "Nonsense, Grieg! Damned, utter nonsense!"

"But I do, sir. I really do! I practice even longer than you say to, but it does no good. My fingers are—stones on the keys." He hoped he sounded distressed. He *was* distressed, damn it! He was supposed to be a Musician, a complete master of sound, a child of universal harmonics, born to understand and to use sound, to perform the rituals of music in a passable—no, a beautiful—manner. Though it might make his fingers a trifle too long, the gene juggling chamber should not fail in giving him the basic oneness with rhythm that was his birthright, the harmony with universal harmony that was his legacy, the blending with melody that was the core of every Musician's soul and the most basic of things required to gain a Class. And what the genetic engineering didn't do correctly, the Inundation Chamber should have compensated for. The Inundation Chamber was a huge room in which the Musicians' Ladies who were pregnant were placed in a weaving symphony of sound that carried subliminal suggestions even into the developing forebrain of the fetus. That treatment should have smoothed the rough edges on the genetic engineers' work. It should have made him want desperately to be a

good Musician of a high Class. But, somehow, even that had failed. The only reason he cared to do well in the gaining of a Class in the ceremonies on Coming of Age Day was so that he would not embarrass his father—who was, after all, the Grand Maestro, the chief-of-state of the city's government.

Unfortunately, the piano was a great, ugly, unresponsive monster to his touch.

Frederic sat on the shimmering yellow bench before the shimmering white piano and looked the boy in the eyes. "You are not even a Class IV Musician, Grieg."
"But, sir—"

"Not even Class IV. I should recommend your disposal as an error of the engineers. Ah, what lovely lightning that would touch off! The Grand Maestro's son a reject!"

Guil shuddered. For the first time, he began to think what would happen to him if he were not given a chance for any Class whatsoever. He would be put to sleep with a sound weapon of some sort, then taken to the disposal furnaces and burned. Not only his father's pride, but his own existence depended on his gaining at least a bottom classification in this sink-or-swim society.

"But I will not recommend your rejection, Grieg," Frederic continued. "For two reasons. One, though you fumble monstrously over these keys and have done so for the past thirteen years, ever since you were four, you show talent elsewhere."

"The guitar," Guil said, feeling a moment of pride that did a little to erase the discomfort of the last two hours at the piano.

"A fine instrument in its own right," Frederic admitted. "An instrument for lesser sensibilities and of a lower social order, to be sure, but perfectly respectable as a Class IV instrument."

"You said there were two reasons," Guil said, somehow sensing that Frederic wanted him to elicit the last, wanted him to draw it out so that the saying of it would not be just Frederic's doing.

"Yes." The pedant's eyes brightened like those of a craggy eagle spying a succulent lamb left alone in a field. "Tomorrow your class will be awarded their stations after each has faced the tests and the Ultimate Sound. I have a strong feeling that you will be dead before tomorrow night. It would be foolish for me, then, to risk the Maestro's wrath when the natural course of Coming of Age Day will weed you out of the system."

It was his last day of lessons under Frederic, and Guil suddenly felt some of the power of his impending freedom. The strap had lost its fearsome qualities when he realized that it could never touch him again once he had left this room. And the clock showed that it was five after the hour. He had already stayed beyond his time. He stood. "Well see, Frederic." It was the first time he had called the teacher by name, and he saw the irritation his familiarity had caused. "I think I'll surprise you."

He was pushing open the door to the hall when Frederic answered. "You may do that, Grieg. Then again, maybe you'll get the biggest surprise of all." His voice, his tone, the gleam in his eyes said that he hoped this would be so. He hoped Guillaume Dufay Grieg would die in the arena.

Then the door was humming shut behind.

Free.

Free of Frederic and the strap, free of the piano and its keys which had been just a bitter punishment over the years. Free. His own man. If... If he lived through the Coming of Age Day rituals. A great many it's wrapped up in that one, but he was flushed with the confidence of youth and it boiled without consideration within his mind.—

He clicked his heels on the wavering colors of the floor, trying to stomp on a particularly brilliant comma of silver that spun through the crimson shimmerstone. It kept dodging his foot as if it were sentient, and he turned down a side hallway of the Tower of Learning, chasing it and smashing his foot into it again and again, only to see it spin out from beneath his shoe even before he had struck the floor. He leaped, came closer to touching it than ever. Then it swam through a rouge-cinnabar swirl and came out ocher instead of silver, and the game had lost its interest for him.

He turned to walk back to the main corridor, paying no attention now to the constantly shifting hues and patterns of the floor, when the glorious reverberations of a well-played piano boomed down the acoustically perfect corridor. It faded, became more pastoral. He searched through the practice studios until he found the pianist It was Girolamo Frescobaldi Cimarosa—Rosie, as the other boys called him. Gently, Guil opened the door and closed it behind.

The music was Chopin's Etude in E Major, Opus 10, Number 3, one of the composer's more beautiful works. Rosie's fingers flitted like insects across the keys as he hunched over the long board, his shoulder-length, coal-dark hair fluffed magnificently over the collar of his cloak. The pink tip of one large ear showed through the hairfall.

Guil slumped to the floor, back against the wall, and listened and watched.

The upper fingers of Rosie's right hand toiled with the elegant melody while the lower fingers articulated an accompanying figure. A difficult thing. An impossible thing for Guil. But he did not take time to brood on that. He let the music flow through him, stir his mind with ridiculous fantasies of visual conceptualization.

Rosie threw his body at the board, made his fingers bayonets of attack that were determined to rend from the keys the complete essence of the beauty contained on the sterile, white sheets of music.

Hair flew as if windblown.

Then the lyric section was over and the brilliant passage based on extended broken chords was flashing by expertly under Rosie's large hands. Before he knew it, Rosie was through the curtailed restatement of the first section and sent the keys pounding toward the rising climax. Guil's heart thumped and did not slow until the last of the gentle subsiding notes had been played.

"That was excellent, Rosie," he said, standing.

"What are you doing here?" The voice was quick, knife-edged with unassurance.

Then Guil was conscious of the hunched back that was bent even when the keyboard was not before the boy, of the two tufts of hair on the edges of his forehead that had been combed inward in an unsuccessful attempt to conceal the tiny horns under them. The stigmata. The markings Rosie carried with him to show his place. "I just stopped in to listen," Guil said, speaking a little more quickly than he had intended. "I heard it from the hall. It was beautiful."

Rosie frowned, unsure of himself, searching for something to say. He was a rarity: a mistake of the genetic engineers, a slip of the gene juggling chamber. When you are toying with thousands of micro-micro-dots that represent bodily and mental characteristics, you are bound to make a mistake now and again, turn out something that is, in some small way, a freak. Never before had a deformed child gained any distinction or even recognition among Musicians. Always, they had died on Coming of Age Day after thirteen years of impossible fumbling with every instrument and of inability to grasp the fundamentals of the Eight Rules of Sound. Rosie, on the other hand, had become the most accomplished Musician in the entire Tower of Learning. Some said that he was a better pianist than even the Grand Maestro, Guil's father. Guil thought this was very true, though he knew he was limited in his own critical capabilities and dismissed his own opinions as irrelevant. But Rosie, despite his achievements, was touchy. He looked for slurs, for references to his deformities in everything that was said. He was hard to make friends with no matter how much one valued his friendship, for he analyzed even the words of his loved ones.

Now, having analyzed Guil's words and expressions, Rosie answered uncertainly. "Thank you."

Guil crawled on top of the shimmering orange piano, dangling his legs only an inch from the floor. "Tomorrow came fast, didn't it?"

"What do you mean?" Rosie asked, crossing his hands uncomfortably on the keyboard.

Ah, yes, Guil thought, *the hands.* Tiny hooks of bone-hard cartilage jagged upward an inch on the back of each hand. "I mean, thirteen years and I don't remember what happened to me since I was four. Frederic and the lessons and the strap and going to bed and getting up and suddenly I'm seventeen. All too fast."

Rosie relaxed visibly. When the conversation was not about him directly, when it was focused on life in general, he could manage to suspend a little of his doubt and suspicions. "I hope you make it, Guil."

"I hope so too."

"I won't."

Guil looked up, startled, not certain that he had really heard what he thought he had. Then he smiled. "Oh, you're kidding, of course."

"No." There was something dark behind Rosie's eyes, something that made Guil want to turn away.

"That's silly! You're better than the lot of us."

Rosie shook his head, setting his hair to bouncing. "I'm afraid, Guil."

"Everyone is. Good Heavens, we all might die tomorrow!"

"You don't understand." His head hung in the hollow between his gristled shoulders, his piercing eyes catching the light of the glowing panels above their heads.

"Try me."

"I'm scared to death, Guil. *I'm* so scared that food won't stay down, and my gut is on fire all the time, spitting flames up my throat. I can't sleep, because the dreams wake me up screaming and give me chills for the rest of the night. So I play and practice things that I don't need to practice and—and do other things until I collapse and am too tired to dream myself awake."

“You must know you have a better chance than the rest of us.”

“There are some things you don’t know about, Guil.”

“Toll me, then.”

For one, short moment, he seemed ready to spill whatever it was that filled him with liquid misery. Then he clamped his lips shut, forced a sigh through them that made them flutter like butterfly wings. The shell had slipped back into place. Rosie was isolated again, a world unto himself. He would suffer alone with whatever it was that made him afraid. “No, you are better off not knowing yet. You’ll find out tomorrow—during the rituals.”

“You sure can keep a fellow in suspense,” Guil said, dropping to his feet. “And if you don’t want to tell me now, then I guess I just have to wait. Besides, I’ve got to be going. Father says that plenty of good food and sound sleep—and maybe a little of his last minute advice—is what I need to prepare me for tomorrow. I don’t want to disappoint him.”

“Tomorrow,” Rosie said, turning to the piano and launching into a furious torrent of notes that rattled the walls. As Guil opened the door and stepped into the hall, he thought he recognized the music as part of *Flight of the Bumblebee* from Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Tsar Sultan*. Then it took a twist and a turn and was something he did not recognize. As the music faded behind him, he thought about that. If there was one thing he was good at, it was identifying tunes, memorizing styles so that he could at least recognize the composer. In this case, he could come up with nothing.

On his way home to the Congressional Tower where his father’s apartments were, he passed by the neon stone gardens which were dull and almost colorless in the bright daylight. Giving way to an unexplainable urge, he walked into the garden, the pavement humming beneath his feet, for it too was a sound configuration. At the end of the garden where a row of crimson stones (dull pink now) lay as a border, he stopped and looked beyond into the ruins that had once been a city of men. It was there, in those ruins, that the Populars lived. The mutants. The condemned.

He wondered, as he looked at the tumbled buildings, at the puddles of broken glass, the twisted and melted steel girders, why the Musicians had built so close to ruin, so close to the mutants. Word had come, spreading out through the colonized worlds of the galaxy, that Earth had been destroyed in a war, that the mother planet was reverting to savagery. The council of Musician Elders on Vladislovitch, the Musicians own colony world, had decided to send a ship of Musicians back to reestablish Earth. Other colony worlds with vastly different societies had the same idea. The Elders’ dreams of owning Earth were shattered, but this city-state had been set up as, at least, a toehold. Maybe one day the dozens of other city-states sprinkled over the globe would leave or collapse. Then the Musicians would have the honor of owning the mother world. So, when there were so many thousands of other sites, why build the city next to the Populars, the mutants who lived in the ruins?

True, the Populars bothered no one. They had long ago learned that Musicians were too powerful for them. But there seemed no necessity for building a showplace colony next to these twisted men and women.

Not for the first time, Guil thought that perhaps he did not know much at all about Musician society. Perhaps, actually, he knew next to nothing, for something in the pit of his stomach and the pit of his mind told him that the Populars were somehow tied more closely to the Musicians than the Congress cared to admit.

While he watched the ruins, a dark and featureless form crossed the top of a rubble pile, glided along a broken wall on swift, long feet, and disappeared into deep shadows where several buildings had collapsed on one another. Featureless, smooth, faceless it had been. Each Popular was different than the other, and some were naturally easier to look upon. But a faceless, obsidian man...

He shivered and left the neon gardens, heading back into the city, back toward his home...

Later, they were dining at the low Oriental table in the Chinese Room, sitting on plush pillows of synthe-foam. Tapestries imitating ancient Chinese threadwork hung about the walls, giving the room an exotic and at once close and comfortable feeling. The robot orchestra stood before them, its intangible, swirling color body pulsating with every possible hue and every reasonable shade as the music throbbed full-bodied from it. To himself, Guil sang the words that went with the tune:

*“Who rides so late through night and wind?
It is the father with his child.
He holds the boy within his arm,
He clasps him tight, he keeps him warm.
“My son, why hide your face in fear?”
“See, Father, the Erlking’s near.
The Erlking with crown and wand...”*

His father spat out an orange seed that went spinning off the plate, across, the table and onto the floor where the pin-point waves of the sonic-sweeper disposed of it instantly. He swallowed the juicy segment. He had been dispensing his advice, some useful, some ridiculous, ever since they had sat down to eat. “Rely on your sound-sedative whistle more than your gun, Guil. That always impresses the judges.”

“The judges are romantic fools,” his mother said, arguing as she always argued, pouting her pretty mouth and launching into the start of a disagreement. She knew that his father was the boss, in the end, but she enjoyed seeing how far she could push before having to make up to him.

“Exactly,” his father said, trying to escape bickering this special night. “The judges are romantic fools, and only an equally large fool would not use that knowledge to his benefit.”

Guil was paying only half attention to his father, the other half of his mind trying to think of the words to the song the robo-orc played and wondering what it was that Rosie had planned for the following day, the thing that was upsetting the hunchback so much that he could not even sleep properly.

“Dear son, ‘tis but a misty cloud.”

“Ah, sweet child, come with me!

Such pleasant games I’ll play with thee!

Such pleasant flowers bloom in the field,
My mother has many a robe of gold...”

Could Rosie be giving up without a fight? It was possible to forego the tests completely, to admit defeat even before you had been tested. You were given a sedative and carted away to the disposal furnaces just the same— but you didn’t have to sweat through the chores in the arena. Was that what Rosie had in mind? No. That was not Rosie’s way. His entire life had been a continuation of proofs of himself, an effort to show all that he was more than they were, worthier, able to accomplish more. He would not just give up, throw everything away without a fight—not after all these years of fights.

“—you would use it against?” his father finished asking.

He swallowed a lump of cheese and washed it down with wine as he sorted through the half of his mind that had been paying attention and tried to find what his father had asked. “First my whistle. Then the sonic-knife. If neither worked, I would use my sound-rifle as a last alternative. The judges frown on using the heaviest armament first.”

“Very good,” his father said. “Didn’t you think he was good with that one?” he asked Guil’s mother.

“Umm,” she said, nodding, not particularly interested.

“Now,” his father began, “the next thing—”

*“Oh, father, father do you not hear
What the Erlking whispers in my ear?”
“Be still, my child, be calm;
Tis but the withered leaves in the wind...”*

“Now, Judge Scarlatti is an egomaniac. If you are chosen a sextuple—”

His mother shifted, sighed. “The boy told us he was only a Class IV.”

“Damn it, don’t undersell your son! He—”

“He is a Class IV,” she said, sucking on a plum. “He is a Class IV. Building hopes will only lead to—”

*“Oh Father, Father see you not
The Erlkings daughters in yon dark spot?”
“My son, my son, the thing you see
Is only the old gray willow tree...”*

“The robo-orc swirled colorfully with the sinister music of *Der Erlkonig*, and Guil suddenly realized that there was something in this song applicable to the Coming of Age Day ritual. Usually, their dinner music was light, airy, nothing at all like this. So there must be some reason for the change. He concentrated on remembering the last lines as it drew to a close.

“I love thee, thy form enframes my sense;
And art thou not willing, I’ll take thee hence!”

“Oh Father, Father, he grasps my arm.

The Erlking has done me harm!”

Strange, Guil thought. *It is a very dark vision, this song.* The robo-orc swirled on, full instrumented and misty-bodied. His father watched.

The father shudders, He speeds ahead,

He clasps to his bosom the sobbing child,
He reaches home with pain and dread;
In his arms, the child lay dead!
Goethe by Schubert.

*Wer reitet so spat durch Nacht und Wind?
...in seinen Armen das Kind was todt...*

There was something about the German language that made the words even more sinister.

Guil shivered, turned to his father and saw the Meistro was watching him expectantly, his mouth now empty of fruit, his eyes cloudy and unreadable. It was obvious that he expected his son to say something, though Guil was not exactly sure what would be proper. “Father, the song, *Der Erlkonig*...”

“Yes?”

His mother busied herself clearing the table although the sonic-servants could have done the job quicker and easier. She disappeared into the kitchen with a stack of dishes in her hands. His father watched her go, then turned back to Guil.

“It is very strange,” Guil said, “that you should want to program it for tonight—a night when we are supposed to be having a celebration.”

“No,” the Meistro said. “It is perfect for tonight. For to night, there is really no other song.”

And then he understood. His father knew that it might be hard for him in the arena, knew that there was a strong possibility that he would not make it. In a way, his father was trying to tell him that he understood this and that he would be able to accept it if his son were to be sent to the disposal furnaces. For a moment, Guil felt relief of a sort his father could accept, could maintain his pride even if he failed them. Was that not a wonderful thing? Then came a second wave of emotion. Yes, damn it, maybe his father could accept it, but then it was not his father who was going to die. It was not his father who would be torn and mutilated in the arena and later fed to the licking flames of the disposal furnaces. The high spirits that he had just attained sunk quickly into black-ness and despair.

Later, alone in his room, he fell asleep with the last line of the song still on his lips. Fell asleep into a dream that he had had ever since he could remember, a dream always the same. Like this:

Above the bleak banks of the river, there is a barren wall of jutting stone to a shelf of polished black onyx a hundred feet overhead. It is an indeterminate hour of the night. The sky is neither blue nor black, mottled in-stead, an odd brown and rotten tan. Where these two colors overlap, it looks much like blood that has dried and grown flaky. At a bend in the river, the onyx shelf juts completely across the water, forming a roof, and on this roof is a purple building fronted with massive columns that are rimmed with black stone faces at their tops. There is a great and

profound silence that does not just hang upon things but which radiates from the landscape. The moon is a motionless gray disc. He seems to be approaching the shelf and the building—as always—floating up from the river on a black leaf, which is strange, considering the total lack of wind. Then, passing over the columned structure, he again floats down, down to the river once more. Gently, with a cradlelike rocking, he floats toward a Stygian sea that engulfs him, towing him toward the lightless bottom where a river of air moves him along the sea floor, past the same purple building, the same promontory, into the same sea where, at the bottom, he is greeted by the exact same river, exact building, dark ocean, and...

He woke sweating, his eyes aching as if they had actually looked upon the impossibility of the dream. His heart pounded with fear that was at the same moment indescribably delicious and desirable. He had been having that dream ever since, as a three year old child, he had been with his father in the arena, inspecting preparations for a Coming of Age Day ceremony. The Pillar of Ultimate Sound had been humming darkly in the center of the floor, the gateway to that land beyond life where everything is different. He had been very interested in the pillar and, after breaking away from his father, had gone to it and reached through, had placed his head inside and had seen the strange land beyond.

He did not know whether he was afraid or whether he welcomed his meeting with the pillar tomorrow at the end of the ceremonies.

Tomorrow...

The arena...

Suddenly, he wondered if he was not going to have a difficult time getting back to sleep.

At the same moment, in a darkened tower room, glowing orangely: a piano.

There were hands upon the keys like froth upon waves.

Madly pounding, tossing, whirling, beating the keys with a frenzy of hatred that boiled through his eyes, the bent figure wheezed breath into the cramped, dry rooms of his lungs, tears on his cheeks.

He pounded the keys. He could possibly become the ruler of all Musician society in this city-state of his. Or he might become a corpse. It could go either way in the arena.

He cursed the keys and his fingers.

He rammed his feet against the pedals until his toes felt as if they would break.

And all the while, the piano sang *tomorrow*...

FIRST:

In the chapel of the Primal Chord, the genetic engineering tower, Loper crouched, facing the slowly opening door that he had been about to use himself. His nostrils widened, seeking odors, telltale perfumes.

The Musician who opened the door did not see the Popular where he hunched next to the last pew, and he closed the door and turned to the altar. In ritual, he touched his fingertips together before his face, drew them apart into the position from which a conductor might begin the symphony. Then he saw Loper.

The Musician opened his mouth to scream. Loper leapt. He crushed the Musician against the wall, bringing all of his three hundred pounds to bear. The Musician, in a moment of concerted effort brought to a peak by wildly pumping adrenalin, wrenched himself free and took one staggering step. Loper grasped one fist in the other, making a club of flesh and bone, and swung hard into the Musician's neck. The man's spine snapped, and he pitched forward onto his face, his head tucked weirdly beneath his left arm.

Loper hid the body behind the altar, then went back to the door and risked a look at the corridor beyond. Ceiling glow-lights highlighted the brown and black swirls within the shimmer-stone green walls so that it seemed as if living creatures composed these partitions, scrambling over one another like a swarm of lice, frothing in an attempt to break the bonds of the magic mortar, gnashing their teeth in fury as the mortar held. The corridor was empty. He stepped into it, closing the chapel door.

Clutching his knife, he crept down the gleaming hall-way until he came to an elevator shaft. It was unlike the inoperative shafts in the ruins of the Popular sector of the city, for it was clean and free of spiderbats. Also, this lacked any identifiable car or cable lift system. It appeared as if one stepped in and was carried upward by air or fell and was cushioned by air. He did not like it, but he had no choice. He punched out the number of the floor he wanted and stepped into the tube.

There was a playing of dissonance and consonance in his bones. Sound swirled through him, crashed over him like a wind, lifting him up the shaft. Abruptly, he ceased to rise and was floating before the exit onto the top floor. He pushed against the walls like a man in a gravityless environment, turning into a standing position, and shoved into the corridor, a little of his terror draining out of him as the elevator whined to a stop behind.

He moved down the corridor to the first door and stopped. He held the knife before him, ready to gut anyone who discovered his presence. He was looking for the nursery, but he did not know what door it lay behind. Palming the door activator, he tensed as the portal slid open.

Over a hundred naked women floated in a gleaming metal bowl at least a hundred and fifty feet across and twenty stories deep. They were held up by coursing, almost visible sound that gurgled from rim to rim and mouth to bottom of the incredible structure. They drifted, now with legs wide-spread, now drawn together in maidenly modesty, now with arms dangling loosely, faces split with awe-wound grins of absolute pleasure as the dupe, triple, quadruple, and sextuple-metered concertos laced their wombs. They were all pregnant, for this was the Inundation Chamber. Here, after the genetic engineers had done their work, had helped to fashion the fetuses, the women were brought to subject the advance stages of their unborn children to the hypnotic Inundation music. The music carried subliminals in primitive picture concept quantums that "brainwashed" the unborn children, smoothed the rough edges of the genetic engineers' work by indoctrinating the fetus with a love and respect of music and authority.

Against his will, Loper looked away from the bird women, suppressing his desire to leap into the bowl, mount them in flight, fornicate as together they plunged to the bottom of the bowl and swooped upward again, crescendoing to a climax with

the pounding swirl of sound. He should not be thinking such things, he knew. He hated Musicians and their Ladies. Still, it is not uncommon to find a relationship between lust and hate, and he struggled with a lust so bred. Stepping into the hallway, he closed the door to the Inundation Chamber, knowing what his dreams would always be from this day forward.

Farther down the hall, he pushed open another door and found the nursery. Walking hurriedly to the cradles of the babies born that day, he began checking names. Not just any child would do. It had to be a newborn babe, fresh from mother's belly that very day, and it had to be the child of a relatively important Musician, at least a Class II. Finally he came to a tag that caught his attention: GUILLAUME DUFAY GRIEG. Could it possibly be the blood, in any way, of Johann Stamitz Grieg, Grand Maestro of Vivaldi, this city-state? He snatched it up. Even if it were only a nephew, its parents should be, with any luck, at least Class Us.

The baby slept. It seemed so small and silly in his hands. He wondered what they would call it for a nickname. Guil? He fought down a moment of tenderness. Tenderness could not be permitted at this stage of the game. Carefully, he slipped into the corridor and found the; elevator. Walking into its surging strings, he fell down the well of noise, clutching the babe to his hair-matted chest.

When he stepped into the hallway on the ground floor, however, there were three Musicians walking toward the elevator...

Chapter 2

The processional, Pomp and Circumstance, gorged the hall. Slowly and in perfect time with the music, the eight boys of Guil's class marched haughtily into the vast chamber of the Grand Hall, their full velvetlike shimmer-cloth capes glowing with contained purple Sashes as they fell behind their shoulders like wings. Purple was the color of a boy, of the uninitiated. When the Coming of Age Day rituals were completed, and if they were then lucky and resourceful enough to still be alive, they would never again wear that color, but would trade it for the reds and oranges, yellows and whites of adulthood.

Guil swallowed hard as they walked, finding his throat more and more constricted the deeper they went into the arena. He had never imagined the Great Hall to be like this! The floor swept away from him in a slight upward curve that would have been unnoticeable in any lesser chamber. It was, he judged, a thousand yards long. Far, far away, the judges were only dots in the tiny crimson chairs that topped the hundred foot vaulting facade of the Bench, which was a blacker black than any he had ever seen. The floor between here and there was a brilliant copper, laced with free-form shots of cream and black that shimmered and intertwined, curling through the almost transparent background of the stone. He turned his eyes on the floor nearby, careful to keep his head properly erect so as not to break the symmetry of the formation, and saw that the stone was transparent Only lightly copper tinted, it dropped for at least a hundred feet, and

only this great depth gave it that heavy coppery hue it seemed to possess at a casual glance—just as a cupful of water is clear but an oceanful is blue.

He looked to the tiers of spectators next—fully five thousand on a side, stretching up and up to the nearly limitless reaches of the walls that thrust upward in a slight outward curve and blended with the ceiling and the shimmering green beams. Each spectator had a comfortable, padded lounge chair on a swivel base to make his job of watching that much easier. Before each chair was a small television screen so that the spectator might see the action close up when it strayed to distant parts of the arena during heated moments of battle.

“My heart is literally in my throat,” Rosie said next to him, his voice strained and based on a tremor.

“I’ll help you stuff it down once I’ve swallowed my own,” Guil said, still marveling at the tiers, at the immense spaces, at the lovely transparent floor.

A wave of cheering moved through the stands as the boys progressed, but they dared not look up any farther than they could manage by straining their eyes around in their sockets. Heads must remain front, for the ritual of entrance called for them to face only the judges who would soon decide their fates.

It was an unbearably long walk considering the tension that was already building in each of the boys and which would have their hearts thumping by the time they had reached their destination, but it did, at least, give Guil time to think. Suddenly, his ability with the guitar seemed as nothing. The Grand Hall stretched to all sides, and the grandeur made him question himself, made him feel small and insignificant—and doomed to failure. What if he *were* an inferior product of the genetic engineers and the Inundation Chamber, worse—in his way—than even Rosie? Would he die today during the tests, or when he had to face the Pillar of Ultimate Sound—or in the disposal furnaces where the rejects were carted, shoved through an iron grate door and burned? Maybe Frederic would be right: maybe he would receive the biggest surprise. Maybe he would die... He forced himself out of this useless funk just as the procession reached the foot of the Bench and spread out in a semicircle before the judges.

The orchestra performed the invocation using ancient instruments of brass and steel and wood rather than the modern synthetic instruments. The judges sat solemn and dignified, their white robes shielding all of their bodies but their heads, the orange ring of the judicial branch encircling their necks. The boys genuflected to the sound-portrait of Vladislovitch, the First Musician, the Finder of the Way of Sound. Starting on the right of the semicircle, each boy recited a line of the Coming of Age Day Litany in turn.

“Vladislovitch, Father of the World, Musician Supreme,” the first boy intoned.

“Vladislovitch, Finder and User of the Eight Rules of Sound, Opener of the Way...”

“Vladislovitch, Meistro and Patron of All Towers...”

“Vladislovitch who played his cadenza before the very gods of old and brought them tumbling down,” Guil said breathlessly.

“Bless us, bless us, bless us,” the next boy chanted.

The litany spun on to conclusion. The crowd said, “Ah-ah-ah-men.” The tests were ready to begin...

They were taken to an isolation chamber to await their individual tests so that none might see what awaited them and thus prepare for it—or collapse from fear of it. Although each boy knew a bit of what would happen if the father of each had, surely, recounted the nature of previous Coming of Age Day rituals), he could not know all, for the exact pattern of the tests was changed every four months, changed for every Coming of Age Day ritual. One by one, the others left to face their futures. There were only Guil and Rosie left when the attendant in light green robes and a yellow scarf came to the door and said, “Grieg. You’re now.”

“Wait!” Rosie cried as Guil reached the door, following the attendant.

“What?”

“Good luck, Guil.”

“Thanks, Rosie. I’ll be waiting to shout for you when it’s your turn.”

But when he stepped outside, he was not so sure he would be around to cheer anyone. Of the six boys who had gone before, only three had made it. Fifty-fifty chances. Were the odds always this gruesome? He could think of no time when anyone had mentioned the percentage of those who survived and those who were slaughtered or taken off for cremation, and he was abruptly ill. Some of the boys who had lost had been good musicians, better than Guil. Much better. And what did that mean, he wondered, trembling.

The winners sat on golden chairs on a platform above the arena floor, below and to the right of the judges, ready to watch the misfits—Guil and Rosie. Guil looked for some sign of the three losers, could find none. No bodies meant that all three must have buckled early, must have been carried away right off. No, not necessarily. A sound creature, after all, did not leave signs of its victims. It engulfed them whole, negated the molecular vibrations that constituted them, and vanished with them, effectively canceling them out of existence.

Quaking, he walked before the towering Bench, bent his neck so he could see the judge called Handel peering at him from the centermost throne. “Guillaume Dufay Grieg?”

I want to run, he thought. *I want to get out of here, out of here and far away.* “It is I, your honor,” he said.

“Are you prepared to begin your test?”

No, no, he thought. *I’m not prepared. I’m afraid. I’m more afraid than a baby in the dark.* Yes, your honor,” he said.

“Do you have any particular statements or requests to make at this time?”

Let me out! Let me the hell out of here! This is like the prisoner receiving his last meal, only my terminal privilege will be to speak a few pieces of wit, of wisdom. But he could not say any of that, for there was his father to consider. And, besides, they would not let him go as he wished. They would burn him. “No special requests or statements, your honor.”

“Very well,” Handel said. He coughed, wiped a hand across his mouth. “Let the tests begin!”

The orchestra struck the proper note and swept off into a complicated piece written by the originators of the rituals to stir excitement among the spectators while the preparations were being made.

It was an oddly eerie tune.

An attendant dressed in traditional white shimmer-cloth with a pulsating flash-fabric collar crossed to Guil; the collar threw angelic glare over his face, obscuring his features. All that was visible was his eyes, bright with reflected throbbings of light. He brought Guil three weapons: the sound-sedative whistle, the sonic knife, and the deadly sound rifle.

No longer trying to suppress the tremors that shook him like a dry leaf, Guil strapped the knife to the waistband of his leotard suit, hung the whistle about his neck by the glistening shimmer-metal chain, and cradled the rifle in his arms. With a nod to the judges, he took a hundred paces into the arena, turned back to the hundred foot monolith that was the Bench, braced himself mentally and physically, puffed out the stale air and took in clean, and nodded once again.

The music subsided, was gone.

“You have been chosen Class IV,” Judge Tallis boomed. He was a hawk of a man, wizened, with a beak nose, his two eyes like the eyes of a predatory bird. His hands appeared out of the robe to push back at the sides of his hair, then disappeared into the folds again.

Class IV. The echo of the words throbbed a moment before the soundproofing walls negated their patterns.

Father will be disappointed, Guil thought. But there was nothing to say except: “I accept my station.”

“Have you chosen an identisong?”

A phrase from your identisong was recorded on a small lapel badge and had merely to be activated to allow you the use of all machines used by your station and to give you entrance into all places your class was permitted entrance. Fourth Class identisongs had to be duple-metered. He realized, as he scanned what hundreds of tunes he knew, that he should have had one already in mind. Then he thought of a choice that would please his father with its irony and its connection with *Der Erlkonig* from the previous evening. “I chose Schubert’s *Marche Militaire*.”

Tallis confirmed the choice.

The orchestra began muted music,

“Let us begin!” Tallis said.

The wall of the Bench shimmered, opaqued in the center, then dissolved in part to form a hole fifty feet across and seventy feet high. For a moment, there was silence that held like smoke in air, as if there would never again be a noise of any sort Except for the almost inaudible sweetness of the orchestra. And Guil wondered, looking at the hole in the Bench, just what could be so damned big! Seconds later, he got his answer. From the portal came a yellow dragon with white-white teeth, scales as large as shovel blades and eyes as red as blood with tiny clotted black pupils. Drool collected on the dragon’s lips and slipped down its chin in rivulets.

The tension in the orchestra’s music increased.

Guil felt the rising urge to flee, but gripped himself with his fear and used it to hold him there. He tried to tell himself that it was only sound, that it was not real. Not real at all. Not in the sense of flesh and blood. It was a man-structured sound configuration, a weaving of molecular vibrations to form a false entity—just like the ten towers and the piano Rosie had played yesterday and, yes, even the cape

and leotard suit he wore. Then his father's words of the night before fled through his mind: "They will only be creatures of sound directed by men, brainless on their own. But remember, they can kill you just as surely as if they were real.

He was very much afraid.

The dragon snorted, blew piercing sound waves from its nostrils instead of the conventional fire of fairy tales and legends. It looked over the galleries, roaring its defiance. And incidentally putting on a show for those who expected horror and pain. It waved its mighty head on the top of its thick, scaled neck, and gnashed its teeth, seemingly pleased with the response of the audience. Then it saw Guil, and though only a sound configuration directed by technicians behind the Bench, it licked its thick, black lips in hunger...

Guil refrained from getting it over with in one quick blast of the sound rifle. It was tempting to level the big weapon and pulverize the dragon, shatter its arrangement of sound patterns and dissipate it. But if he chose the easy way out and did not prove to the judges' satisfaction that he was the master of sound and a competent user of the Eight Rules, then they would most certainly not let him out of the arena alive. Or if they did, it would be only to let the proper attendants take him to the disposal furnaces and ash him. He slipped the sound-sedative whistle between his teeth, bit down on it until his teeth ached, waiting for the dragon to make its move.

But the dragon fancied itself a cat and decided he was a mouse to be played with. It prowled around the end of the arena, watching the galleries as if it did not see him, as if its confrontation would be with the spectators. However, he could tell when its eyes flicked for short moments in his direction, gauging the distance and the chances so the engineers guiding it could know when to leap. It roared at the walls, and the roar echoed briefly before the walls negated it. Guil waited, weary with waiting and wishing the action would start. He shifted from one foot to the other, the gun still clenched in his hand, his free arm across the other, forming a cradle to hold the gun. Seconds passed in an agonizing crawl. Then minutes.

And suddenly the dragon leaped...

Guil jumped in surprise despite himself. Sweat popped out on his face, and his nose watered slightly. At first, it appeared as if the beast were going to cross the distance between them in that single leap. It hung impossibly in the air, huge, covering dozens of feet with its fall back to the floor. But it did not make the entire distance and crashed ponderously to the stone twenty feet away. Guil backed hurriedly, for he could see that the long neck could just about make up for the remaining distance. As he backed, he blew the whistle until his face reddened and his ears grew hot with rushing blood.

The dragon snorted again, shaking its massive head in wild fury.

Guil continued to blow the whistle.

The sound was almost inaudible.

The dragon's eyes widened for a moment, then grew heavy. Its floppy ears raised like great tents as if straining to pick up each shrill note of the sound-sedative, then withered back like dying flowers.

He blew again, longer this time, holding out until his chest screamed for air and he had to stop and suck violently for breath before continuing.

The beast leaped, crashing short again, unsteady. Its massive legs seemed to vibrate like jelly. It tried to run, wobbled sideways, and fell down clumsily on its rump.

Guil blew and blew.

The dragon shook its head again, ears slapping loudly against the sides of its skull, and struggled to its feet. The process was slow and arduous, but it managed to raise itself again. The engineers fighting to hold the mobility pattern of the configuration must have let out a small cheer at this final rally of their robot. When it was erect once more, it started after the boy, wobbling drunkenly, obviously on its last legs.

This is too easy, Guil thought. Still, he blew the whistle, always backing, his eyes fixed to the tremendous jaws and the saberlike teeth of his adversary—and to the feet that were as big around as the stumps of felled oak trees.

The dragon tried to leap once more, but it could not cope with the sound-sedative whistle and fell onto its side. Ashcan lids slid oily down its gargantuan orbs, and it fell into sleep.

There was appreciative applause from the galleries.

Guil was reluctant to believe the monster had really ceased to battle and was not just playing a shrewd game of possum in preparation for jumping up and gouging Gull's heart from his chest. He continued to sound the whistle. His cheeks ached, and his eyes felt as if they would pop out of their sockets and roll across the floor to become lost in the cream and black swirls splashing the copper. An unwilling Oedipus. He had a fleeting vision of everyone crawling around on the arena floor looking for his eyes, the tests momentarily suspended until his vision could be restored.

Finally, the dragon emitted belches that tried to emulate snores. A touch of comedy by the sound engineers.

Guil dropped the whistle from his mouth, let it slap back against his chest, and worked his lips to rid them of a cramped sensation. Proudly, he turned toward the section of the tiers where his father would be seated with his entourage. As he did so, turning his back only fractionally on the arena, the crowd screamed...

Guil whirled, his mouth open, choked, and started to run. Then he remembered that he was in an arena and that running could take him to no place of safety and could only tire him instead. He stopped and turned to stare at what had frightened him. The body of the dragon was shredding along the spine, disfigured now with seven and eight foot slashes as if it were a Chinese paper construction. The skin flapped open and rustled, curled back and showed dark holes boring away into the body. There was something innately sinister about those dark tunnels, something ugly and disgusting. He was reminded of worm burrows in rancid meat. Then, from these holes came the devils.

That was the only fitting term he could find for them: devils. They stood four feet tall, were two-legged, had triple-elbowed arms that dragged on the floor. They were extremely hairy, their heads warty, greasy, four-eyed monstrosities slashed by wide mouths that had been cram-jammed full of razor-honed yellow teeth that splayed over green lips and dripped drool. Their chests were barrels under thick, short necks, and they were powerful runners if their overly-muscled legs were any indication. Guil thought he could have laughed had the situation not been so

perilous. These were creatures out of some test master's nightmares, not things that could possibly ever exist on their own. He stifled his laughter with little trouble, however, for he knew these things could kill—laughable or not.

He counted ten.

He stuffed the whistle back in his mouth and blew hard.

Absolutely nothing.

The devils did not cease in their exit from the dragon's body, did not blink their eyes, did not show a single sign of weariness.

Of course, he thought, they aren't going to throw one test at me that is essentially like the last, even if I am battling for a mere Class IV.

The test masters were shrewd. What would come next would not be anything like what had gone before. The whistle would not work here. He drew his sonic knife, pointed it at the devils climbing down the dragon's skull, and made the motion of cutting. One of the devils screamed. The invisible keen edge of the sonic blade had caught him, sliced him. His stomach suddenly split wide, dumping entrails and blood over the dragon's chin. The devil twirled slightly as if unable to believe what was happening, as if wanting to turn away from the scene and collect its senses. Then it fell, twisting its neck on the floor.

Guil was disgusted with the thousands in the tiers who wanted blood and who demanded it in the ceremonies, even if it was not real. They cheered and gibbered and waved their arms. Vampires, they were, thirsting after the forbidden liquor.

Another roar of approval. Louder. Deep. Guttural.

He swung the tip of the blade toward another of the animals, sawed off its left hand. The member fell wetly to the floor, and the fingers convulsed wildly for a few seconds before admitting defeat. Then the hand disappeared. The engineers had no use for it, no reason to maintain its existence.

He approached the other eight devils, swinging the blade menacingly. But, of course, he could not drive them away. They were not real with a fear of their own, could not experience pain, and had been especially constructed to kill him. Viciously, he swung the tip of the blade, not really touching them, but arcing it across two devils. One, cut nearly in half, wobbled a single step, jerked epileptically, and bounced to the floor in a shower of red that—despite its unreal source—spattered Guil's face. He wiped it off as best he could when he realized the engineers were going to keep it intact. A bubble of it caught in his nose, and he blew it free. The second devil, his head split, slid gently to the floor.

Vomit tickled the back of Guil's throat with its acid fingers. The test masters were a little too careful with the detail, a little too generous with the sadism for the spectators. They splashed gore and pain around like children with water and sand. Guil wondered whether the real reason they did not want to see sound rifles used except as a last resort was because sound rifles were clean and left no blood or mangled remains when aimed correctly. Was the purpose to gain a station and prove manhood—or to thrill the Musicians and their Ladies with horror by the bucketful?

The six remaining devils separated and gingerly tried to surround him. They closed in from three sides, teeth foam-flecked, eyes hideous and wild. But it would not be those teeth, no matter how horrid they looked, that would kill him. The devils would simply grasp him in a death embrace where their null waves would

negate his positive waves and wipe him off the face of the earth. He arced the point of his knife and smoothly halved all of them in ten seconds. There was a tremendous amount of blood on the floor, leaking away in all directions like a thousand-fingered hand with an irregular palm.

Guil searched the arena for signs of the next test. For a time, as the seconds ticked by, he thought that it might be over and that he might have won. But the silence of the crowd and the gaze of the judges told him this was not so. Then what? Was it now a war of nerves, stretching seconds into minutes, stretching minutes into scores of minutes until he was ready to crack from the stress—then throwing another horror at him? But he did not have time to follow that course of thought any further. The next test was upon him.

Suddenly he saw that the gore from the past battles was shivering, not just as all sound configurations shimmered, but with a purpose. The blood from the ten devils began to draw together, defying gravitational laws, surging up the curved floor like crimson tides, forming a deep, high-sided puddle. Coagulation occurred rapidly as black clots formed, meshed, tangled to clot more and more of the sticky fluid. He could almost feel as well as hear the shudders of disgust in the tiers. Still, they loved it with a savage lust. It was an awful and delicious thrill they would never allow themselves to miss.

Abruptly, the blood coagulation was fed by gallons of red fluid that erupted from the slashes on the partially deflated hulk of the dragon—blood stored, saved, waiting for this moment. It gushed down the floor to the pulsating mass, splashed around it and held to it magically. The jelly-mass quivered, now a dozen feet high and nine feet thick, a pillar of congealed blood with a strange will of its own. All at once, it shrank down to six feet, split into two pillars, each stretching back to its original height of twelve feet with a new thickness of four and a half.

The crowd roared, thumped the bleachers. Guil could see their faces without even bothering to look: red, bloated slightly out of normal perspective, perspiring, saliva wet in their open mouths and glistening on their lips, their noses quivering like the noses of wild animals sensing a terminal battle. Eyes wide and pupils dilated. And why? What was it they had that he lacked? What ugly longing boiled in them that did not boil in him, that clutched them to this spectacle?

The two pillars trembled as if about to move.

More noise from the crowd...

Guil waved the sonic knife, slashed them in two, waved it back at a lower level and made eight pieces. Then he saw the terrible consequences of acting without thinking. Each part still lived, burbling, slopping, stretching to almost six feet, shrinking width-wise to two feet. They were not dead, but merely multiplied. They lashed out with pseudopods, all eight of them, closing the gap between test and testee...

He threw the sonic knife from him in fury, bringing the rifle into play now. Falling to one knee, he aimed through the glass bubble on the sleek, gray barrel, centered on the jelly-mass, and fired. The thing vibrated, seemed to flame into a million flecks of seething ash, and was gone, its sound patterns disrupted and dispersed by the bolt from the rifle. This was good. This was better. No blood, no gore, no ruined bodies. Simple and clean. He turned toward the remaining seven pillars of blood jelly, grinning.

While he had concentrated on the first of the creatures, the others had moved frighteningly close. He danced backwards, firing as he went. He blasted two more of them out of existence before he suddenly slipped and fell backwards in a tangle of legs and arms. The gun tumbled out of his hands and rattled across the floor, spinning to a stop a dozen feet away...

His head spun as the gun had spun, aching with brushburns where flesh had skidded over stone. Every nerve in his body tensed and began screaming, for this was, just possibly, the end of Guillaume Dufay Grieg. He launched himself dizzily after the rifle, rolling across the floor and clutching it, losing it in his panic and having to clutch it again. Turning to stand, he found a blood beast towering over him. The clots churned through it as it gurgled even closer to him. A pseudopod snaked out and wrapped around his leg, stung and tightened there.

The crowd moaned.

He felt the tingling as his natural molecular patterns were disturbed. He swung the rifle up, heaving frightful sobs from his chest, and blasted point blank at the blood beast. There was a rich humming as sound pattern canceled sound pattern, and the blood beast was gone. The tingling sensation in his leg was gone too, but it left behind a dull aching as his molecular patterns protested the near obliteration. But the blood beast was gone!

The other four were not.

And they were closer.

Reaching out...

Clutching the sound rifle, he rolled sideways until he slammed against the arena wall. Still dizzy, he stood and braced his back against the low barrier of cool shimmer-stone. His ribs ached, as did his leg and the side of his head. He fought to clear the multiple images from his mind while panic boomed in him and warned him that he didn't have time to straighten himself out, didn't have enough time at all...

The crowd was roaring again, and the sharp bellow of noise seemed to help flush away the dizziness. He felt his breathing return to some semblance of normality, though the slamming of his heart against his chest wall did not decrease. He brought the gun up and played it on the four blood beasts. They could not move as fast as he could shoot. They sank rapidly into nothingness.

The screams of the crowd indicated a knowledge of what was coming next.

But his head ached and his vision was now blurred by sweat and blood and he could not, for the moment, see anything. Through the watery haze, the arena seemed empty, save for the body of the dragon and some scattered members of the devils he had cut with the sonic knife. Hugging the wall, he started back toward the Bench so that there might be room behind him for running when the next challenge was thrown at him. He felt as if he would have to run, for there was so little energy left to fight with.

His legs did not hurt. Contrariwise, they held no feeling whatsoever. They were like dull, senseless hunks of steel that had been welded to his hips and moved on some distant, involuntary robot control mechanism. Up and down, up and down... He realized that he could not even feel the slap of his feet against the floor. He was so very, very tired. Only the pumping of his natural supply of adrenalin was keeping him going, and that seemed perilously close to exhaustion. He searched

again for an opponent as the crowd screamed and had its millionth paroxysm of horror-filled joy, its millionth orgasm of terror. He blinked sweat out of his eyes, raised an arm to wipe away some of the blood. His hands were still alive, but he realized the half paralysis that had invaded his legs was creeping down his arms in an effort to turn him into a complete zombie. He knew that, if he were to survive, the next test would have to come soon while he still had some energy, still a droplet of strength. Then he saw it...

...wriggling in the paper skin of the dragon...

...crawling in there...

Something...

The dragon was a Pandora's Box filled with nightmares. This one was a snake—a giant of a snake. It reared its truck-sized head with washtub green eyes, rose from the carcass of the lizard, its forked tongue hissing in and out of its mammoth Jaws. How many coils laid in the dragon? How many feet could the dragon possibly contain? Then he realized the test masters could make as many feet of coils as they wished come out of the dead dragon. Logic played no part in all of this. Logic and physical laws had been set aside. This was their nightmare they were sharing with him, and they could dream anything they liked. A thousand feet of snake could come boiling out of there. Two thousand. Ten thousand. They could fill the arena wall to wall with it and smother him with its scaly body.

And how many other things might follow the snake out of the carcass—assuming he could kill the snake? Could not countless terrors be swarming inside? Enough to keep him fighting here until he dropped and was defeated?

Then he saw it clearly and simply. The one thing he was supposed to grasp. The first rule of sound was to understand the simplicity of all the other rules. Sound control was easy, almost within the powers of an idiot. Pandora's Box was the answer. If he destroyed the dragon's carcass, the Pandora's Box would be smashed to splinters. He had ignored the corpse in his wariness of active adversaries. Now he saw that the dragon was the source. He could afford to ignore all else and destroy the dragon.

The snake focused phosphorescent green saucer eyes on him...

Wearily, he raised his rifle.

Raised it up and up and up...

Coil after coil unwound as the snake reared above the dead dragon, weaving and bobbling, coming out of it like a slow jack-in-the-box, out of it and out of it and out of it!

He sighted on the dragon's body, ignoring the menacing snake that was only a secondary adversary.

The snake was fifty feet above the dragon's body now, great fangs bared and dripping.

He destroyed the dragon.

The snake crashed onto the floor like a lump rope, now only half a beast. The part that had still been coiled in the dragon had not survived, and only fifty feet of the monster now writhed in the arena. Kicking without legs, screaming without a voice, it wriggled in its death struggle toward him. The giant jaws opened. He saw small, sinister forms within the throat, grublike things that were rolling toward the mouth in an attempt to fall out and take over where the snake had failed. The test

masters were clever—and mad. Without hesitation, he destroyed the snake with a prolonged bolt from the sound rifle, thus demolishing the test, dissolving the slugs and whatever else had been in that throat.

The Great Hall was quiet The arena floor was empty —save for him.

Suddenly the crowd bellowed like a mighty animal, applauded, shouted, jumped up and down. The cheer, like a mighty wave, swept into the arena and bore him toward the Bench...

FIRST:

Loper stopped a few feet from the elevator, holding the child he had kidnapped, watching the three approaching Musicians and wondering, desperately, what he could do. A fat Musician on the end of the trio saw Loper first, and he shouted, started running. Loper looked for doors. At the farthest end of the corridor, away from the Musicians, four huge, milky glass panels waited like cataracted eyes.

The Musician reached him, his arms extended as if he would grope for the child. Loper swung his dagger, plunged it through the man's neck, ripped it loose. The Musician wobbled sideways, his eyes suddenly very large, and collapsed to the shiny floor, leaking all over the beautiful tile.

One of the others reached for his sound-sedative whistle.

"No whistles!" Loper shouted, holding the baby above his head with one hand, showing his intent to loll at the drone of the sound-sedative.

The Musicians stopped, faces suddenly milky white like the doors, threatening to dissolve here and reappear on some oddity shelf as porcelain figures of rare perfection.

Slowly, Loper backed away. A dozen yards later, he turned and ran, his wide, six-toed feet slapping loudly against the tile. His leg muscles snaked under his skin like steel cables, thrusting him on. He burst through the doors, smashing one outward against a pillar, shattering it. It hummed in fragments, then disappeared. By the time he had reached the bottom of the steps and was in the neon stone gardens, the sirens were wailing and outraged shouting had erupted behind.

The baby was awake and screaming. He held it against his chest to dull its outcries.

Neon stones glowed on all sides, casting up auroras that nearly blinded him when he strayed from the regular pathways between them.

Bursting blue ashimme?: a sea afire...

Red, red, crimson, rouge, cinnabar: blood...

He raced from the gardens, stopped to look back. A sound rifle beam sang into a tree next to him, puffed a huge limb out of existence. Then a Musician shouted an order not to shoot for fear of harming the child. Loper turned and—loped.

When he reached the Popular Sector, he discovered he was still not safe, for the Musicians snapped on their brilliant amber sound shields and came on. He turned into a litter-strewn alleyway, turned again and again. Suddenly, panic-stricken, he realized he had made a crucial blunder. He should have sprinted directly into the ruins where reinforcements lay; he should not have tried to lose them. Here in the alley-maze, they could divide to surround and finally corner him. That was

something he could not allow to happen, especially since he had the child and it had been to steal a child that everything had been risked in the first place.

He would have to act now, before they retrieved the child and the chance of substituting Strong's perfect baby, his unmutated baby, was lost. He held the baby at arm's length and was struck by the gentle, soft lines of it, the pink coloration, the tiny features... No! He had to hurry, had to act. This baby must never be found.

He reminded himself that it was this babe's great-great-great-multigreat grandparents and every relative on down who had made the postwar Earth what it was.

In the future, this child would perpetuate the wrongs of his ancestors. With anger for what the Musicians had made the Populars, Loper snapped its thin neck between three fingers, turned and stuffed the raglike corpse into a drain pipe where the patter of rat feet echoed scratchily...

Chapter 3

There were four on the winner's platform now, and the arena was settling down, the crowds making less and less noise as the time drew near for the start of the final test. Guil felt the bandage on his head, decided it was too small to worry about, and grinned. He had made it! At least through the first stage, through the arena challenges. There remained only the Pillar of Ultimate Sound, the courting of Death Himself. But he could not envision anything worse than the arena, more trying than the dragon's Pandora Box, more horrifying than the blood beasts—or the forms that had attempted to slither from the snake's throat. The Ultimate Sound would only be a formality; he had beaten the Erlking! While he rejoiced that his life was now set and molded and without further complications, Rosie approached the Bench, shoulders hunched. He remembered the boy's words from the previous day, and he turned to watch carefully for whatever startling thing Rosie had planned.

Rosie stopped and looked up.

"Girolamo Frescobaldi Cimarosa?" the judge asked.

"It is I, your honor."

"Are you prepared to begin your test?"

"No, your honor."

No.

No! It took time to register and have meaning. The mind was prepared for the standard reply, the reply given by all boys, and now something different had been uttered; it required a mental adjustment. A mumble of astonishment went through the thousands in their tiers as neighbor turned to neighbor to confirm what they thought they had heard—but could not believe. Guil hunched forward though he could see and hear perfectly well.

“Before we go any further,” the judge said, obviously perplexed as anyone in the audience, T should tell you that you have been recommended by your instructor for a Class I station.”

The audience gasped. Half came to their feet, and the other half followed suit. The situation demanded a direct view of the Bench no matter how much better they could see it on their individual televisions. Guil had expected Rosie to place high, but had not been anticipating a full Class I status. He had been limited to a Class IV chiefly because of his rebellious nature and his innate musical inability, not because he was any more incompetent at using the Eight Rules than any of the other boys. Similarly, he had expected Rosie to be named for a low class simply because of his stigmata. But now the judge had offered the highest place in society.

“I do not accept,” Rosie said. He did not say it with disdain or in fear. There was something else in his voice —pride, perhaps.

“You do not accept?” the judge croaked, furious now, his hands flitting out of his voluminous robes, his scrawny neck stretching out of the orange judicial ring on his collar.

Rosie stood, waiting, a pathetic figure on the vast floor, alone and very small before the Bench. Realizing the boy was waiting for the continuation of the traditional questions, the judge cleared his throat and said, “Do you have any particular statements or requests to be made at this time?”

“I do.” Rosie seemed suddenly to stand straighter, to break some of the twisted grip of his bones and muscles. Guil had never seen him effect a similar posture.

“That is?”

“I wish to forgo the tests of the Four Classes in order that I may try for the Medallion of the Composer.”

The roar of unrestrained excitement that coursed through the tiers was far greater than anything the Musicians and their Ladies had loosened during the traditional tests that had preceded this moment. It rebounded from the walls, shook the stands with its tumultuous booming and proved too much even for the thirsty acoustical walls to drink in and negate. Guil felt swallowed by it, like a morsel of food dropped into a giant’s throat. Somehow, he felt more alive under its pounding echo. He was exhilarated as he had never been. Not only his own success, but now this! Did Rosie really think he could make it? Only fourteen had tried in four hundred years, and only Aaron Copeland Mozart had made it. That had been—how long?—two hundred and twelve years ago. *And I know him*, Guil thought. *And no matter whether he makes it or not, he will go down in Vivaldi’s city history.*

The gigantic key orchestra was brought into the arena after a delay of some minutes. The audience quieted as the hunchback approached the instrument, drew the stool before it, ran his hands over the hundred and twenty keys, drifted feet over the eleven pedals, and cast his eyes up and down the three rows of blue and red toggles stretched twenty to a line above the keys.

Rosie sucked in his breath and bent over the board like a nearly blind man over a book. The audience took its seats with a *whump!* like the wings of a huge bird thumping in heavy air. Guil realized he had not been breathing. He breathed. And Rosie began his original composition...

The opening theme was proud and chivalric. It was piano only, but promising more later. The octaves for the left hand approached the limits of what a piano could do. It seemed as if only the full orchestra with its trumpets and drums could do justice to the marvelous conception. Then, abruptly, as he threw toggles and pumped pedals, there *was* a full orchestra.

Lull...

An interminably long lull. Finished? Guil wondered. Finished already?

No! An artless tune, much like a folksong, was played by a solo bassoon *andantino* and *capriccioso*, happy-go-lucky. The Great Hall was tomb-silent except for the music. The people might just as well have died or faded away into some other continuum.

Tension began to increase in the middle of the movement. There were tremolos on the strings and ominous pronouncements by the trombones and trumpets... Violins... Then a repetition of the theme by cellos and woodwinds.

Sound coursed magnificently through the Great Hall, whirlpooled the recesses of Guil's mind, stung his teeth with irresistible vibration, forced him through the womb-waves of its theme and countertheme as instrument was played against instrument, hand against hand, shadow orchestra against main orchestra, dissonance against consonance—for one thing is nothing without the other.

Strings, strings, a wire waterfall of strings. Violins, viola, violoncello, contrabass playing *legato*, *staccato*, now *legato* again. Suddenly a piccolo *cadenza* without lessening the plunge toward climax... bugles, bugles, brass challenges at midnight... whirling, flashing, crashing, bone-rendering and... silence.

Guil stood, panting, his entire body shaking, his fingers gripping the platform railing as if he would split it beneath his grasp. His legs felt like rockets that would send him shooting into the ceiling, flame trailing behind. He started to shout a bravo, but the crowd beat him to it, tearing his own voice away in the flux of the greater roar. Still he cheered and waved his arms madly, tears on his face as Rosie stood, those damned hunched shoulders nonexistent in the face of this absolute and resounding triumph. The years and years of the mutant's battling had terminated in this, a final reward that more than compensated for the rigors of his childhood. Guil, vision blurred, turned to the Bench and saw that the judges too were overwhelmed. Handel was pounding his fists on the Bench top, pounding and pounding until they must have been bruised, pounding in joy, not in a call to order. The boom sounded even above the cheering as his flesh hammers struck squarely, unheeding of their own condition. Just when Guil was certain the sound configuration of the Great Hall must be disrupted and fade into nothingness, Rosie drew himself up and turned, bowing to the audience. The shouting doubled, tripled impossibly, quadrupled as ten thousand pairs of lungs wrenched themselves apart to congratulate. The sound blasted Guil until his ears ached. Nevertheless, the screaming continued and would continue until lungs were afire, throats cracking. Rosie was a Composer. *One* of the greatest of all time if this selection was any indication. And he was theirs!

In time, the fury died.

Rosie received the Medallion of the Composer which could change the vibrations of any mechanism or any portal to allow him use or entrance. It did not merely key locks, it effectively dissolved doors for a moment to let him pass, set machines in

tune with his own patterns so they worked for him as if they were a part of him. He had only to render the products of his talent in return. Finally, when all the rituals demanded by the situation had been run through to completion, the judge asked if Rosie had any requests to make now that he had been freed of the tests and the Pillar of Ultimate Sound.

Then came the bombshell...

He asked that his sister be allowed to try for a station in the arena.

It was a preposterous request Women were Ladies. Women were never Musicians. It was a thing that had never been, a thing that had no place in their ordered society. It was like asking a twentieth-century man to accept a porpoise for his President simply because science had proved that the porpoise was intelligent. Vladislovitch, the Father of the World, had seen the function of women as procreation and nothing more. He had made it explicitly clear that women were to be the bearers of children, those who carried on the race and the immortality of Vladislovitch's own name, but that they were never to be stationed. Never. The station was a sign of masculinity, and a stationed woman would destroy the very basics of the order of things.

Still, though the request was preposterous, so was the situation. They had their first Composer in two centuries. The histories told of the glory of the age of the last Composer, of the magnificence of the society he had inspired during his lifetime. The rise of a Composer acted as an inexplicable aphrodisiac on society, turning it on to itself until it blossomed colorfully. There wasn't a soul in the Great Hall who did not long for another such Golden Era. Rosie, therefore, was nearly a god to them. Indeed, after his death, he would eventually be canonized and then proceed from sainthood to godhood as the years passed. Tomorrow, they might feel a bit less sure of the move, but today they were exuberant, and they agreed to his request.

Besides, what woman could possibly survive in the arena? There was almost no chance of her success. So there would be no problem later on. Would there?

The crowd, jabbering, found seats again. Guil sat down as Rosie climbed the platform stairs and sat beside him. "I didn't even know you had a sister," Guil said, trying to suppress his awe so that he might talk to Rosie as a friend, as he would have before the bestowing of the Medallion.

"Oh, yes, Guil. A sister." Rosie grinned broadly. "You'll see. Here comes Tisha now."

Guil squinted, trying to make the girl out from his position across the vast arena. Her instructor came to the left and slightly behind her, hobbling a bit. It was white-haired Franz! The gentle face, calm manner, and proud carriage told him that it was the old man who had trained him on the guitar, who had been so patient with his rumbling (unlike Frederic) and who had shown him that he did have at least the minimal talents of a musician. He fought down an urge to wave and looked back at the girl He swallowed hard, felt his Adam's apple bobble in his throat like a trapped animal Had he been expecting a hunchback like Rosie? A warped mutant, another error in the gene juggling chambers? But she took his breath away with her beauty, burned his already sore throat with a strange longing he could not quite define.

She is magnificent, Guil thought.

Rosie smiled.

Beautiful. Five foot three, slight but awe-inspiring. She was dressed in a wine-colored leotard suit and matching slippers. The suit clung tightly, too tightly to the sweet contours of her body. Long and stunning legs for so short a girl, flaring hips of perfect breadth, a tiny waist that looked as if hands might encircle it, pert and upthrust breasts, and her neck, a hand-carved polished curve of nut brown. Her face was delicate as fine Chinese embroidery, framed with a burst of black hair and punctuated with two eyes as blue-green as those of a cat. Even from across the arena, her face shone with a radiant loveliness that stirred his nerves into a frustrated dance. Surely, the genetic engineers had been performing contrition for past mistakes when they had formed this shinning girl-woman,

“She’s... she’s...”

“Isn’t she?” Rosie chuckled.

The duo reached the Bench and halted—Tisha with her feet drawn together, her back arched, very pert and very pretty, old Franz stooped and looking weary but game nonetheless. The litany progressed, and the crowd sucked in a collective breath that must have drained half of the air from the room when Franz said that—being her tutor and being proud of what she had accomplished under him—he recommended her for a Class I. It had been daring enough a request on Rosie’s part, but to ask for Class I seemed to be pushing it further than the bounds of decency.

The judges looked skeptical too.

However, Guil thought, it would probably be better to win a Class I than a Class IV. He could see that if Tisha won a Class IV station, the ridicule heaped on other Class IVs from those higher in the social order would lead to much unrest and bad feelings: “Why, even a woman can win one of your damn Class IV’s!” So it had to be the top or nothing. Reluctantly, the judges agreed to let her try for it. They had committed themselves to Rosie. Besides, there was the almost positive assumption that she could only fail.

But she did not die.

She performed perfectly against more horrors than Guil had had to face, using her weapons expertly—an array of fourteen that a Class I had to understand and master. For half an hour, she calmly took whatever was thrown at her, using bolosonics, sound rifles, and sonic tropic dart systems. It was plain that the judges intended to balance the weight against her, that the test masters behind the Bench would force her to confront twice as many specters as any other Class I candidate would have to endure.

She slew the wolfmen that spewed from a shower of wriggling worms.

She disposed of the scorpion-tailed dragonflies that rose from the corpses of the wolfmen.

When at last the test masters could not decently continue tests without publicly admitting they were stacking things against her, and when the tests were finished, she received a shallow spatter of applause, mostly from the Ladies in the stands. The men were too busy ruminating on what all of this would mean to them. She was escorted to the platform where she hugged Rosie and kissed Guil on the cheek because Rosie had called him his only friend.

At last, it was time for all but Rosie to face the Pillar of Ultimate Sound. Guil led Tisha from the platform, dust puffed a bit at having her arm for even this brief moment.

Then, moaning from a sudden break in the floor, came the Pillar of the Ultimate Sound...

As the swirling, umbrageous column towered above them, humming with a bleak and ugly steadiness, a thousand submelodies intertwined among a million syncopated rhythms playing against one another in near cacophony, he knew without a doubt that the Pillar of the Ultimate Sound was worse than the tests in the arena. He tried to argue himself out of that viewpoint by reminding himself that he had stuck his head into the pillar that day he had been with his father, had experienced the eerie world that the pillar was a gateway to. There should be nothing frightening now about the pillar, should there? Yes. Yes there should. When he had been a child and had looked into the realm beyond, he had been too young to understand what it was, what it meant. Now, older and with the benefit of stories about researchers who had ventured beyond and had never returned, he knew that the land beyond the pillar was Death. Knowing made a great deal of difference. His stomach churned madly, anxious to empty itself.

The pillar played hymns.

But black and malevolent were their themes...

The order of challenge was settled on by the drawing of lots. Guil was to be last, Tisha just before him. He felt his ice hands contracting, cracking the bones of his fingers as his flesh tried to crawl in on itself. The people in the stands felt the terror too. They were quiet, solemn, perhaps a bit nervous. An invisible graveyard breeze swept through the place, rattling the spectators like ten thousand teeth in the jaws of the Great Hall.

The judges peered over the bench, watching intently.

The doctor came onto the floor, followed by two assistants. He was a psychiatrist; the assistants were medical doctors. The chief doctor's function would be to examine each boy—or girl—after he—or she—had come out of the pillar, then pass judgment on his emotional stability. Some of the contestants would be broken by the experience. Others would pass it without much trouble. It depended on whether one was still a child, holding onto the beliefs of his immortality.

The first boy stepped forward at the direction of the doctor and entered the pillar. He was inside for only moments, and came out looking chipper enough. The psychiatrist attached the sensitive bands of his scanner to the wrists of the boy, slipped the mesh cap over his head. In seconds, the scan had been completed, and the psychiatrist announced that this one had passed the test, had not built up an undue amount of pattern instability in his thought waves.

A second one followed the first, entered the pillar hesitantly. When three minutes had passed and the boy did not emerge, the psychiatrist went forward and stepped partially into the pillar, found him and brought him out. His lips were loose, slimed with drool, and his eyes were vacant. The boy had slipped into a schizophrenic state so deep that there would be no getting him out, ever. Another body for the disposal furnaces.

Then, after several more tests, it was Tisha's turn. She stepped forward without a moment's pause, slid into the humming brown wall of sound. Guil wanted to reach out for her, to stop her, but he could not. This was her fight. A minute later, she came out, smiling, and approached the psychiatrist. It was obvious that the experience had not deranged her, that her mind was capable of accepting the atmosphere beyond the pillar without losing control of itself. She was able to die for a short moment and come back with us living and not lose her sanity.

But the psychiatrist proclaimed her disturbed.

She protested, turned to the judges and demanded to be cross-checked by another psychiatrist with another scanning machine.

The judges only nodded.

The psychiatrist stated that it would not be necessary for her to be relegated to the disposal furnaces, for the instability was not that serious.

"Why, then, is it serious enough to keep me from gaining a Class?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips and facing him with all the determination she could muster.

"I have made my statement," the doctor said. He turned away from her.

"Dismissed," the judge said.

"You can't do this to me," she said.

"Yes," the judge said. "Dismissed."

Guil watched her walk off the floor, back into the rooms beyond the arena where she would change and leave. Rosie had been influential enough—in the heat of the moment, at least—to get her a chance to try for a Class, but his influence had not lasted. He was a Composer, but it would take more than a future saint and god to change the order Vladislovitch had established. The judges had seen their mistake, had realized this could open the door to more women seeking Class, and had found a way to slam that door in her face.

He was next.

For a moment, he considered the wisdom of refusing on the grounds that the girl had been cheated. Then he decided that would be decidedly unwise, stupid even. Who was he, after all, to dispute with the judges? And who was he to say that the ways established by Vladislovitch should now be overturned? Ahead of him lay a peaceful life within this pleasant society. There was no reason to strike out and demolish his future. He could not singlehandedly change the masculinist policy, and he would succeed only in bringing his own ruin. He stepped forward.

The pillar hummed, pulsated from dark brown to light brown and back to dark again.

He had faced it as a child. He must remember that.

He stepped into the pillar, through the gate into another world, the world of Death from which the researchers had never returned...

There was before him a raven sky, black from horizon to horizon, stung with faint brown stars. To his right was a row of chocolate-hued mountains cut by a gem-glistening river that was very dark green and terribly wide. Abruptly, he thought of his dream:

Above the bleak banks of the green river there is a barren wall of stone jutting to a shelf of polished black onyx a hundred feet overhead. It is an indeterminable hour of the night. The sky is clear, but it is not blue. As he watches, it threads

from black to lighter shadows, an odd brown and a rotten tan that approximate the color of dried blood where they overlap. At a bend in the river, the onyx shelf juts completely across the water, forming a roof, and on this roof is a purple building of massive columns rimmed with black stone faces at their tops. Drifting on a leaf, he approaches the building...

Then he elaborated on the dream, took it one step further:

Within, he sees for the first time, what seem to be cavorting, dancing figures which...

Then he realized he was standing too long in the column. It was best to get out in the normal time length, to give the psychiatrist and his machines no chance whatsoever to ban him from adulthood. He stepped back into the Great Hall.

For a moment, he was struck with a melancholy, almost overwhelming sense of loss. The psychiatrist came forward, slipped the bands on his wrists and the mesh pick-up cap on his skull. He was not found wanting. He Lad passed the final test. It was over. Done. But a sick-sweet feeling within told him that it was far from over, a long, long way from done. Single file, they left the Great Hall, the totem of the pillar roaring a siren song behind.

In the rooms behind the Great Hall, he found a dressing and shower cubicle. He tossed off his cape, grabbed his chest and hugged himself. He thought of the Pillar of Ultimate Sound, of the throbbing desires to return there, and he vomited over the pretty blue floor which had been programmed—due to past experience with testees on Coming of Age Day—to sound-annihilate just such a vile fluid...

The sound shower, activated by his identisong medal,

“washed” away his perspiration, pelleted him with tuneful cleansing. But it could not reach wet fingers down through the muck of him and cleanse his soul. And that was the thing that was dirtied, much more blackened than his skin. In just one day, so many things had happened and the world seemed so suddenly wrong. First, he had seen the savage blood lust hidden just below the surface of the Musicians who claimed to be the height of civilized existence. That frightened him as much as the pillar. He no longer felt that he knew those people he had lived with all these years. Suddenly, they had taken off masks and had shown jackal faces underneath. Then, too, there was the pillar and the indescribable magnetism of that landscape. He wanted to go back. Part of his mind longed for the brown-black sky and the ethereal, dusky landscape.

“You were very brave,” a voice said behind him.

A little voice, little and soft.

Her voice.

He turned, shocked at her nakedness, frantically wondering what he might grab—and from where?—to cover his own body. She seemed unconcerned, however, as if mutual bathing were a thing the two of them had shared a thousand times. And his thoughts went to her beauty, to the curves and prominences of the body that matched in every degree the loveliness of that indescribable face.

She stepped under a second shower broadcaster. “Rosie was afraid for you.”

“I was afraid for Rosie,” he said, then laughed, his tension draining just a little.

“I know what you mean. Rosie doesn’t need pity. I’ve always known that.”

“You were rather brave yourself,” he said, searching for some way to keep the conversation going so that there was not as much awareness of her body.

“Not really.” She took his medal and lifted it to her shower head, turning it on as the bars of *Marche militaire* played.

“You were cheated,” he said.

She shrugged her shoulders. Her breasts bounced.

He turned his face to the shower speakers, closed his eyes. Invisible fingers squeezed new perspiration out of his skin, and he needed to have it sung away.

“Do you think this will encourage other girls?” he asked. How?”

“I mean to apply for a station.”

“What’s to encourage them?” she asked. “It will be rumored all over the city how thoroughly I was humiliated and turned away. And no other girl will have a brother who is a Composer to get her even as far as Rosie got me.”

“I guess so.”

“You were different,” she said, turning more toward him.

His eyes traveled down the front of her. He pulled them back up to her face, blushing. “What do you mean?”

“You were hoping I would win.”

“Of course.”

“No one else was. Except Rosie. They were all waiting for me to be killed in the arena or crack up in the pillar. They wanted me to end up in the disposal furnaces.”

“I don’t know if you can make that sort of generalization.”

“It’s true, and you know that it is.”

He stood for a moment, trying to find something to say that would not deny the honesty of the society of which he was now a part. But there was nothing but the truth. “You’re right,” he said.

She laughed, teeth sparkling, then cut it short “You saw the black and brown sky?” she said.

“Which became especially distorted and mottled over the chocolate mountains,” he said. He turned to the shower and closed his eyes again.

“And the ichorlike river.”

“All of it,” he affirmed, filled with horror and delight at the same time. The feeling of sick-sweet desire flooded back.

“Guil,” she said, putting a finger on his left eye and prying the lid open. “I came to you because you were the only one that wanted me to win. You cared about what happened. And because I’m afraid that they may have me marked now that I have tried to upset things.”

“Afraid? You?”

She looked at him, shook her head.

And with the sound playing *prestissimo* falls upon their singing flesh on the shimmer-stone floor, they found an epiphany of soul, moving together in time, giving to each a moment for *cadenza*...

FIRST:

Loper had disposed of the child's body just in time, for a moment later, the pursuing Musicians entered the far end of the alley. He turned, started to run the other way. Suddenly, Musicians blocked that entrance too.

He drew his knife, tossed it. It bounced off the yellow shield as he knew it would. He turned, searching the wall behind. A window ledge and a shattered window lay fifteen feet above. He leaped, caught hold of a hole where a brick had once rested, kicked his feet against the wall, brought a foot up to share the hole, raised a hand, grasped the window ledge, and pulled himself up.

"He doesn't have the child!" someone shouted.

Yellow light danced on the dull crimson walls.

He slashed his hand on the fragments of glass sticking out of the bottom of the sill. He hooked bleeding fingers over the rotting wood.

"Don't let him—"

"Stop him or—"

"Someone shoot the goddamned—"

His foot burst like an over-ripe fruit under the knife of the cold sound beam. Every bone reverberated like tuning forks set end-to-end. Desperately, he pulled over the sill and sprawled on the floor of the abandoned building. The voices outside subsided to murmurs.

A musty odor hung in the air. Reaching to examine his foot, he found only a stump. He wouldn't think about that. Gritting his broad teeth, he struggled out of his breechcloth, used it to make a tourniquet to stay the worst of the flow. Although he was resigned to dying for the cause, he didn't want to cash in his chips before he absolutely had to. He pushed up, moving on both hands and one leg, the wounded member held out so that he looked like a dog searching for a place to make its water. His head spun, toppled, climbed back to clarity, boiled, bubbled, ached.

The building was a warehouse, long abandoned now, the floor rotting in places. Indeed, he felt sure if the Musicians crowded in after him they would all plummet to the cellar. Grimly, he made his way across the room to a set of stairs leading to a platform that ringed the main chamber and gave access to second floor doors.

The wall adjoining the alley erupted in a shower of brick and dust, yellow light filtering in as Musicians shoved through, pulled others after them.

He doubled his efforts, holding to the rickety railing that could collapse at any moment, hopping from step to step on his good leg. The Musicians came onto the main floor just as he swung onto the platform.

"Up there!" And they were after him.

But the floor gave way beneath them. Five of the twelve plunged through the rotting wood, screaming, even their shields unable to absorb the shock of a thirty foot fall onto old rusted beams, trash, and rail posts. But seven remained.

The survivors strung themselves out and approached the stairs from several directions to distribute their weight. They saw Loper moving along the rail towards one of the doors, and they raised their rifles.

"Just wound him!"

Loper felt three fingers tear loose of his right hand. He faltered, wobbled, balancing on one leg, and crashed through the railing and the rotten floor below,

breaking his bull neck in the spokes of a rusted bicycle lying on the basement floor.

At least, he thought in that very last instant, the plan will be initiated. We will get our substitute child into the Musician towers in place of the real Guillaume Dufay Grieg. Then there was only blackness.

The seven Musicians searched the alleyways for the child, but their search here was a fruitless one. The rats were very hungry that night...

Chapter 4

When Tisha had gone from the cubicle, Guil dressed slowly, still stunned by the relationship that now existed between them, trying to sort out what it meant. She had said many things to him. She had said that they were two of a kind, two rare ones in this society, misfits of a sort, and the rare ones that had a capacity for tenderness toward other human beings. Rare Ones... She said that Rosie had some of it. That she and Guil had it. That old, white-haired Franz was compassionate. But that she could not recall having ever met anyone else who cared for anyone other than himself.

“No,” he had said. “You’re wrong.”

“Ami?”

“Of course.”

“I rather think it’s a case of your not noticing what the world is really like. You must lead a somewhat conservative and sheltered existence as son of the Grand Maestro, after all. Name me one person who has a genuine compassion for others—aside from the four already mentioned. Go on.”

“My father,” he said.

“Present for examination one instance when this compassion showed.”

He started to speak, then realized there was no instance that he could recall. He had always been aware that his father thought first of his own interests, of his own image. They had never been close, and now he saw why. It was not merely because they were of different generations, but because they were totally different types. Tisha was right.

And now, as he left the rooms behind the Great Hall and went out into the early evening air, his mind rambled over the other faults he had recently begun to see in this supposedly Utopian world. The blood lust of the spectators in the arena. The crookedness of the judges in their handling of Tisha—and the ready acceptance of such crookedness by the audience. The cruelty of the rituals themselves, the barbarous percentage of healthy young boys who were fed to the disposal furnaces. And, for some reason, he also connected the ruins of the Popular Sector with the string of failures of Musician society. He did not know exactly why this should be. The Populars were mutated Earthmen, twisted and warped as a result of their own foolish wars. And yet...

He turned away from the streets that led deep into the Congressional Tower and his father’s apartments, walked instead toward the ring of the neon stone gardens

that marked the boundary between Musician city-state and Popular Sector. The first ring of stones was white, just beginning to shimmer in these first minutes of semi-darkness. The next ring was pale green, then darker green, then blue, then purple, then deep yellow, orange, and last of all, fiery red. He paused at the last ring and looked at the ruins as he had the day before on his way home from his lessons.

This was a different section of rubble. There were three buildings standing within the mounds and piles of debris, three weary sentinels. Two of them, buildings of plastic and steel, had melted slightly and now leaned against each other like drunken comrades, offering mutual support without which both would have cracked and fallen to join the mangled mess of mortar and materials at their feet. The third building, one of stone—he vaguely remembered that these square, red blocks were called bricks—stood almost unscathed. There were even a few windows still intact, though they were crusted with grime. As he concentrated on one of those windows, he saw that there was something inside, looking out at him...

He could not distinguish any of its details, for the dirt on the pane was too thick. Then, as he watched, it disappeared.

The thought returned that the Musician society was somehow responsible for the Popular Sector. Why didn't they rebuild it? Why didn't they offer civilization to the Populans, the mutants? Oh, he knew the reasoning. The mutants were savages. They could not be civilized. The radiation had done things to their minds as well as their bodies. The Musicians were being merciful by not exterminating them altogether. Yet... Yet...

He caught a blur of movement on the roof of the intact structure. He shifted his gaze to see what it was. On the roof, staring down and across at him, was the black figure without a face.

It's the shadows, he thought. I just can't see any face because of the shadows. It really has a face; it has to!

Or did it have to?

He shuddered.

There were no rules that proscribed the limits of diversification in the Populans. He had seen some examples of things that had once been human but no longer remotely resembled a man. There were the slugform mutations that bore a human face at the end of a pulpy, segmented body. This faceless man, certainly, was no stranger than that.

He tried to look away. He could not.

And the faceless man waved to him.

Involuntarily, he waved back.

Then the faceless man was gone.

A while later, he turned away and walked back through the neon stone gardens, back from the rich colors to the primary border of white, beyond that into the shimmer-stone pavement of the streets.

When he got home, he had to suffer through a celebration staged by his father, a mammoth, nothing-lacking extravaganza with one of the highly expensive primitive orchestras that used real relic instruments instead of moog machines. The robo-orc had been stored in a closet somewhere. There were two hundred

well-wishers and freeloaders present, all wearing partial or full false faces of sequined shimmer-cloth that stretched snugly over their features and was somehow unable to conceal (for Guil, at least) the bestiality that lurked on the true expressions that had leered from the tiers of the Great Hall only hours earlier.

His father grasped him by the arm, just above the elbow, his fingers digging into Gull's flesh. Thus chained, he was dragged about the room from one guest to another, here to be congratulated, there to be slapped on the back. "And here," his father said, "you must know who this is, even though he is wearing a mask."

It was Frederic. Guil knew that even without a clear view of the bird face. The eyes were unveiled, and that would have been enough by itself. They glistened, red-rimmed, and bored into him, searching for his vital areas. But it was not the eyes, first of all, that told him this was his old instructor. It was the sting-strap. Even now, away from lessons, in a social situation, the vicious pendant carried the leather sting-strap looped through the belt of his robe. It dangled next to his left hip, much like the gun of an ancient cowboy.

"Congratulations," Frederic said, though it was obvious that he did not mean it. Insincerity literally dripped like venom from his words.

"Thank you," Guil said.

"The Pillar didn't frighten him at all," Guil's father said. He grinned, pinched Guil's arm even tighter. "He walked into one when he was just a child. Did you know about that?"

"No," Frederic said.

"Walked right into it. Didn't bother him then either."

"It was just my head," Guil amended.

"What?"

"I just put my head in, Father."

"Still," the Grand Meistro said. "Still, for a mere child of—"

"What do you intend to do with your life now that you've earned it?" Frederic asked.

"I haven't thought much about it."

The eyes shone brighter, bored more deeply. "Teaching is out, of course. Unless you teach guitar. But that is a limited field. You could go into maintenance."

Guil's father choked.

"Keeping the Towers and all the other configurations in form and operative is a noble enough task," Frederic amended, shifting his gaze to the Meistro. "I had thought the boy might go into a biological area," the Meistro said. "He was always keen on sciences outside of sound science. We need good biologists to track down the new developments in Popular mutations, to dissect them."

"Or he could go into entertainment," Frederic said. "He could work with the filming crews who do those feature lengths on the Populars."

"I don't think so," Guil said. "I have a year to think, by custom. I'll take my time."

"Certainly, certainly," his father said.

"Certainly," Frederic echoed. Guil noticed that the teacher's hand had strayed to the sting-strap. His bony fingers stroked it as if so doing brought him some pleasant stimulation.

Then it was over, and he was alone with his father, standing against the mantle of the simu-fire fireplace where sound-flames wavered behind the shimmering brasslike grill.

“*Der Erlkonig*,” Guil said, swallowing some of the green wine that had flowed freely throughout the evening.

“Just a song,” his father said uneasily.

“No.”

“Just a song!” The Meistro’s face was a livid, ugly mask like a corpse frightened even after death.

“Vladislovitch didn’t understand the ninth rule of sound, I guess,” Guil said.

That’s heresy.” The Meistro forced down his rage and sipped the wine, the tensed muscles of his neck denying his front of calm. “There is no Ninth Rule.”

The pillar? The land beyond?”

“A sound configuration. Nothing more. Like the other sound configurations.”

The unreal flames sputtered, throwing off cold. “Do you know the history of the pillar, father?”

“Created as a final test for the Coming of Age Day rituals so that—”

“No. I doubt all that.”

His father swallowed the wine, picked up another glass that was half empty and rimmed with blue lipstick. “Created as a final test by some test master who thought—”

“By Vladislovitch. He created it, but that is a carefully concealed fact, forgotten through the centuries—or nearly so. I think that is the real truth. Vladislovitch was trying to conquer the Ninth Rule of Sound, the Ninth Rule of Everything. Call it immortality. But he could not beat Death. It defeated him instead.”

“You better just shut up. Just keep quiet about it.”

“What about the researchers who never came back?”

There weren’t any researchers. That’s a fairy tale. There isn’t a world beyond the pillar, just the illusion of one.”

“The legends say the researchers were real.”

“Just fairy tales.”

“Why don’t we send more researchers? Why are we afraid of what is beyond there?”

“You’ll have your own room,” the Meistro said, trying to change the subject.

“And so we have to prove we respect Vladislovitch’s courage—even though he failed to conquer the Ninth Rule—by imitating, in some small way, what he did. Because he was one of those who never came back from the other side of the pillar, one of those researchers who—”

“You’ll have your own room and your own sensonic.” Some of the blue lipstick had rubbed off the glass and now lined his lips with a grotesque trim.

“Sensonic?” Guil had heard the term always used in a mystic sense before, always as a subject denied existence in the presence of children. But he was no longer a child in any sense of the word.

“You’ll see. You’ll see shortly. It makes all of this worthwhile, Guil. It really does.”

“Even knowing of the Erlking?”

The Grand Meistro crossed the few feet between them, smashed an open palm across Guil's face. "Shut up! Shut up!" Saliva seemed to have clogged his throat so that he could hardly speak, could only make frustrated burbling and gurgling sounds like a drowning animal. He grabbed the boy by the frock coat he wore and shook him until both could hardly see for flying hair, until both were red faced. He tossed him against the shimmer-stone wings of the fireplace and stalked across the room. He opened a bottle of wine, filled a glass.

When he turned, his face was void of anger, filled instead with a conspiratorial grin. "Come on. I'll show you your new room."

His room was a hundred feet long, eighty wide, the walls lined with empty bookshelves waiting for discriminating fulfillment. The ceiling was a planetariumlike reproduction of the night sky of early June. Even with the lights off, the unreal stars were refracted in the black crystal walls so that the room was bathed in melancholy gray light.

"And your sensonic—now that you are a man." His father, clearly intoxicated now, waved the bottle of wine toward the bed.

"Just a bed?"

His father grinned, but there was something in that grin that was a scream of agony. Guil looked away.

"I'll leave you to see if it is just a bed or something more," he said, backing out of the room like a slave before a king, bowing slightly, head nodding. The door slid shut like a guillotine, chopping the head from view if not—in reality—from the shoulders.

Guil surveyed the chamber briefly, then succumbed to his exhaustion. He undressed in the pseudostarlight, visions of a soft body against hard shower tiles fleeing lark-like through his mind. The bed was soft, downy smooth against his weary flesh. He lay looking at the stars for a time before he saw the red console embedded in the headboard. He rolled to it, punched the first button. The bed revolved to the left. The second button moved it to the right. The third stopped it. The fourth button brought the dreams...

An orgy of sexual sensation filmed his body, seeped into every crevice and brimmed him with fierce joy. Vague shapes began to take form as mist entities. Then from mist to fog... From fog to a thick cloud

...From thick cloud to the haze of a memory and from there one step further to reality... Reality... Huge-breasted women, lusty and naked and eyes almost mad with what seemed to be desire, came from nowhere, eager to satisfy... Sound configurations... They were only sound configurations like the buildings they lived in and like the beasts he had fought in the arena. But like the beasts, they could affect him. The beasts could kill. The sound women could stir him to desire and culmination. They pulled him down and smothered him with mountains of flesh, swept him down skin-surfaced rivers toward the ocean that lay dark and waiting so that he thought it was the land within the pillar until he plunged into it and discovered it was the womb instead and that slipping wetly across it spiraled him toward an orgasm of physical and psychological self that would drain him of all semen for millennia...

Choking, he struggled toward the headboard, punched the fifth button, cutting off the warm and sensuous sound configurations before they could lead him to

climax and shut themselves off. The women disappeared in stages, their breasts and mouths hanging grotesquely in the air after all else had vanished.

The brown nipples swelled, burst, and left holes in the pendulous breasts...

Then the breasts were gone too...

Only the mouth, hungry tongue licking sharp teeth, curling and uncurling, curling and uncurling, beckoning to him...

Then he was alone again and unfulfilled, the wine forcing a bitter trail up his throat. With an effort he did not think he could possess in his utter weariness, he forced it down. Sensonic! So this was it. The great mystical experience, the thing that made life worth living—as his father had assured him not very long ago. Electronic lust. This was why there were separate bedrooms for mother and father—so that the reality of the spouse did not intrude on the id-satisfying plunges into the sonic whore bodies. It was as sad as it was disgusting. Guil felt an unbearable despair that welled up in his bones and geysered into every cell, despair that would nevertheless have to be borne.

Electric sex. Procreation was just a duty, a thing to be done now and again to replenish the race. And had Vladislavitch been able to conquer the Ninth Rule, had he gained the means to immortality through sound manipulation, then procreation would not have been necessary either. Indeed, taking the logical next step, real women would no longer be necessary. If no one ever died, there could be no use for births. The race could always remain steady and powerful without resorting to biological function.

For the first time, he realized the position of the woman in Musician society. Not much above that of the Popular. She was a useful tool, something to insure racial continuation, nothing more. Now, too, Tisha's danger was more relevant. When the judges and the congressmen realized that a breasted and vaginaed creature had attempted—and almost successfully—to enter their dominion, they would take steps to see that such a dangerous, ambitious creature was eliminated. Most assuredly, she would not be permitted to live for long. They would not dispose of her immediately. That would be too suspicious. But in a week, or two weeks. In a month... A year... The furnaces...

His heart thudded. He wanted to find her and warn her. But she would be asleep, after all, and he could not know where. And the tests, the pillar, the love-making in the shower, the party, and lastly the sensonics, had taken too much out of him. Despite panic, he found the arms of sleep...

And still more dreams...

Somewhere in his brain, a message tape, implanted long ago, decided that the proper number of years had passed. The chemical restrictive bonds dissolved, and it spied its message to him as he slept...

YOU ARE NOT GUILLAUME DUFAY GRIEG. YOU ARE NOT THE NATURAL SON OF JOHANN STAMITZ GRIEG. YOU ARE GIDEON, SON OF STRONG THE POPULAR. YOU ARE A POPULAR. YOU WERE BORN UNMUTATED. A POPULAR NAMED LOPER...

And so on.

Much later, he woke up screaming...

THE SECOND MOVEMENT

The Decision.

FIRST:

Strong sat in the ruins of the west wings, tossing stones into a pond that had once been a well-used swimming pool when the normal, prewar and preMusician men had existed, back four hundred years when the differences of the twenty-second century were many and wondrous.

A pebble skimmed the water, touching four times.

Now the pool was a blue eye in the white marble ruin of the pavilion that had once housed it. Its only patrons were a few yellow and green lizards. Its majesty had slipped from it as it had become, chiefly, a place for mosquitoes to breed in the summer when they found their way through the cracked ceiling to the wet rubble pockets of damp shade.

Three times this one touched water, sinking with a bullup...

Strong examined the lamps in the ceiling. They burned four hundred years after the war, for the power source of this section had not been damaged. It ran on and on, perhaps endlessly, giving light even when the building the light illuminated was a debris-strewn disaster area. Men had built well in those days with a science that was now just so much magic to Strong's kind. Almost as well as the Musicians built...

One, two, three, four, five, *bullup* ...

Could they, in all honesty, believe that the Musicians could be overthrown? If they could not even begin to conceive of what made these lights work, or what made the still operative robo-doc treat illnesses, if these things were such a mystery, how could they fathom and topple the mighty towers of the Musicians? Could they overthrow all this through just one boy?

One, *bullup*...

Yes, damn it, they could! Loper had not died without cause. When they got their boy into the towers...

There you are," Dragon said, twisting his lightly scaled head around the corner from the broken hallway. "You hide in the damdest places!"

"If I wanted to hide, you wouldn't find me." What, then?"

"Tossing stones in the water. What does it look like?"

"Oh, thinking, huh?" Dragon sat next to the bigger man, his squat legs drawn up against his chest, clawed feet dug into the rubble, glistening arms folded on his knees. He picked up stones and began lobbing them. He snorted. "Well, if you're just sitting here being morbid and melancholy and like that, there isn't much use in it I might as well tell you what I came to tell you."

Strong waited, finally said, "What's that?"

"Blue," Dragon said casually. "Old lady Sparrow says her time has come."

"What!"

“She’s ready to give birth. I was trying to make it anti-climatic, but you wouldn’t play along.”

Strong stood, scrambled up the slope of powdered and broken marble, his thick arms rippling even more vibrantly than those of his dead brother Loper had when he had climbed the Primal Chord. The child was on its way. And none too soon. Any longer, and it would have been too late to let the Musicians think they had recaptured the child Loper had kidnapped.

Dragon tossed a handful of stones into the pond and ran after him.

Chapter 5

He could not get to sleep until almost dawn, and he woke only six hours later, just before noon. The inside of his mouth tasted as if something small and furry had crawled inside and died while he slept. His entire body ached, and his thoughts were strangely muddled. He got out of bed and padded into the bathroom, looked into the three dimensional mirror at his drawn, swollen-eyed face.

I am Guillaume Dufay Grieg, he thought. I am Guil.

The three dimensional image looked back at him, seeming to be another person rather than a reflection. And it seemed also to be saying: *You lie. You are not Guil. Guil died last night. You are Gideon. You don’t even belong here. You are a Popular.*

He looked away from the reflection then and decided not to pay any attention to it. He went on with his morning toiletry, then dressed and went into the kitchen for breakfast. His father was downstairs somewhere in the offices of the Congress, attending to the affairs of the city-state. His mother was at a meeting with other women, discussing their sensonics. The club was called The Experience Sharers. Now, after all these years, he understood clearly what the purpose of the club was. Women got together to exchange their ideas for sexual experiences so that their individual sensonic programs could be as varied as possible. He had a meager breakfast, for he was not particularly hungry. At least the food chased away the sour taste in his mouth. The only problem was that it left behind a sweet, cloying taste that was almost as bad.

After breakfast, he did not know what to do. He sat at the table, staring at the changing patterns of the shimmer-stone wall, and he was suddenly thinking of his new name. Gideon... A Popular...

Again, he tried to suppress the thoughts, tried to deny that they even existed. But it was a losing battle. At last, when he realized there was nothing to do but face up to the situation, he moved into the main living room, slumped into a contour chair that shimmered and remolded to fit him, and he rambled over what he had learned last night.

Seventeen years ago, a Popular by the name of Loper, a big, burly brute of a creature, had managed to gain entrance to the Primal Chord, the tower that housed the genetic engineers, nursery, and sound research laboratories. Once there, he had kidnapped a newborn child. That child had been the Meistro’s son,

the real Guil. He had killed the child, then had been killed by Musicians pursuing him. But the Musicians had not known that the baby was dead. They thought other Populars had it. They searched the ruins. They found a baby that was human, unmutated, and they brought it back, rejoicing that it had not been injured. But the baby had not been Guil. It had been the son of a Popular: Strong's son named Gideon. Months before Gideon's birth, the robo-doc reported the child would be human, and the plan for substituting him for a real Musician baby was hatched on the instant. So the fake Guil had grown up thinking he was a Musician. Now a message tape (surgically implanted by the robo-doc) had gone off, had told him that he was a Popular, and had stated that he (Guil-Gideon) must help the Populars overthrow the Musicians. The message tape claimed that the Musicians had caused the Earthmen who had survived the war to mutate and were responsible for the Populars.

If that was true, then the Musicians were every bit as sinister as he had suspected. Yet, why would they create mutants of the survivors of the nuclear war? And why hide the fact that they had created them?

Even if it were not true, it should be enough that he was the son of a Popular. With that knowledge alone, he should go to them and arrange the details of the sabotage and espionage they expected of him.

But Populars were not intelligent. And not sane. They were savages.

No, that was quite obviously a Musicians' lie.

He sat thinking for a while longer, realized that he was only poring back over these few facts and assumptions. He had only so much information, only so much to judge by. Of course, he could not go running off to lay out plans for a revolution.

Was he a Popular by birth? Yes—but a Musician by environment. He could not that easily throw away the last seventeen years. Besides, his future was set. He had reached manhood. Why throw it away for strangers, warped and twisted half men? And yet he could not ignore the Populars any longer. Not only was there his natural curiosity about his true parents, but a need to find out more about the message tape's assertions that the Musicians had caused the mutation of Earthmen into Populars. He had begun to suspect that the foundations of this city-state were somehow unnatural, that this society was sick, rotting behind the thin veneer of shimmer-stone. This was his chance to find out. When he had gone over the situation half a dozen times, he pushed out of the chair and left the apartments. If he chose the proper area of the neon stone gardens, he could pass into the ruins of the Popular Sector without being seen.

Twice, as he wandered along the fringe of the neon stone gardens, he was ready to trot across the weeded, strewn no man's land between cultures, but was drawn up short when he encountered another Musician wandering through the stones and the trees. At last, when he had stationed himself where he could see all ways for a sufficient distance to know he could cross over unobserved, he stepped out beyond the crimson stones and into the waist-high weeds. Moving quickly, stumbling over broken chunks of concrete and sheets of twisted plastic, he made for the cracked and partially demolished facade of a building whose other three walls had collapsed. Once behind that, he could move without fear of being seen by any Musicians. The Popular Sector was strictly off limits, and intrusion there

was punishable in the Musician courts. Only licensed biologists and filmsters could penetrate the ruins.

He was halfway toward the wall when he saw the black figure standing half in the shadow the partition threw. It was waiting for him, its arms folded across its chest. He drew up, stopped.

The figure beckoned to him.

After a moment, he continued, more hesitantly this time. He kept telling himself that this was one of his people. This was more his brother than any Musician. Then he wondered if this were Strong, his father. The thought jolted him as severely as if he had been struck with a sound rifle beam. Then he whisked it out of his mind. The Populars got their names according to their physical characteristics. Strong would be a huge, hulking man— or half man. This black figure was thin and wiry, tawny like a cat. He was thirty feet away now, and he stopped. This close, and he could still not see any features on the obsidian face.

The black man beckoned again, more insistently this time,

He took half a dozen more steps. Stopped again. There were no eyes. He could not see the shine of teeth. There was no hump of a nose.

The figure hissed at him. The sound was low and hoarse.

He strained to see better.

He could still see no face.

No face at all.

The creature hissed.

He took another step.

The creature started forward, reaching out its hands.

Without thinking, Guil turned and fled, back over the broken concrete, the weeds lashing at his legs, stinging them through the black leotards he wore. He tripped over a tangle of cable and steel beam, went down hard. The wind was knocked out of his body as if a hammer had slammed into the pit of his stomach. He did not think he could move, not for minutes. Then he heard the approach of the faceless mutant, heard its light catlike steps in the high grass. He sucked in air so fast that his lungs ached even worse, pushed up, and went on. When his feet slapped onto the neon stones, he felt an indescribable wave of relief.

Twenty feet into the garden, back among the light orange stones, he turned. The faceless Popular stood halfway across the no-man's-land, facing his way. He knew it was looking at him, though he also knew it had no eyes. After a few long seconds, it turned and slunk back into the ruins, leaving him alone with his fear...

For a time, he contented himself with wandering through the city, exploring parts of it that he did not know well and rediscovering the sections he was familiar with. It was as if, by losing himself in the inanimate, he could forget the pressures being placed on him by other men. Still, he avoided lonely places, stayed with the citizens who used the main concourses. Those few times that he did find himself without companionship, he felt as if he were being watched by something sinister, something waiting for the proper moment to leap out of hiding and pounce on him. He tried to imagine what this fictitious enemy would look like, tried to kid himself out of his paranoia. But every time he tried to envision this fantasy assailant, he came up with a faceless, dark figure with long arms and thin but powerful fingers,

fingers like steel tongs. Then he would have to shift his chain of thoughts to something very commonplace that was not associated with his terror.

An hour of this wrestling with himself was plenty. He had always been one for action, one for taking the initiative. Indeed, it was this propensity that had gotten him labeled as a rebel quite early in life. He thought it must be the Popular blood in him, for Musicians were mostly passive. When he had almost run out of places to walk, two hours later, he found himself before a ground entrance to the main commerce tower. He pushed through the singing doors into a foyer where a chart hung from the ceiling on long, brasslike chains, listing the hundreds of stores in the tower. He located what he wanted, found the sound elevator, and ascended to the eighty-second floor and the toto-experience theater.

At the theater entrance, he used his medal, his identi-song, to get inside. He pressed it against the activator on the theater door and waited while the few bars played to a finish. The guard mechanism listened, recorded the piece, checked it against the credit files in the city's main status-tap credit department in the Congressional Tower. When it was satisfied that he was financially solvent either through private accounts or parental accounts, it swung open the door and allowed him to enter.

He walked through into the dark theater, stood in the back until he was able to see well enough to continue down the aisle. Fifteen rows from the back, and thirty-five rows from the front, he moved in to the fourth seat and slipped into one of the heavily padded chairs. Almost before he touched the fabric of the seat, he felt the nerve-tapping needles of sound stinging into him. He slipped on the mesh sensitizor cap and drew it tight to his skull by means of a small drawstring on the left side. Now, he was ready.

For fifteen minutes, nothing but soft music drifted through his flesh, carried by the sound needles and the mesh sensitizor cap until it seemed as if he were floating in a pool of sound—no, pleasantly drowning in it. As he relaxed, he thought about the toto-experience film. It was not exactly like the sensonics, though related. For one thing, the toto-experience theater did not concern itself with sex. Adventure, patriotism, suspense, and horror—yes. Sex, no. For one thing, the toto houses could not possibly compete with the sensonic sexual experience available to every adult in the city-state. Secondly, the theaters catered largely to children, boys not yet at their manhood, girls not yet married into the status of Lady. But for pure escape when sex was not enough—and there were many times, many cases where Musicians needed something more than an orgasm—the theaters were a welcome diversion.

Slowly, the music began to fade.

It was time for the feature.

Guil tensed as the soundtrack of the film replaced the intermission music, and his palms grew sweaty. He knew what he had come to see. Today's film was the latest results of the researchers who poked through Popular ruins looking for new mutations. He wondered, briefly, if the Stygian phantom would be in the feature...

Then the vast cinerama screen lit up, and figures came on in colors brighter than they should have been, colors so bright that they stung at his eyes so that he was forced to squint to see at all. The sound rushed by him like a great flock of birds, an endless, flapping parade of them stirring the air and making his

eardrums reverberate. Although he knew that he did not move from his seat, and that his seat did not remove from its place on the shimmer-stone floor, it felt very much as if he were rising, drifting across the other seats and toward the screen itself. The colors and sounds grew more real.

He noticed, for the first time, that there was a cut-out spot on the screen, a white blank in the film in the shape of a man. The other researchers addressed it, explaining to it what they were hoping to discover by the dissection of the creature on the operating table. Then he was moving through the screen, passing through the thin molecular compression of the screen, farther back into the reality of the film itself. He swept in toward the nothingness spot, the white man-shape, and filled it. Toto-experience now. He was in the film as well as watching it.

There were also smells. Antiseptics, mostly. But something else, too. He sniffed, caught it good this time. It was the odor of the first stages of tissue decay. For the first time, he looked at the thing on the table; the Popular the doctors were dissecting, and his stomach did somersaults.

It was one of the hideous slugforms that had devolved from Man. There were not too many of this species, and each individual worm differed slightly from others of its sort. This one was a cherry red and pulsated with postmortem muscle spasms, so that it looked almost like the primary stages of a clot forming in the bloodstream. Only, this clot was four feet long and weighed in at a hundred pounds. Its body was bristled with sharp spines that jutted out on both sides and from its segmented back. Halfway up each of these spines was a bulbous projection, light blue in color and apparently only thinly shelled with a rubbery, wet, glistening membrane.

Though the slugform was dead, one of the doctors informed Guil (who now understood that he was taking the part of a visiting Congressman inspecting the facilities of the researchers), it was still possible to display, for the Congressman, what the purpose of the blue tennis ball-sized spheres was. The doctor turned back to the slugform and used a scalpel to slice away putrid slug meat from the base of a spine. When he found what he wanted, he beckoned Guil—or the Congressman, whichever way one looked at it—to him.

“This is a nerve trigger that receives impulses both from the brain and from the point of this spine. If something attacks the slugform, the points pick up the sensation, relay it to the nerve. The nerve trigger breaks the internal shell of the poison sac (the blue bulb) and sends the toxic liquid up through the interior of the spine to leak out the pin-point holes in the end. Or, if the enemy has not yet attacked, but the slug sees that he will shortly, the slug can send impulses from the brain to trigger the nerves and be ready for its assailant.”

“Fascinating,” Guil said.

“We think so.”

Then he was retching. He could not help himself. He was gagging, trying to stifle the vomit and trying to scream at the same time.

The next instant, he was dissociated with the film and was sitting in his seat. The monitoring computers had sensed his great revulsion and had kicked his circuits open. Tired now, his entire frame shaking, he un-tightened the mesh cap and dropped it onto the seat, stood up, swaying. The sound needles withdrew from his nerves, stopped tapping his sensitive centers. He stumbled up the aisle and

into the corridor of the immense shopping tower. In the light and the fresher air, he felt somewhat better. He shoved his hands in the slit pockets of the short cloak he wore over his leotards and walked to the elevator shafts.

As he fell to the ground floor and left the building, the questions began arising again. Was the nuclear war responsible for the Populars—or were the Musicians the culprits? But how could the Musicians be responsible? They surely didn't have the power to warp thousands of—

Then he remembered the genetic engineers and the gene juggling chamber in the Primal Chord. Still, that explained nothing. The men from the ruins would not, surely, willingly submit to such atrocities. They would not willingly amble into the Primal Chord of their own free will and come out monsters. Some would escape, hide, evade...

It made no sense, none at all. And now, hours and hours after the message tape had been triggered, he was no closer to a solution of his dilemma than he had been moments before the end of the tape when the first awe and terror had swept into his mind.

What was the solution then? Run away? To another of the city-states that dotted Earth? But he could remember times when representatives from those other city-states had been to Vivaldi. From what he heard and read, their own cities were patterned after the social order of Vivaldi, on a gladiator rite of passage and on a strict class system. More than likely, he would fight his way across vast distances to another city-state and find it as bad or worse than this one.

What, then?

He needed someone to discuss the situation with, someone to garner an opinion from. If he could gather new insights, perhaps the problem could be easily solved. But he could not imagine whom he could tell of his Popular origins without getting himself shipped to the disposal furnaces. Anyone he told would have him carted away within the hour. Except... Except, Tisha.

He went to the directory at the nearest vidfone station and located the address of her parents. This time, buoyed by his distinct purpose, he found that the walking was even enjoyable. He thought about Tisha, about her face, her full body, the way she talked and moved. She would help him. She would prove his balm to salve the tensions in him.

Though he could not know it, the path of action he had chosen and would continue to choose would lead him directly to the featureless black man who waited in the ruins, watching...

FIRST:

Strong burst into the Healing Room with Dragon close behind. He crossed quickly to Blue. Blue... It was a fitting name. Truly, other features came to mind when one caught sight of her—such as her breasts (now high and distended with milk), her lovely, smooth brown legs, her feet like tiny feet on porcelain figurines—but two things were most impressive: first, the eyes blue and penetrating; second, the fine, semitransparent web membranes between the fingers, the stigmata that kept her from passing as an exceptionally beautiful Musician's Lady.

"I thought you wouldn't make it," she said, reaching for his hand.

“Dragon plays games—a treacherous reptile.”

“Out of the way,” Sparrow snapped, moving bird-fashion before the prone girl-woman. “It’s time. The pains. I know when it’s time.”

As if on cue, Blue convulsed with labor pains, her face so twisted that it frightened Strong to look at her. But her nails dug the callused flesh of his palms, and he was forced to look.

Sparrow pushed them to the door, then turned to the audio receptors of the giant robo-doc computer system embedded in the wall “She’s with child, doctor. Can you heal her?”

“An abortion will require—”

“No! No, abortion is out. Can you deliver it?”

“May I be presented with the patient?” it asked in its husky, no-nonsense voice.

Sparrow slid the operating table into the slot in the robo-doc’s middle. Blue was gone from sight now.

“I can do it,” the computer said.

“Well?” Strong asked Sparrow.

“Well what?” she asked in return, her black eyes ringed with hairlines of weariness and age, the chitinous, beak-like rim that replaced her lips faded from black of youth the gray of age.

“Well, what do we do next?”

“We sit on the floor,” Dragon said. “And we just wait.”

They sat.

Chapter 6

Guil searched her eyes, trying to find some hint of what her true thoughts were, and he wondered whether he had any right dragging her into this. After all, it was his real father who had given him away to foster a revolution, his past that needed discovery, and his problems that needed solutions. The world had turned topsy-turvy in a single day, had whirled and left him upside down and gasping for breath. The Musicians were, he now knew with a certainty, a warped and disgusting lot; however, might not the Populars who could so easily give away a son and then just as easily upset his new life seventeen years later be worse than the Musicians? Did not this basic callousness shed some light on an ugly side of the Popular character every bit as foul as that of the Musicians? Well, whatever the case, whether the problems were his own or merely the focal point of larger problems for society in general, he had had to tell her, had had a duty to tell her and include her in his plans. They had shared, so rapidly, bodies and souls and minds that they had become a gestalt with the sum equaling more than either of the parts. In the end of his explanation, he said, simply, ‘I’m not necessarily asking you to get involved in a revolution—though you well may. Chiefly, I just want to have you next to me.’

“Of course,” she said.

He sighed, cupped her chin in his hand, was going to kiss it when he thought that might be too cheap a movement. Instead, he said, "I thought you'd be afraid."

"Neither of us has anything to fear since the pillar," she said.

The Erlking," he said, tangling his fingers in her hair.

"The what?"

"Schubert's *Der Erlkonig*. The Goethe poem set to music."

"I don't think I understand," she said.

"The Erlking is Death."

"Oh," she said. "In my case, it was *Night on Bald Mountain*."

That would do."

They reached the neon stone gardens and lost themselves in a copse of trees so that they would be out of sight of any casual passers-by. When they seemed to be alone and unnoticed, they stepped across the last row of stones, the crimson glow just beginning to pulsate in those first hours of evening, and into the barren waste between the city and the ruins. Here, they could yet hesitate, could turn as Guil had turned earlier in the day, turn and run, run back to the safety of the neon stones and the ordered society they represented. But they did not turn, hardly even hesitated.

They entered the ruins, hand-in-hand, wary for the slightest movement, the barest whisper of sound beyond the functions of their own bodies. The night was very dark among the broken buildings, brick dust and the stench of rotting food heavy on the air. Guil turned to look back over the ten gentle hills and ten towers where the descendents of Vladislovitch laid in their sensonics, sterile and pale as the black grip of passion tore their loins in false sensation. Too much wrong there. As he watched, he could not understand how he could ever have failed to understand his lack of compatibility with Musician society. He was not a good Musician (small m or capital M) simply because his blood was not of their culture, his genes not subject to their manipulation. He had never even known the smoothing finish of the Inundation Chamber.

"Maybe we'd better use our shields," Tisha said.

"They're expecting me," he said. "They must be. We aren't in any danger."

"But the Populars are—"

"Supposed to be savage," he concluded the statement. "But we have been taught wrong. They must be friendly, intelligent, and civilized in their own way. Come on, the night's going to go by fast enough as it is."

They advanced into the ruins, stepping across the frame of the metal glider sofa, rusted and twisted over the centuries but still a recognizable skeleton. They had gone no more than a hundred feet when the faceless Popular stepped in front of them, his hands out-stretched in what he obviously hoped was a friendly gesture.

Tisha jumped. Guil held her arm and kept her beside him. He had insulted this poor creature earlier by running from him in panic. He did not intend to be so grossly ill-mannered again. Besides, the phantom was obviously waiting to escort him somewhere.

"I'm Guil," he said to the creature. He felt somehow absurd, like a man talking to the wind or to a tree.

"I'm called Tar," the black figure said.

"Tisha," she said, her voice somewhat uneven.

“If you’ll follow me,” Tar said, “I’ll take you to your people.”

Guil nodded.

The phantom turned and glided off through the debris. They had to push themselves to keep up with him. He took them across almost unimaginable ruins: colossal piles of stone and mortar and metals, sprouts of fungus and mushrooms that had welled up from rotting timbers, puddles of glass (some of different colors, some that was not transparent). There were mashed unrecognizable things, some standing obviously upside down, others squashed against the sides of still standing buildings as if they had been crawling insects beaten with a gargantuan flyswatter.

In time, they moved under the demolished city, down into the underground thoroughfares that still contained a few scattered lighting panels aglow in the frosted white ceiling. It was by this dim but sufficient illumination that Guil saw the phantom’s face close up for the first time. He had been partially right about what it must look like—but also partially wrong. There were no eyes as a normal man would think of them, though there were two lighter shades of black where eyes should have been, smoother textured than the rest of his facial tissue, resembling taunt, black drumheads. The nose was a mere slit in his face, his mouth a lipless affair without teeth—only dark, horny-looking gums. For some reason, he was no longer afraid of the phantom. It was not just because Tar had seemed friendly (in point of fact, he had seemed more cold and withdrawn than anything), but because he was faced with the minute pores of the reality here, where he had only seen the vague outline of the phantom on his earlier attempt to cross from city to ruins. With some of the mystery gone, the fear drifted off too.

They went from the corridor to a shabby blue door upon which the phantom Tar knocked. The door buzzed, slid open, and they went inside. Tar left them. A hand reached out, grasped Guil’s hand, its surface thrice as large as his. The face beyond the arm was as large as the mouth of a bucket. A big bucket “Son?”

Guil stared a moment before comprehension came. He had been expecting to meet a Popular that was his father, and he should not have been shocked. Yet, somewhere in the dregs of his mind barrel, there lingered a hope that this wasn’t true, that his father would be normal, un-mutated. “Yes,” he said at last. “I’m Guil. Or—Gideon.”

“And this?” Strong asked, indicating Tisha.

“Tisha Cimarosa,” Guil said. He was about to go on to say that her brother had won the station of Composer at the rituals the previous day. Then he remembered that these were Populares. Even if Strong did understand Musician society enough to fathom the meaning of the Medallion of the Composer, it was almost a surety that he would not therefore think highly of Tisha. He might be able to accept her as a girl-not-yet-a-Lady, but he would never look favorably on her if he knew she had connections high within the city-state.

“Tisha,” Strong said, swallowing both her hands in one of his.

There had been a time, years ago, even before the birth of Guil-Gideon, when Strong had come across the seven volumes of the Universal Church. At the time when he uncovered these books in the ruins, he was at a particularly depressive slump in his manic-depressive personality. He was looking for something, then, something to give shape and meaning to things. When he found the holy books, he

knew, if only subconsciously, that these held the answer, these held a dogma and doctrine that made the injustices of life bearable.

The Universal Church had come into being some eighty years before the final war that wiped out traditional civilization on Earth. For centuries, the religions of the world had been seeking to establish linkages; at last, they founded their individual ways into a conglomerate religion that encompassed most of the main beliefs of Mankind. The Universal Church had perished in the war with everything else—though a fragment of it now lived in Strong. He raised up the old banners, read the old words, and somehow only managed to take the spit and the fire and the brimstone and the vengeance. He left the mercy and kindness behind.

Now, it seemed almost divinely appointed that he should play a major role in the destruction of the city-state of Vivaldi. And then, perhaps, of all the other city-states that had come back from the stars to throw chains around the mother planet. He was the father of the one who would bring about the changes. He saw it as a holy, divine, preordained situation. It was his paranoia. The completion of the plan was good. Anything that stood in its way was, of necessity, evil. And any sort of romantic entanglement between the boy and this Tisha person was bound to affect Gideon's fighting powers, his wit, his ingenuity. Indeed, might it not be possible, in the penultimate hour, for this Lady-to-be to persuade him to turn against his real people and work against the Populars?

Should he kill her now? Instantly? There was a problem in that the boy had been raised in the Musicians' world. He would not understand that Strong's purpose was divine. After all, Gideon had been taught to worship Vladislovitch. He was a pagan. No, the killing of the girl would have to wait for a more opportune time, for a time when Gideon was so involved in the revolution that he could not withdraw his support. Then, when Strong killed her, he could explain to Gideon-Guil that the boy's purpose was divine, that he must not filthy himself with women. It was that way in the Seven Books of the Compendium; all the great prophets were chaste.

Later, he would get her. She was very slight. She would crumple easily between his fingers. He realized, suddenly, that he had been quiet for too long, that they were looking at him strangely. "She's beautiful," he said, trying to smooth over his hesitation.

Tisha did not blush. She knew she was beautiful, and she could see no benefit in denying her self-awareness. "Thank you," she said.

"My—my mother?" Guil-Gideon asked.

Strong looked startled. "Oh, of course! She's sleeping. She waited for over a day. We expected you sooner. But then I guess you couldn't just up and run away at the first moment." He led them through another sliding panel, a yellow one this time, and into a room where a woman lay on a clean but rickety cot. "Blue," Strong called, shaking her shoulder. "Blue, he's here."

His mother was the second most beautiful creature he had ever seen, only a shade less stunning than Tisha though she was at least fifteen years older than the girl at his side. Had they been of equal age and health, he mused, Tisha would have had to take second place to this genuinely lovely woman. He saw the webs under her arms, for she wore a sleeveless toga affair now, and he saw them, also, between her fingers. They may have contributed to her name, but the chief reason

she was called Blue lay in her eyes which were as brilliant as neon stones. They shone.

For a moment they stood awkwardly, looking at each other, like small children deciding whether or not to make friends. Then Blue almost floated into Guil-Gideon's arms, crying and hugging him, kissing him wetly. He didn't like it, but he held her too and tried to find something in all of this to sort things out and show him the way, show him why they could twice disrupt his hie and seem to feel so little sorrow over it. The Musicians consigned their children over to the arena, not too disturbed if half of them died. And these people, similarly, had given over their son to a cause, also unconcerned about what he would feel and what it would mean to him.

The history of Man, what little he knew of it, was studded with philosophers that said individual lives were not as important as certain ideals. They had helped to cram the ideals down the throats of their young soldiers, had sent them marching off to war in colorful uniforms like a bunch of bespangled monkeys. And when the soldiers didn't come back, the same men who had urged them off in the first place (and who had stayed behind their desks, writing more of their toilet slop propaganda prose) wrote eulogies for them and praised their names and talked some more about ideals. But what did a god-damned ideal mean to any one of those soldiers? Lying there in the mud, rotting, maggots eating out the insides of their gray husks, how could they feel a lofty pride in their ideals? Would an ideal even let them see a movie again? Not with their eyeballs burst and running down their faces. Would an ideal, then, help them to eat a holiday dinner? Not with their teeth cracked and their tongues halfway down their throats and colored like dung. Would any ideal let them, help them, give them one more chance to make love to someone? You're damn right it wouldn't. There had never been, in the history of Earth, an ideal worth dying for. Because men always corrupted the ideals anyway. Now and then, there might be a good concrete reason having to do with economics or subjugation. But not even that very often. Only life was worth dying for, and there was no sense in that.

Standing there with his mother embracing him and his father behind her, beaming at him, he felt very cold, remote. He suddenly saw that no child owed anything to its parents. Children were the end product of passion, of carelessness during that passion—or, if the child was a planned child, the result of a desire for immortality, for your name and reputation to go on one or two more generations—and in the Musicians' case, duty. A passion, carelessness, or duty could not repay debts even if there were debts. Confusion boiled in his mind again. The walls of the room were alien and distant, seemed to sway slightly, as if this were a ship on a rough sea. The woman drying her tears before him was only a statue that had come to *life* with all the attitudes and desires of a human being—except for true mother love. Blue lacked that.

They came to an end of the corridor where a bomb pocket had opened a mouth into caverns beneath the old city. The darkness in the caverns was all but impenetrable, so thick it seemed as if it could be touched and poured into a pitcher. They had left Tisha behind with Blue, had come this far alone. Guil was glad of that, for he did not want her to see him shaking. His hands trembled, and

his lips twitched. He was, somewhat, afraid of this man who claimed to be his father.

It had not taken long for him to find that Strong was a religious fanatic, for the big Popular was constantly spouting off homilies and prayers from some source he called the Seven Books. It seemed to have been a world religion sometime before the holocaust, but Guil could not be certain. He had never heard of it, but then again he was not particularly well-schooled in Earth history.

All he knew was that Strong wanted him to fight for an ideal. He had not said as much yet, but the trend of his discussion headed in that direction. He was going to ask Guil to fight for something in those Seven Books, to take up weapons for a religion four hundred years dead. And he did not think he could do it. It would be the same thing as if he had joined the Musicians in a bloody war against the Populars—supposedly under the blessing of Vladislovitch. No, he would not risk everything for a mere ideal. Some practicality, yes. If Strong made the point that the Populars had been hideously treated, deserved a right to a place of power—then, he might join battle. Even that, however, was not a certainty. It would have been so much easier, he thought, if he had liked them immensely. But he did not.

Strong led the way down through the hole in the floor, clutching at projecting rocks and beams, came out on a level area again. When Guil was beside him, he stepped forward and disappeared. There was the sound of skin and cloth scraping over sand.

Guil went to the edge where the plain dropped abruptly, could see for a few inches. It seemed like a long slope of sand that could not be traversed any way but by crude tobogganing. If he tried to stand and run down, the steep slope would probably pitch him forward onto his head just as he reached a more solid flooring. He held his breath, pushed off from the edge, and went slithering down five hundred feet of fine-grained earth. He was glad that he had a leotard suit on that covered most all his body, and he briefly wondered how Strong had been able to withstand the brush-burning without screaming.

Strong was waiting for him, grasped his shoulder and squeezed it affectionately. He turned then and led the way over more rubble toward the two luminous moth-like eyes that shone in the darkness and gave off a little light to their left. In the backwash of the ocular glow, Guil could see a man hanging upside down from a beam, his toes gripping some precarious perch in the shadows above. Guil and Strong stopped at an out-cropping of cement barely visible in the gloom, sat down facing the specter.

The hanging man flapped leathery wings, wrapped them around himself and surveyed the man and boy, his lantern eyes washing them with green light. There was a haughty air about him, a mild look of disdain on his wizened, ugly features. "Him?" he asked.

"Yes," Strong said. There was pride in his voice, and he was purposefully accentuating it to let the manbat know that he thought Guil a fine specimen of a son.

"You're certain?" the manbat asked.

"Positive. He is my son."

"They could have found out, could have switched someone on you."

"I know my son!"

The manbat fluttered, and his clawed toes scraped as he readjusted his purchase on the rusting steel.

Guil coughed, wondering how long it would take one of them to think of including him in their conversation. After all, he was the focal point of this whole business.

“Oh,” Strong said, “Gideon, this is Redbat.”

“Redbat,” Guil said courteously.

“An oddity,” the upside-down half-man said, bunking slow, furry lids over his magnificent eyes. He smacked his thin lips together and made a sighing sound. “For some reason, I’m red-skinned and red-furred. Doesn’t really matter to some bats, cause some of us mutated to a point where we see in black and white or in radar blips. But I have radar *and* my human sight, and I saw that I was red and different. And I knew.”

“Knew what?” Guil asked.

The manbat showed fangs as large as thumbs. In the light wash from his eyes, they too were green, though a softer shade. “I was meant to lead, of course! I knew that right away.”

“Lead what?”

“Manbats!” Redbat exclaimed, fluttering all over with consternation, his eyes even a little wider than they had been.

Strong pinched his son’s arm between his thick fingers to warn the boy. Cue such admonition was enough, Guil decided. He had a single, snapshot-clear vision of thumb-sized fangs sinking to the gums in a vein, tearing flesh, foam-flecked and crimson...

“Redbat,” Strong said, turning the manbat’s attention away from Guil, who was relieved to see the mutant’s green gaze shift from his face, “we came to meet with your council. The Day is only a week ahead.”

“So soon?”

“The boy has already told me that what I want can be done quite easily.”

True, Guil thought, *but I did not say I would do it.*

“They won’t suspect him of sabotage,” Strong continued. “He can go freely almost anywhere he wants. And where he cannot go is of no consequence to our plans. So we might as well begin coordinating things.”

The manbat was silent for a time, thinking. Guil tried to imagine what the workings of such a mind would be like, what patterns the thoughts would follow, what prejudices would exist, what memories. It was a little too much for him. He could accept the Populars on a physical level, but could never extrapolate from that to a thought process pattern that might be typical of them. “Come on,” Redbat said at last.

Redbat disengaged his claws and flopped to the floor, managing to come to a standing position before he hit. He turned, scrambled over the ruins, farther back into the darkness, half flying and half walking through the narrow passage whose sides were formed of broken chunks of concrete, broken glass, twisted wires, and oddly intact ceramic tiles.

“Father,” Guil said, the word thick and bad-tasting on his tongue, much as if a fat insect had flown in his mouth, “why didn’t you use Redbat instead of Loper to steal the real Guillaume from the Primal Chord?”

Strong clambered over stone and plastic and metal, reached back and helped Guil over the hillock. "It's 2,500 feet to the top of the Primal Chord. True, manbats can fly. but they are still men. Their bone structure is not completely adapted to flight. A real bat's bones are nearly hollow, but manbats have to walk on the ground and support their weight, so hollow bones are out. Therefore, they can only get up about two hundred feet. And even if they would have flown up the Primal Chord that far, they would not have had well-developed muscles to scale the rest of the distance in a conventional manner."

Darker it got.

And colder.

They came to another slope that was negotiable only by sliding down it. Redbat was fortunate in that the ceiling here was high enough to allow him to fly to the bottom. Strong went first. Guil looked at what he could see of the slope, listened to his father's descent. This one was not made of sand. He could hear heavy material rolling here. But, again, it was too steep to permit walking. He tensed, pushed off...

Rocks and skin on a toboggan ride. The rocks came out the better for it Guil grimaced as the tip of his little finger rasped over another rock. Then he was sliding down a long stretch of loose stones, kicking and squealing as the dust rose to choke and blind him. When he came to the bottom, he lay still a moment, then pushed up before Strong (always motherly in fear his divine tool would be damaged) could come running to assay his wounds.

"You're certain he can do it?" Redbat asked, fluffing his wings in the gloom, his face screwed into an almost comic scowl. But Guil remembered what that same face looked like with fangs splitting the lips and could suddenly see nothing remotely comic about it.

"He can do it," Strong said. "But we have to remember that he was raised by Musicians. He isn't prepared for the kind of life we lead."

Guil wondered how these two would have fared in the arena. Probably would have dropped under the dragon, been sung out of existence by a sound creature or, if not that, carted off to the disposal furnaces beneath the arena. Still, what Strong said was true. He *was* not out of his element. It seemed, recently, as if he were always and forever out of his element...

"Still—" Redbat tried to argue.

"You would not have survived in his world, in the city-state. You would not have learned their sound rules and would have died in the arena."

Redbat looked angry for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe so," he said. "Come on."

The endless tunnels twisted and retwisted, rose and fell through the dusty dimness of the rubble stacks into moments of absolute pitch that pained the eyes with its intensity. Rubble sometimes filled the way so that they had to turn sideways and press their backs against the rugged wall to squeeze by. Other times the floor rose slowly until they finally had to struggle on their stomachs between ceiling and ruins. Redbat seemed to have the least difficulty, his wiry, leathery form able to shrink to startling compactness whenever the situation demanded. Guil Decided that there was more than likely another way and that this one was being used to show him how rough this life could be. Because of this suspicion, he

refused to groan or complain, but took the punishment with admirable stoicism—although an occasional mutter would involuntarily escape his lips. Finally, in one of the blackest places, they stopped. This was a room again. The walls swept away to either side, and the ceiling was ten or eleven feet high. Guil was aware of the presence of other creatures, heard the faintest thin whisper of rattly breathing.

“He brought the boy Gideon,” Redbat said.

There was a rustling that echoed thinly in the damp chamber. A row of four huge eyes appeared and was immediately broken by a staggered line of four more as the manbats turned completely around on their perches to face him.

“I don’t like his looks,” a thin voice whined, sandpaper over glass.

“Of course you don’t,” Redbat hissed. He fluttered his wings in annoyance. “You don’t like him because he looks like a Musician.”

“Redbat’s right,” another of the four said. His voice was so gentle and kind that Guil was immediately reminded of the tender gentle Franz who taught him the guitar. Lacking the bat’s real name, and so he would be able to think of the creature as something with a personality, he named him after the old teacher. Franz cleared his throat, made a scratching, dry sound. “We must not let our prejudices influence us. If we do, we’re liable to lose the only chance we have.”

“Well said,” Redbat answered. “I don’t like him either.” He turned to stare at Guil. His fangs appeared for a moment, curled over his lower lip, then withdrew to the stinking hole of his mouth. “But he’s the best chance we’ve got.”

Strong’s hand was on Guil’s arm again, applying a somewhat painful pressure as a warning to be quiet and accept. Guil did not need a warning.

The bat that had first stated his dislike for the boy scrambled around on his perch, still upside-down, and faced the other direction. Now there were only six eyes before them.

“Tell us what you would have us do,” Franz said to Strong.

“Gideon will go back to the Musicians as if he did not know his true nature, and he will carry on this act for another week. He does not need that much time to do his part, but we will require it to ready our forces for the Day. Then a week from tonight he will see to it that the generators which maintain the sound configurations of the towers are destroyed—all except the Meistro’s Palace and the Congressional Hall in the administrative tower. We will keep that structure intact in order to start our own government from there—a symbol, if you will, of our power. The other buildings will fade. When the de-deterioration begins, we will attack and kill any Musician left alive and in the open. Your part will be to attack from the air. As I see it, this sort of attack will be especially effective as it will come as a surprise.”

“They will have their sound rifles,” another bat said.

“We can’t wait for perfect conditions,” Strong argued. “We expect to have our share of casualties. We had long talks on the matter, if you remember correctly, and we decided casualties would be worth it if we had a chance for success. And now we have such a chance.”

“Hummpphh!” the bat with his back turned said.

Everyone ignored him.

“And whistles?” Franz asked. “The sound-sedatives?”

“Whistles can’t have any effect on you unless you are within fifteen yards. You can swoop down before they can effectively use them,” Guil said, talking chiefly to make it known that he was not completely a tool that they could lay back on the shelf any time they wished. Besides, he had not said he would do any of this. He was not yet sure. And the longer he was around these people, the more intimately he came to know his father, Strong, the less sure he became...

The three pairs of eyes shifted to him, watched him a moment, then moved back to Redbat. It was impossible to read anything from those eyes, impossible to tell what they thought of him—how deep their hatred ran.

“It’s settled then?” Redbat asked.

Three blinks.

“How many can you provide?” Strong wanted to know. There was a keen edge of excitement to his voice, and his breath came faster and in shorter, more gasping inhalations.

“Four thousand for Vivaldi,” Redbat said. “Later, if it is decided to move against other city-states, we will . . . to rely mainly on what is left of this primary force.”

“Four thousand is enough,” Strong said. “With Gideon and whatever sound rifles and sonic knives we can capture, it will be more than enough.”

Guil listened to the battle plans with a part of his mind, while much of his consciousness still tried to deal with the choice he would soon have to make. Either he would continue the status quo, maintain the Musician society from sheer refusal to participate in a revolt against it, or he would have to lead that revolt, step with it out of the ruins and carry its vengeance through the neon stone gardens to the very corridors of the Congressional Tower. Once, he thought that he heard something behind him, movement of some sort. He turned, could see nothing but darkness. Looking back to Redbat and the others, he tried to return to his contemplations. It was then that he felt hot breath on his neck and heard the rattle of claws scuttling across stones...

Later, he would wonder which he had actually sensed first: the humid breath or the sound of the claws. It would seem logical that the scuttling noise should come before the breath, and it very likely had. But in those microseconds when his animal cunning innately knew something was wrong, his sensory impressions blasted into his cortex in such rapid succession that he had no time to sort them out.

Screeching, shouting, rattling, flapping, the very darkness swam over him, punctuated with green discs, swallowed him, spat him up, wallowed him between its thick lips...

For a moment, he thought he was smothering. Something fouled his nose and head and cut off the cool air from the cavern. He gagged repeatedly, felt the soft tissues of his throat beginning to burn, felt his chest swell and his lungs begin to ache. He flailed, struck something. He struck it again, feebly, before he thought to feel it and test for the source of his afflictions. The nerves on the tips of his fingers relayed the message to his fogging brains there was a leathery wing about his head.

He struck out again, viciously this time, managed to free his face for a moment, just long enough to expel a short burst of stale air and suck in something more palatable. Then the wing was back, tighter now, the little hand on the end of it

hooked into his cloak. He struck out twice again before he understood that flailing like a windmill was doing absolutely no good. His blows bounced off the rubbery wing flesh without inflicting any damage—and probably damned little pain. And his lungs were tired again, surging up in his chest cavity as if they would take the initiative in gaining air for themselves. Shifting his tactics, he bit into the wing that covered his face, tore a chunk of the membrane loose and spat it out. It tasted like bad cheese, but he had gained the desired effect. The manbat screamed, fluttered, and released him,

“The boy! The boy!” Strong was shouting. But what he was really thinking, Guil knew, was: the plan, the plan!

“Nasty!” Redbat shouted. His reedy voice slithered and fizzed off the rocks. “Let him go, Nasty!”

Nasty, Guil thought. And what an appropriate name it was. This must be the bat, he reasoned, that had turned away from him earlier. But he had been busy while the rest of them had talked. He had turned his back and had quietly left his perch, had sneaked around the room and had come in from behind. Maybe “Nasty” wasn’t the best name for him, Guil thought. Maybe “Traacherous” was better.

Claws raked his chest, harsh, hot needles. He felt the fine lines of pain on one level, the blood breaking through in tiny rivulets on another. The claws sank deeper, twisted viciously back and forth. Nasty called wildly, cheered himself on with the most hideous array of dissonant notes Guil had ever heard.

Guil struck upward with a fist, smashed it just below the green eyes. The blow felt solid, and something had given under it. Nasty’s head snapped back and to the side. The claws tore loose, taking slivers of flesh with them and freeing more blood. For a moment, Guil thought he had broken its neck, and relief began to quiet his panic.

Then Nasty shrieked, flapped onto Guil’s back and sunk claws into the boy’s shoulders from the bronc-buster position.

For a while, Guil tried whirling about, hoping to get his hands on the tip of a wing or a foot, anything that would give him leverage against the beast so that he might cause it pain and pry it loose. But the manbat was more naturally the fighter, and he kept himself cunningly out of the boy’s grasp, allowing himself to be brushed by Guil’s fingertips but never conceding more than that.

Eventually, Guil stopped, realizing he would tire and the manbat would finish him. The fangs and the claws would rip into him, open him up. His mind spinning swiftly through alternate courses of action, he did the only prudent thing. He fell backwards, crushing the bat’s thin chest under him. Still, the manbat would not retreat. Nasty foamed and screeched his hatred, sank fangs into the boy’s shoulder in a misdirected try for his neck.

Guil’s head spun madly merry-go-roundish, pumped up and down, slid, slipped, galloped in place. Pain shot through his chest like an electric current, and his shoulders seemed close to paralysis. He fought against the imprudent desire to get to his feet and try to run. There would be no place to go—just as there had been no hiding place in the arena in the Coming of Age Day—and that would free the manbat to claw and bite anew. Instead, he pressed back hard, rolled to the left and right, listening to the crunch of cartilage and light bones.

Blood gurgled in Nasty's throat. He ripped his fangs loose and tried once more for the boy's throat. There, he knew, the pounding mainline of blood flowed. But he missed and merely scraped the flesh, his own pain and weakness now defeating him. His breath was foul with rotting meat fragments and the stench of his own gore.

Guil rolled and rolled a long while before he realized the manbat was dead. The chest had crumpled inward, and the ribs had punctured its heart and other organs, setting a bubbling blood fountain to gurgling life. Warily his clothes soaked with blood and caked with dirt, little sobs of exhaustion escaping from his throat despite his iron determination to hold them in, he stood and wheezed for air.

"I would have killed him anyway," Redbat said. "He disobeyed me when I told him to stop. That would not have been tolerated."

"But," Guil croaked, his sides and shoulders throbbing and hot where the bat had clawed him, "I fought him for... you. Now, Redbat... you owe me... a favor. The time will come when I will want... you to pay it back."

"That is honorable," Redbat said. "Fine. Now you had both better leave. We must prepare to marshal our forces for the Day."

He turned, Strong's arm about him, and struggled up the stony incline back toward the cave where they had first met Redbat, unable to refuse his father's aid this time, even though he wanted to, even though he detested looking weak before this man.

"Your wounds," Strong protested.

"I'll be fine."

"We'll take you to the robo-doc in this area — before we continue with the preparations. We'll get you fixed. And those stinking clothes laundered."

Well," Guil said reluctantly. "If you insist." He topped the rise. "Maybe a bandage or two is necessary." Then he pitched forward onto the rubble, into an even deeper dark...

FIRST:

The operating table slid out of the robo-doc, bearing Blue.

Strong knew that the time was near at hand and his head was full of quotations from the Seven Books to bolster his Dream and give it flesh. His body literally shivered with pious joy. But his Dream was a vision of final judgment, retribution, and justice, and his mind was filled with this: "Then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water: in the habitation of dragons, where each lay, shall be grass with reeds and bushes." He was the father of the prophet. And the prophet would become the Savior.

Another slot opened in the computer physician's belly, and a cradle containing the baby hummed out. "It's true," Strong said when he saw it, his voice a reverential whisper.

"The doctor doesn't lie," Sparrow said. "It is a great being who—"

"Yeah, yeah," said Dragon. "Now give him the boy."

She handed the baby to Strong, He thought: *Ye shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth for trouble, for ye are the seed of the blessed of the Lord.*

... THE SEED OF THE BLESSED OF THE LORD...

“What will the name be?” Dragon asked. “We can’t wait to see what he’ll look like when he grows. We can’t wait to give him a trait name.”

“Gideon,” Strong said.

“What is that?” Sparrow asked, tending to Blue who still lay sleeping.

“In this book,” Strong said. He handed over one of the seven volumes of the Universal Church. “Gideon was a great prophet. In three separate religions before the Universal Church—and highly regarded after the amalgamation.”

“A prophet,” Dragon said. “But the name is funny.” He started to laugh his rasping, hoarse laugh, but stopped abruptly when he saw the look on Strong’s face. He guessed it was insanity...

Chapter 7

Mummified in spray-on, clear bandages, clothes clean and dried and containing a faint odor of some cleansing fluid, he tramped the corridor behind Strong. His wounds did not hurt very much, for the strange computer-doctor left over from prewar days had healed them and had laced them with pain killers. Stitches had been required in four places, the robo-doc had said, but they were self-removing and would dissolve in five days when the wounds would be completely healed. It even guaranteed that there would be no scars. But for the moment, wounds or not, they moved on with preparations for the Day.

“Who is this Gypsy Eyes we’re going to see?” he asked as he caught up with Strong who was setting a relatively fast pace with his longer, more muscular legs.

“Just wait. You’ll see.”

“I’m tired of being told to wait and that I’ll see!”

Strong, never breaking pace, gave him a perplexed look and then a half-smile of uncertainty. He wanted a docile puppet to maneuver, not someone given to outbursts of individuality. Guil’s sharp tone made him slightly ill-at-ease, but he managed to contain his anger that had seethed to the surface at the seeming insubordination. “It’s just that it is difficult to explain Gypsy Eyes until you meet him. He explains himself better than I ever could. You’ll see.” He realized his *faux pas* with the last sentence, but it was too late to retract it now.

Guil chose to ignore it.

They went on.

For a time, the corridors were untouched by destruction, so perfect, indeed, that they seemed an impossibility in the midst of the utter ruin that he had seen everywhere else. The old apartments here had been made into living quarters for the Populars, and they had kept the place well. The overhead lights seemed to fulfill the duties of sunlight, encouraging snaky vines and pale flowers to grow in the carefully tended, well-weeded black earth that filled the long troughs that lined both walls and broke only for the doors to the various apartments.

Then the hallway sloped upward like a ramp, leaving the general living areas, troughs, and flowers behind, turning in a wide arc as if they were traveling about the outer rim of a wheel and the living quarters had been spokes. There was no rubbish or rubble here either, though the walls were undecorated and painted a monotonous white that made the eyes seek every tiny fleck or stain for some relief. At the top of the ramp, Strong palmed a door open and led the way into a ten-sided room with a wall of glass and a ceiling where the ocean danced wildly blue-green.

Guil felt his mouth open involuntarily in that age-old reaction to anything awesome. He stood in the middle of the room and stared up at the sea. It was as beautiful as anything he had ever seen in the Musician world. In fact, the Musicians would rarely to in for designing something this beautiful. Aesthetics, for them, dealt with sound, not with form and color. The colors of their buildings and clothes and fixtures were only incidental to the patterns that made up those things. But this was far more beautiful than their sounds.

Above, the sea danced blue-green.

“And the Lord said, ‘Do not the waters of the sea show forth the face of God?’” Strong smiled a self-satisfied smile. The quote had so easily rolled from his tongue that Guil was certain he could not have felt anything emotional from it, could not even have appreciated its poetic tone. It was habitual and ugly the way the scripture verses slid out of his mouth, like the sterile products of an automated factory sliding into the finished bin.

Guil went to the glass wall and looked out, surprised by what he saw. He had expected water and ocean bottom, for he thought they were beneath the ocean. But they were above it! This bubble wall curved away from the face of a great cliff, a hundred feet from the top of the sea. He looked down and was caught up in a vertiginous moment when he saw that the lip of the window melted into the floor and that he was standing on the thick glass with nothing (nothing visible) separating him from the water.

He hung there.

Ahead, the ocean stretched forever into gray, moving mists that eventually obscured it. Now and then, lightning played through the higher layers of the fog, pulsated in reflection across the water. Guil wondered, seeing this magnificence for the first time, why the Musicians had not chosen to build Vivaldi here, only a mile or two away from where it was placed. Here, they would have the sea and the mist. Vaguely, he knew that the sea was associated with death. It was eternal. It produced life and claimed it. It went on. And would go on even after the Musicians had passed. Perhaps that was it. Though the Musicians were strangely fascinated with death, they were not willing to be faced with a constant reminder that death was eternal and not just a mortal entity like themselves.

He looked down, away from the fog and lightning.

Below, the sea dashed itself violently against the rocks that looked like craggy brown teeth. It sprayed dozens of feet into the air, foaming up the cliff face but never quite touching the window. He could faintly hear the dragon roar of it seeping through the glass. Far out, a gull swooped down out of the clouds, glided toward the cliff and disappeared into a dark aperture just above the foam line and just below the window.

Guil turned and looked at the ceiling again. It appeared to be a slab of glass which supported the unbearable weight of an ocean, yet the ocean was below them. “How is that done?” he asked, too curious to contain the question, not particularly caring whether his ignorance made Strong feel smug.

But Strong did not answer. A voice deep and smooth as water-licked limestone spoke up. “Mirrors. They reflect the scene from a pipe that opens on the ocean floor at the base of the cliff. It channels the reflection from mirror to mirror and throws it on the ceiling through a projector in the head of that statue of Neptune.”

He swiveled, searching the green- and blue-toned shadows for the lips that had spoken those words. He saw the man, lean and dark in the far corner next to a fish tank where thin, yellow darts swam through frond-split crystal water. A cascade of white hair, each strand thin and frizzy though the whole appeared thick, poured over his extra-large head and withered away just above shaggy white eyebrows and two gray eyes.

“Who—” Guil began, stepping away from the window.

“Mirrors, mirrors, mirrors. Oh, they were damn clever, those prewar Earthmen! They could pervert reality to their whims. But they were not clever enough. Little pieces like these are all they left behind.”

“Gypsy Eyes?”

Strong stood silently by the door. He nodded.

The fish swam unconcerned.

Outside, the mists formed ghost bodies that dissolved in passionate embraces.

“Mirrors are wonderful things,” the white-haired one continued, oblivious to Guil’s questions—or just not caring to answer them. “They show you what you could not know otherwise. How could you know your own face without a mirror? Hmmm? Could we have any idea what we are without mirrors to tell us? Did men, before there were mirrors, think themselves insects or look-alikes for ferocious animals? No, I guess not. They could see one another and have some idea of their own visage. But what about self? They could have a general idea about their facial appearance, but what about the individual face? Hmmm? How could they know self? How could they ever be really certain that they were not different from others? They couldn’t. All their miserable lives, they could never be sure. But with mirrors...”

“If you are Gypsy Eyes—” Guil began unsuccessfully.

The old Popular stood and walked slowly through the colored shadows toward the window. “Still, mirrors have their faults. We can’t use them to look ahead. We can look behind or look at the *now*, but we can’t look ahead with them. Turn them front to reflect what’s ahead, and you can’t see them anyhow. So they’re not really valuable, all these mirrors.”

Then, with a sudden fury, he threw himself past Guil, into the out-thrusting balcony, crashing against the thick glass. He bounced off, crumpled to the floor. For a moment, Guil almost laughed. It had seemed like some slapstick stunt, some routine to gain laughter. Then he was able to remember the force with which the mutant had slammed against the window, remembered the stunning reverberation of the collision. It must have hurt. Yet, like a moth to the flame, Gypsy Eyes rose and heaved himself at the pane once more. Again, he toppled backwards. And, yet again, he rose.

The hollow boom of flesh against the unbreakable shield filled the room. Guil turned to Strong, but though concerned, the big man did nothing to stop Gypsy Eyes' attempts at suicide. He had seen it all before. Maybe many times.

"Stop him!" he called.

Strong did not make a move.

Because, Guil thought, that glass will hold, and this is just some crazy ritual, something we must watch, something he must do.

In the tank, fronds waved. Fishes swam. Outside, waves roared off the rocks.

In time, Gypsy Eyes collapsed onto the lip of glass, staring down through the transparent floor at the rocks and the water. He was weeping; tears moved along the glass, glistening blue-green... Blue-green...

"I asked you not to do it," Strong said, lifting the old man by his arms and helping him into his chair next to the fish tank. "Not until after the Day. That's only a week from now. We need you badly, Gypsy Eyes."

The Popular straightened in his chair, trying to regain his dignity. He seemed less melancholy.

"What did it look like?" Strong asked.

"At this point, I saw a seventy-eight percent chance of death if I accompany you on the revolution into the Musician Sector."

"That bad?" Strong lost some of his control, let his features slide down his face in a great frown.

"Worse for me," Gypsy Eyes said. "I suffer a ninety-eight percent probability of death if I remain behind and do not accompany you."

Strong looked puzzled. "Why?"

"Because, without my assistance, you'll fail. And then the Musicians will come in here and teach us a lesson by wiping out half of us. Me included. The seventy-eight and ninety-eight are percentages for *my* success, remember. The revolution may fare better."

Strong turned to Guil who stood dumbly watching and listening to the exchange. "Gypsy Eyes sees the future," he said.

"No," the old man corrected him. "I see *all possible futures*. Countless futures. There's a difference. I can review the majority of possible futures in seven to ten seconds and determine the likelihood of the success or failure of most any event. I can't give you a detailed picture of anything. I'm a mirror with a crack in it. No, hundreds of cracks so that, in the little undamaged fragments, you can only see a tiny fraction of what you're looking for."

Strong sank into another chair, motioned Guil to a couch. "But Gyp gets too personal. He looks ahead too far, and he can't help looking ahead for his own fate. And every time, the fate is somewhat different, for the possible futures change as what happens in the present changes. He is constantly barraging himself with visions of his possible deaths, though thus far he is alive and healthy. I'm trying to keep him from searching into personal things, because if it's too gruesome at any given moment, he gets—what would you say, Gyp?"

"Suicidal, I guess."

"That's it. We just saw it happen again. Now, I asked you to promise to only look ahead at the chances of the revolution's success, not your own." He turned to Guil. "See, if I wondered whether a particular piece of strategy would get the

results I sought in the battle in question, I would ask Gyp. He'd tell me the percentages. I'd either go ahead as planned or change strategies according to his view. He's invaluable. Unless he gets hung up on his own fate."

"What did you come for?" Gypsy Eyes asked curiously, not angrily. There seemed to be no anger in the man, as if the scope of his future vision made any act done to him only a petty thing of the moment and unworthy of ire.

This is my boy, Gideon. In a week, we begin."

The gray eyes brightened. "I'll be careful, Strong."

"I know you will, Gyp. Just a week. Just don't look for your personal future for seven days. After that, you can get suicidal if you want."

They left, then, closing out the ceiling-sea. When they were halfway down the hall toward the arc in the rim, Guil would have sworn he heard the hollow booming of flesh thrown against glass, flesh against glass, again and again with sickening regularity.

As they walked, turning into less habitable corridors to save steps on the way back to Blue and Tisha, Guil thought of the Populars he had met in the last few hours. Gypsy Eyes with his swollen head, his ability to tell the future. Redbat, a tiling that had once been a man. Tar, the obsidian figure without eyes... Blue and her webs... Strong with his impossible musculature...

At last, as they passed a place where the corridor wall had been blasted out, Guil sat on the crumbling rubble and looked down at the remains of a once mighty civilization, at the littered beach a few yards beyond that, at the same ocean he had seen from the window in Gypsy Eyes' place. He twisted his neck out of the hole, located the glass bubble of Gypsy Eyes' port a quarter of a mile back along the cliff and up another three hundred feet.

"What is it?" Strong asked, moving to him when he saw he had stopped. "Tired?"

"No."

"What, then?"

"The message tape," Guil said. "It told me that the Musicians had made you what you are. It said that the Musician had warped the survivors of the nuclear war, had made them into Populars."

"This is true."

"But the radiation from the bombs would do that."

"Not like this. Random radiation would produce monsters worse than any of us. Heavy radiation of the random form would produce, largely, nonfunctionals, creatures incapable of sustaining their own life. The thing that mutated us, that messed into our genes, was sound waves."

"But how could you know that It's been four hundred years since the war, since the first Populars."

"In the beginning," Strong said, making it sound like a narrative catch-phrase leading into a sermon, "just after the war, we had begun to struggle back onto our feet Or the men of that time had. They were piecing things together. Then the Musicians came. You know, of course, that the Musicians, and many of the other groups that colonized the other worlds in the galaxy, were outcasts. They were bidden good riddance when they originally left Earth. Perhaps, when they came back, it was with a determination to prove something. Their own worthiness, maybe. The World Science Control had banned their researches, had labeled them

unstable and dangerous to life as it was then known. They were coming back to prove they were better. When they came back, it was not to help reconstruct the planet, but to assume dominance over it. They waged a short war against the Earth-men who were now chiefly weaponless. All of this had been recorded. It is hidden here and there in the ruins to assure its safety from Musician hands: we must keep our history, if nothing else.”

“Even if the Musicians won,” Guil said, “that does not explain the mutations.”

“The Musicians,” Strong continued, “did not eradicate nearly all of the Earthmen survivors. They drove them deeper into the ruins and left them psychologically whipped. Then, over the next few years, the first Populars were born, babies with strange, inhuman features. As the births continued (all of them functional to one degree or another) the few men of science left from the two wars became convinced that the mutations were not accidental, and not the result of the bombs. They were too subtle, too—well, clever. With what limited resources they had, they began research into the situation. Nothing was ever conclusively proved, but they learned enough to satisfy them. The Musicians were broadcasting shaped molecular sound waves with a tropic characteristic. Tropic to DNA and RNA.”

“But why?” Guil asked. “Why do this to other men? They had beaten them. Surely that was enough.”

“Perhaps it was the final step. They had come back to show us that they survived and we did not. Next, they displayed their superiority by conquering us and driving us into our self-made ruins. Finally, they had the means to, in effect, strike us from the records of existence. We were reduced, in their opinion, to something less than men. And, I sometimes think, they discovered in the new mutations a source of entertainment.”

“There are theaters,” Guil admitted.

“Everyone,” Strong said, “needs something to make him feel superior, some group he can look down upon. The Musicians in Vivaldi have a class system which allows this. I have learned this much. Your Class Is can look down on your Class Us, your Class II’s on your Class Ills, and the III’s on the IVs. But where do the Class IVs go to find someone to feel superior to? The Populars, of course. So, aside from revenge, aside from entertainment value, and aside from a simple sadistic streak that cuts down the middle of their society, they needed us to provide the logical final rung in their social order.”

They sat for a time, watching the beach. Several crabs scuttled out of the water and wobbled around the sand for a few moments, looking for something only they could define. It was growing darker. And colder. The mists were thicker, reaching fingers even into the hole in the wall where they sat.

“Are you ready?” Strong asked.

“Yes,” Guil said, standing. “Let’s go.”

As they finished their trek home, maintaining silence by unspoken agreement, Guil tried to decide if, after absorbing this ugly detail, he was finally committed to the Populars in this coming war. All he found was that he was on the thin line between sides, balancing. And he was a good balancer. He would not fall one way or the other. He tried to make himself ashamed of his wavering. The evidence

balanced against the Musicians. He should already be deep into the Popular struggle. Yet...

Yet he liked the comfort of the society in which he had been raised. He could not give it up easily. If he foiled this attempt at revolution, the Populans might never be able to rise again. And he would be safe. He knew it was not a heroic stance he now occupied. In many ways, it was gutless, cowardly, and revolting.

One more piece of sympathy for the Populans, he thought, and he would accept his role as a leader of revolution. If just one more thing would happen to make him pity them and feel more deeply for their plight. Then he would be their champion. But it was highly unlikely that anything else would happen to persuade him. Highly unlikely...

FIRST:

Strong hunkered in the piles of brick and steel, holding his infant son in his huge arms. The robo-doc had placed a chemically time-triggered, micro-miniature message tape in the child's brain. It would go off seventeen years from now, hopefully just after the boy had gained manhood in Musician society. He had no doubts that the boy would reach a Class. His son, after all, was a prophet. And prophets were nearly omnipotent.

There had been a moment when Blue had tried to dissuade him from the plan, just after she had seen the child that had come from her belly. To sooth her, he had sought a phrase from one of the Seven Books, had found it: "Wherefore didst thou marvel? This shall make war for the Lamb and the Lamb shall help him to overcome them, for he is the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful. Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it."

YOU MUST SURELY BEAR IT...

Somehow, he did not think Blue had gotten the solace from those lines that he had.

Now, crouched in the tumble-down walls of his city, he watched the yellow shields of the Musicians as the search party came across the nightmare landscape, prying into pockets of deep shadow, details of them breaking off to enter tunnels down into the Popular Sector. When he judged the moment to be the most dramatic, when the enemy was dangerously close at hand, he leaped up, ran away from them, the baby slung under his arm so that they might spot it immediately.

There were shouts behind.

A sound rifle beam sang into a marble slab as large as a house that lay at a forty-five degree angle to his right. The marble fizzed into thousands of fireflies whose light lasted only an instant, was gone.

Then another bolt. Much closer. Too close, in fact He stopped and put his child down on an old sofa whose vinyl-plast covering had kept it from serious rot, then turned and ran faster than he had ever run before in his life.

The Musicians fired after him.

But, soon, the chase was over. They had found the baby, and they were, temporarily anyway, satisfied. Whether they would visit reprisals upon the Popular

community in the days to come, or whether they would just strengthen their security over their own buildings, he did not know. All he could consider now, as he fell into a cave entrance and waited to watch the Musicians take his son away with the assumption he was one of theirs, was the future, the glorious future. He had divine power. He had a divine command to propagate this coming insurrection. His son was a prophet. What else could he be but a prophet? What else could ever explain the birth of a perfect child to Popular parents? A statistical law just now coming into actuality, deemed necessary by mathematics? No, that was the wrong thought train. He prayed that the gods would give him strength to overcome evil thought. He prayed that they would give him strength to live until the time for the revolution arrived, and to carry it out on the proper day.

And he prayed for patience to wait out the next seventeen years.

Chapter 8

They returned to Strong's apartment and exchanged small talk with the women and each other over a dinner composed chiefly of three succulent, small roasts that tasted nothing like what Guil was used to eating in the city, tasted spicier and finer in some indefinable way. The talk of revolution was slight, almost nonexistent. It seemed as if they had never even considered such violent political action. But the halcyon hour was interrupted even before they reached the final course, which was hard, yeastless bread and some sort of rich butter. Shouted alarms boomed down the corridors outside like cannon balls fired down a muzzle, and the meal was abruptly forgotten.

Strong got quickly to his feet, surprising Guil once more with the agility that lurked in that mammoth frame, hurried to the door and palmed it open, pressing against it as if he could not even bear to wait the short moment it took the mechanism to withdraw the portal into the wall. Beyond the door, a mangy bead, scarred and quite hideous, appeared, the mouth working agitatedly, though nothing seemed to be coming out of it. At last, the owner got control of his body. "Breakthrough!" he said almost hysterically. "Corridor F. Won't be long. Four—maybe five or six minutes."

"You stay here," Strong said to his son.

"What is it? What's going on?"

"It's too dangerous. Forget it."

But being denied information only made his curiosity sharper. "I'm not a woman," he said.

"You mustn't be hurt," Strong argued. "You are too valuable to us!" There was definitely nothing sentimental about that last statement; it was delivered coldly, sharply, and with the same evenness a businessman might employ when talking about his inventory. Strong could just as easily have been speaking of a valuable work animal or a piece of machinery now long out of production. That was exactly what he was, Guil thought, a machine, a tool, a valuable trained animal upon

which all the dreams of this Popular were constructed, upon which Strong's immortality depended.

"I can handle myself," Guil said.

"Remember Nasty?"

"Yes," Guil said. "And I won that fight."

"You were chewed up pretty badly."

"But I won."

Strong sighed. This was no time for argument. Guil could see that, even though he could not determine what was causing all the excitement.

They left the apartment, running, turned three times into other corridors, and came to a place where a steel mesh net had been strung across Corridor F and sealed tightly to the walls with heavy staples. They had come to a complete stop before the net, when they realized Tisha was with them. She jerked to a halt, her long hair flying all around her head. "I'm not about to sit and wait for you to come back with more wounds," she said.

"You don't belong here!" Strong bellowed, eyeing the net, then the girl, then the net again.

"He's right, Tish," Guil said.

"Stuff it," she said sweetly. "You want to fight me to prove whether or not I belong here?"

He grinned. "No." He could remember her in the arena, the way she had disposed of sound monster after monster in an almost back-of-the-hand manner.

Strong shrugged. The other mutants eyed the girl curiously, the first real Musician they had seen who was fighting for and not against them. Guil, after all, was not a true Musician.

"What's happening here?" Guil asked Strong.

"Rats," Strong said simply.

"Rats?" Cold boiled over him like dry-ice steam.

"They live in the uncharted corridors, the bottom-most layers. Millions and millions of humans lived here before the war and the Musicians, and we only occupy a minute portion of the tunnels that are usable. Aside from that, miles of tunnels have caved in and filled partially or completely with water, making them undesirable even if we did wish to use them. The rats run these unhampered. How many there are, we don't know, but it is easy to visualize hundreds of thousands of them. Occasionally—no, quite regularly, in fact—a small pack will break through into our section."

"Why?"

"For food," Strong said. "There's a limited supply of things down there to eat. Other mutated animals, that's about all. But up here—there's us."

"What mutated animals?" Guil asked.

"The war's radiation, maybe the Musicians' radiation— maybe both—have changed things like frogs, lizards, cats, dogs, snakes, some insects (especially the worm forms)."

"They're coming!" A cyclops Popular called.

Guil looked through the fine but sturdy steel mesh. On the other side, a thousand red pinpricks glared, resolved into eyes that were followed by furry gray

bodies that shuffled and jostled for the front ranks. They were a hideous army, more frightening than a man with a weapon could ever hope to be.

“Here!” Strong said, handing them small, hand-sized crossbows designed to hold a clip of steel needles much like a machine gun bullet belt “Forty shots to a clip. And try to make every clip count. Though, with the net in the way, that’s more of a meaningless cliché than an order.”

The clattering of the rats grew louder.

Tisha fired six shots in rapid succession. Three tangled in the net or bounced off the mesh onto the floor where they were equally useless. Three others sped through the loops in the net and brought down a trio of the beasts. It was not excellent marksmanship that accounted for this score, but the wall effect of the enemy. There were so many of the rats that one was assured of taking them out of action if the darts made it past the mesh.

“You’ll do fine!” Strong shouted.

Then there was no time for talk.

It seemed as if the hallway were too full of needles to allow even for the passage of air. Darts spun in glittering clouds, choked continually from the self-loading barrels of the crossbows. Rats fell by the hundreds as they leaped onto the net and tried to chew at the tiny links, to fray them away and gain passage to the delicious looking men who fired on them. And to the delicious looking girl with the dark mane of hair...

At first, the beasts paused to tear at the corpses of other rats, rending the flesh from the bones in a bloody fury, satiating the hunger that drove them. Guil saw one rat holding the entrails of a dead comrade; the rodent turned and tried to fight the wave to get away with its prize, but it went down under the claws of the others. But cannibalism wasn’t to last. The stampede had triggered something deeper than hunger, a psychological lemminglike drive that brought them straining at the net to the exclusion of all else, even the hunger pains that must be lacing them even as they rushed.

It seemed as if they had once had a taste of human flesh and could never again be truly satisfied on any lesser diet.

Darts sank into the gray fur.

Blood spouted, drenched the net, filming the loops between the strands of mesh.

Guil saw one of his own shivs lance an eye. The rat kept climbing the mesh for a moment as if completely oblivious of the fatal wound. Its body had been told to press forward no matter what, and it was still heeding that primary directive, even though its ability to function had been severely curtailed. Then, after a long and arduous struggle up the net toward the top where it must have fancied it would find a gap, it turned in dizzy circles and fell into the teeming hordes behind it.

Clip after clip of darts...

Blood gurgled beneath the net and stretched in rivers under their feet, curled into pools and lakes behind them.

Guil thought of the arena while he fired the darts. The Musicians would enjoy this. There was so much horror. He realized that, while the Populars killed other living things out of absolute necessity, the Musicians killed frivolously for sheer delight And killed their own sons, not mere rats.

Then the net went down...

One rat, hidden in the shadows and concealed by the shiny film of blood that swathed the mesh, had climbed near the ceiling where the net was stapled the most haphazardly, had settled into its little nook, and had worried a staple loose from the plaster of the corridor ceiling. It must have had a great deal of satisfaction when it was not caught, but it did not trust to luck and did not let itself waste time with self-congratulations. In that respect, it would have made a great soldier if it had been a man. It went on to another staple and took that one out too.

One corner of the net drooped. Only one, but that was enough.

The rats swarmed up the net on a flesh ladder, pulling over one another in a mad scramble to be the first, and poured through the opening. As the main body of the wave concentrated in reaching the gap at the top, their weight began ripping the other staples out...

"Master rat!" a cyclops with a bald head shouted.

Then it was plural. "Master rats, master rats!" The call echoed through the confusion,

Guil had no difficulty seeing what they were talking about. Rats as large as small dogs, perhaps fifteen or twenty pounds apiece, foamed around the bend in the corridor and followed the smaller slave rats who had died to bring down the nets. Their clattering was less screechy, more guttural. This appearance of a plan seemed to indicate intelligence of some degree in the larger rats, but Guil did not think he wanted to dwell on that sort of thought.

It also seemed as if the guttural rumbling of the Masters had a pattern, a detectable raising and lowering, a varying of sound lengths that could be a sign of verbal communication above the level of mere animal-instinct grunting. But that was a nasty thought too. He kept firing, grabbing clip upon clip from the basket of a three-armed dwarf who was acting as ammunition bearer. The dwarf kept shouting, "Shoot! Shoot! Kill!" at Guil every time he brought him dart clips.

But Guil did not have to be told.

The master rats knew what they wanted. It was not the flesh of their slave rats or of each other. Guil could not see a single case of rat cannibalism now that the Masters were leading the charge. With red-eyed fury, they hustled on, dying in frightening numbers, clawing over their fellows as they fell—gaining, gaining...

A scaly Popular with orange eyes like chips of some sweet frozen confection went down under the enemy when he tripped and could not regain his feet in time. A number of rats converged on him, but the main force continued its drive.

"Fall back!" Strong shouted.

They moved backwards to the end of the corridor, firing continuously, aware that even a momentary lull in their barrage would afford the mutant rats the opportunity they desired to sweep forward and overwhelm them. Guil risked a glance at Tisha, saw her biting her lower lip, the gun extended to the end of her stiffened arm as she fired again and again with a fury born of panic. She was accounting well for herself, and she made Guil even more proud of her.

Then, for a brief but terribly lucid moment, he perceived her as a corpse covered with rats, her flesh sheared away from her face by sharp, yellow teeth. She was almost dead, in this vision, but not quite—just alive enough to know what was

happening and to be driven stark raving mad by it. Also, in the dream, one rat stood in the hole of her gaping mouth and worried her nose...

He gagged, dispelling the dream, and was burdened down with the realization that he, as her man, should make certain that nothing of this sort befell her. Abruptly, he remembered the sound pistol in his jacket which he had brought with him in the event the Populars proved unfriendly.

“Strong!” he shouted, waving the gun. “Move the men back. I can handle them alone.”

“You’re insane!”

“I know that, but I have a sound pistol.”

“I can’t allow it,” his father said.

“You haven’t any choice!”

Reluctantly, Strong made the order. The other mutants fell away from Guil, most happy to retreat. He turned to the gray horde now surging unchecked down the passageway, chilled by the increase in their maniacal chattering now that they felt confident of their victory. He raised the gun and fired.

Rats hummed, vibrated flesh against bone, were flung apart in fiery flourishes that ashed glowing and were gone. Blood showered through the air but became a flaming fall of ashes and then evaporated into nothingness, the molecules whining away from one another, the patterns of the atomic constructions negated by the sound weapon. There seemed to be thousands of them now, pouring as if from the mouth of a cornucopia. The wave stood still almost as if it were a single organism, though the rats still struggled furiously and tried to pass the invisible barrier that vaporized them without vapor, burned them without flame or residue, crushed them without blood or bone remaining. The Masters had come up against something new, something unexplained and unplanned for. While their minds labored for a solution, they acted like normal rats in a frenzy, trying to overcome and push aside the immovable.

Then as he swung the sound-beam back and forth in machinelike smoothness, the wave began to recede, fluctuate, recede a bit more. Suddenly, the Master rats perceived the hopelessness of the situation and began retreating at top speed, galloping like dogs chasing a rabbit, pushing beyond their charges and leading the rout. Guil followed them from hall to hall, the vengeful executioner, driving them eventually to a hole in the wall of a rubble-strewn corridor.

The rats piled up at the hole, frothed and fumed, chattered and tore at each other to escape the sound beam. He stood at a safe distance, playing the beam on them, watching them fire and disappear. A group of perhaps a hundred rats turned from the hole—most likely by order of the Master rats—and charged him. He lowered the beam and fired at them, back-stepped hastily and brought the last one down only inches away from his feet.

When he looked up, the last of the other rats had slipped into the darkness of the hole in the wall. He crossed to the spot and fired for a few minutes into the space beyond to make certain they had been driven far enough away not to contemplate another attack through the same crevice—at least in the immediate future. Trembling and wobbly-legged, he walked back to the others.

Tisha ran to him and hugged him, and he returned the affection. She was very warm and soft, and he let some of his horror drain out of him through the perfect conductor of her body.

The Populars were busy loading the dead rats in Dicker baskets as Strong intoned a series of short prayers from the Seven Books, thanking the Lord for their good fortune. Guil supposed they had been lucky not to be killed, but he was not sure that a near disastrous battle with crazed mutant rats was a thing to be thankful for—no matter what the outcome. He stifled any such thoughts, knowing they would not be welcome in Strong's company. "Here," he said instead, producing the sound pistol. "You don't have to dispose of them. I can do it quicker and easier."

"No, no!" Strong said, cutting his last prayer a bit short. He had a twenty pound rat draped over each arm, and he plopped them into a large basket. They bounced once, they lay still. "We aren't disposing of them. Not yet."

"But why—"

The giant hefted another rat in one hand, stroked the lifeless body as if it were a favorite pet. A dart had sunk through its nose and penetrated its brain. Its eyes stared like polished marbles, its mouth open, its lips drawn back from its ugly teeth in a snarl so fierce it seemed the creature *must* be alive. Strong pinched the bloated sides of the beast, grabbed a handful of its shank and twisted it. "This is food, boy!" He grinned.

"Food?" Guil's stomach rumbled louder, felt as if it were devouring itself.

Strong nodded, still grinning.

"I don't understand." Or was it, Guil wondered, that he did not want to understand?

"Our only source of meat," Strong said.

Foam and blood freckled the yellow rat fangs.

"I don't believe it!"

"Nothing to believe. That's the way it is."

"But—"

Strong shrugged. "You ate half a roast rat for supper tonight. It was tasty enough, wasn't it?"

Yellow teeth.

Dead red eyes.

Foam-flecked...

Morning lay two hours from the horizon as they stepped from the shadows of the Popular Sector into the neon stones. All of the Musicians, save those on duty in the Primal Chord and the few engineers maintaining all the sound generators, were asleep in the towers, writhing in their sensonics, unconcerned with the dangers and horrors of eating rats—and of being eaten by rats. Just this thin line between rubble and neon stones made all the difference. Guil shivered; Tisha shivered too, matching the tempo of his flesh. They stopped and sat on a broad blue neon stone.

She was blue-toned before him. The light, cast up from beneath her and accenting some features while nearly obliterating others, gave her a supernatural, mysterious look.

He had told himself earlier in the evening that all he needed was one more thing to make him sympathetic toward the Populars, one event to arouse more pity in him. Then, he had decided, he would step off the thin Una and take their side. He had been confident that no such event would take place. The conservative part of him rested comfortably with the knowledge that he would soon resume a normal life as a Musician. But— fortunately or unfortunately—that event *had* transpired. The thought of men (or at least the descendents of men) having to rely on slaughtered rats for their chief food supply made him agonizingly ill.

“The only one I felt even slightly akin to was Gypsy Eyes,” he said, watching the stones crackle imperceptibly from one shade to a fainter or slightly brighter blue. He had told her about Gypsy Eyes on their walk back from the Popular Sector.

“I understand,” she said, her blue face solemn.

He looked at the ten majestic towers jabbing their points at the night sky. “And yet I can’t go back and live in the city. I know what Vladislovitch was and what he started. Not only what he made the Musicians, more than that It was Vladislovitch who established the conditions that force the Populars to eat rats. Oh, I know Vladislovitch was dead centuries before the colony ship returned to Earth and built the city-state. But Vladislovitch is responsible for the psychological structures of these Musicians’ minds—and was therefore indirectly at fault with regard to the fate of the Populars. Because of his teachings and his social order, the Musicians are cold, self-centered, sadistic. They keep the Populars in abject poverty by forcing them to remain in their ruined compound, by not giving them land to farm and raiding all independent farming efforts made by the mutants outside their compound. And then there are the sensonics.”

“I smashed the console the first night,” she said.

Without her having said so, he knew that she had not liked the sensonics either. But it was good to hear her say it, to make it a certainty beyond dispute. He felt a longing to protect her while at the same time he knew she needed no protection. “We’re trapped. I can’t go on knowing my pleasure as a Musician will bring pain to others in the Popular Sector. Yet I can’t live in the Popular Sector or in the Popular-dominated city that would follow a breakdown in the present system. I can’t find my place or purpose, and I can’t bear to be purposeless as they are.”

“There’s always—” she began.

“*Der Erlkonig.*”

So there it was. There were not two lands, but three for them to choose from. There was the city-state, the Popular Sector, or the land beyond the pillar. Death. The place from which no researchers had ever returned. It was impossible to say, at this moment, that the land beyond the pillar had been chosen, for there was still enough fear of it to keep them from talking about it openly. But was Death a hideous place? Or was it merely another plane of existence beyond this one? And maybe the researchers had never returned simply because they did not want to— or because travel was one way. Their disappearance did not necessarily indicate that the land of Death was an unpleasant one.

“Then will we help them?” she asked.

“It would make things right again, even if we fit nowhere in the order that follows. In time, without the gene-warping broadcasts, they may breed human again, rebuild the parks and restore the prewar cities to the glory they once knew.”

“We’ll help despite the Erlking?”

He grinned an odd, half-formed grin. “Not despite the Erlking. *Because* of the Erlking.”

She pulled him down onto the flat blue stone into the glowing warmth of the neon-spattered night and held him there in softness, blue-toned before him.

And he held her too.

And morning was coming...

The preparations for the revolution had begun.

THE THIRD MOVEMENT

Revolution and Beyond.

FIRST:

As a boy living in the Popular Sector, Strong (even then a fine specimen of a superman, with muscles that rippled beneath the sheath of his dark brown skin like live animals with purposes of their own) had been part of a close-knit family group. His father was Shell—an odd creature with a carapace and other horny platings protecting various regions of his body—and his mother was Fingers (she had an abundance of them). Both Shell and Fingers loved their children and raised the three boys—Strong, Loper, and Babe—in an environment that encouraged the boys to be as concerned with their brothers as they were with their own well-being.

It seemed, therefore, that Babe, being the youngest of the trio of children (and he would always look young, it appeared; he had stopped growing when he reached four feet, and although there were enough indications of his blossoming manhood to assuage fears that he might be a throwback and not just a mutation, his countenance, casually examined, was that of a sweet and innocent baby) should be the most protected. After all, there was Strong to look after Loper and Babe, and Loper to concentrate on Babe alone. Yet, one day, when things seemed to be going along every bit as peacefully as possible, they discovered that Babe was missing.

They searched the ruins carefully, afraid that he might have fallen into some pocket or shaft in the debris, might now be trapped and unable to free himself.

But he was not there.

That left, as far as Strong could see, only one other place where the child might be found. This was the week of the Festival, that yearly time when the Musicians gathered in their halls and in their streets for celebrations in honor of the one they called Vladislovitch. As an integral part of some of these street fairs, Populars were

brought into the city to entertain the spectators. The games played were cruel. The Populars did not always return of a piece—or return at all.

Although only fourteen, Strong felt sufficiently powerful and clever to skirt the edges of the city-state—perhaps even venture inside—and try to locate his brother. Ho had long felt that he had been meant to strike back and destroy the Musicians. What other reason for his tremendous size? Now, perhaps, he would have a chance to do just that. Against the advice of his father, he left the ruins and worked across the no-man's-land to the edges of the neon stone gardens...

Chapter 9

A week passed quickly, and the day before the revolution was at hand.

The days since his visit to the Popular Sector had been troublesome ones for Guil as he wrestled to come to grips with himself and with the purpose of the years that still lay ahead of him. It would have been so nice to be old, old like Franz and content to know that there was not much more to be borne. He knew his future was aligned with the pillar and the land beyond that he had only glimpsed twice, and both of those times for only brief moments. He knew he should be afraid of Death. The Musician concept—indeed, a major concept all through history as far as he could tell—held that Death was permanent and dark and a vast nothingness. The reason he felt no fear was because he did not hold with this concept; he had seen the land beyond the Pillar of Ultimate Sound. There was some form of existence there.

To prepare himself for what was soon to come, he slept through the last afternoon, dreaming of a leaf boat that carried him down a green river toward a promontory where a purple, column-faced building stood inviolate. In this dream, silence was awful and deep, though he had an odd recollection that he had been to this building before when there had been a hint of singing and the leaping shadows of dancers...

Afternoon faded into evening, though the night sky with its stars remained on his ceiling the entire time. After a time, sleep was fitful and came in patches separated by minutes when he was half-awake and when visions of the future and different but beckoning dreams fused to add a third dimension to his mind, another plane somewhere where between the conscious and unconscious wherein scenes were acted out that did not wholly belong in either of the other two. Somehow, his un-spoken pledge with Tisha had released the agony of his burden. He was no longer a man in the middle, for there was a third alternative which both realized would keep them together, yet would not subject them to living in a tower, ridden by their guilt, or in a rat-infested world of Populars. First: the revolution, the guns, and the fires. Then, when they were certain the self-centered Musician empire had fallen, he and Tisha could be off to their own world, their own society, to the place where they belonged if they belonged anywhere at all.

If only he could stifle his remaining fear...

Self-centered... The word struck him again and again as he tumbled in and out of sleep. It was the perfect modifier for the Musicians' world, for their heritage and their future. Self was their god. Yes, they managed to masquerade it in the form of the great composers and Vladislovitch. But these were figureheads. No, maybe even false gods, and he saw now that the Musicians must know this as well as he did. But his pledge with Tisha, the decision to reject this society, removed him from any burden of shame at having been a part of it. There was still a gram of disgust, but nothing more. Self was then-god. Witness the center of their lives, the focal point around which their world revolved: sensonics. Each Musician spent at least eight, usually ten hours a night under the sensonics. Holidays were often devoted to "retreats" which were nothing more than escapes into the fleshy, unreal desire world of the sound configurations, a prolonged electric orgy. Much better and much easier than real sex, for in real sex every experience may not be perfect. And every experience may not involve multiple orgasm as the sensonics produced. Besides, in real sex, you had to deal with another human being. You had to worry about pleasing someone, about another individual's feelings and his or her self-respect. That was an awful lot of bother when there was this much easier method.

Also, there was the Vladislovitchian precedent to follow. Something had always seemed strange about that placid, white face seen in photographs and reproduced in the great altars. At times, Guil thought it resembled the face of a moron, loose and silly and vaguely pathetic. At other times, he could trace lines of intelligence in the face and corrected his judgment to the decision that this was merely the visage of an unimaginative, lifeless man. But neither of these impressions meshed with what Vladislovitch had accomplished. Now he realized that it was something more subtle, something infinitely more pressing that had given Vladislovitch the drive to master sound and vibration, to forge a new society, to set out with it and colonize another world. Simply: the man had not been heterosexual.

Oh, perhaps it was just that he could not make it with women and therefore denounced them except indirectly through sensonics and as procreators of other men. Somehow, Guil felt certain that if Vladislovitch's sensonic machine could have been tested during the man's lifetime, the tests would have discovered that his own sound configurations were not those of bosomy women with satiny skin, long legs, and questing tongues, but of young boys. Young, smooth, virile boys with flawless skin and vaguely sweet faces...

Sterile, smooth, and soft, the face of Vladislovitch pitched impotently through his dreams...

Self-centered, impotent, it must surely fall. He could only be doing the right thing by hastening its collapse. But were not all of Man's societies self-centered and impotent? How could he know the preMusician world, the prewar world, had been any different? Indeed, to listen to Strong's quotes from the Seven Books, it could be argued that societies had always been self-centered and impotent as they were constantly warring against one another, or splitting apart in their own guts, eventually falling to yet another social form that would fall in turn and be replaced by another that would... so on and on and.

At least there was Tisha and the Erlking. The latter would not be so difficult to face with the former at his side. The pillar hummed darkly in the arena floor, waiting...

He was in the shallow between dream crests when the door opened and closed, and there was someone else within the room...

He struggled to sit up, squinted.

Above, the false stars glittered in the fake night.

“Who’s there?” he asked.

Silence.

Who is it?”

Still silence.

He was suddenly bowled from the bed, clutching at the sheets and pulling them with him and whatever it was that had struck him! In the dim light and with sleep matting the comers of his eyes, he could not see well.

“Wait a minute,” he said.

But there was no reasoning with whoever had attacked him.

He struck upward with a fist, felt it caught in a vise-like grip. He tried to wrench himself free, but his shoulders were pinned to the floor and a heavy body prevented him from twisting away. Whoever this was, he was a strong bastard—and he was determined.

“Who is it?” He demanded to know, though he felt foolish making any demands from his present position.

“I won’t let you do it.” The stranger’s voice was harsh and breathless, but Guil thought that he recognized it.

“Rosie?”

“You can’t!” Rosie applied more pressure with his knees. “You can’t go ahead with it.”

“You’re hurting me.”

“Good.” .

“Go ahead with what?” he asked, hoping a change of tactics would bring relief. If he tried to calm the Composer, maybe he could free himself.

“You know,” Rosie said.

“No, I don’t!”

Rosie made a sound like a snarl.

“Damn it, that hurts!” Guil was beginning to see small points of color in the darkness, though he knew they were seen behind his eyeballs and did not really exist.

“Good,” Rosie said again. But that wasn’t like Rosie.

“Rosie, listen to me. I—”

Rosie pressed even harder with his knees. Guil’s shoulders began to tingle with the first signs of muscle separation. Nasty’s wounds, almost healed, would open under the pressure, burst the stitches. Carefully, desperately but slowly, he slid his right leg up, pointing the knee and measuring the possibility of swinging the foot in a tight enough arc to smash it into the head that was now visible as his eyes adjusted to the gloom and blinked away the blurredness of sleep. “Rosie, what the hell is it?” he asked to distract the Composer’s attention from the movement of the leg.

“Seventeen years, Guil. I tried for seventeen years. I worked and sweated and polished. You haven’t the faintest idea how much I worked over those years, not

the slightest glimmer. You won't destroy it all now for some warped monsters that think they want the world."

"I don't understand what you're saying. Let me up." Carefully, raising the leg...

"Tish told me."

Told you what?"

"Don't fool with me!"

"What have you done with her?"

"Nothing."

"If you've hurt her—"

"I haven't hurt her. She was little-girl excited about it. She thought I would be too. You see, she knows that I think very little of our city-state, of the social order here. But she forgot that I must now conduct myself as an integral part of it, for that is the only advantageous thing for me to do. She said she wasn't supposed to tell but that she knew I would be excited too. I pretended to be. No need to harm her. Killing you is all I need to do."

"Look, wait a moment—"

"You won't topple the Musicians. Not now that I've made it."

"Rosie, there are people out there beyond the city who—"

"Freaks!"

"People who—"

"I don't want to hear it," the Composer shrieked.

Guil swung his foot and connected with Rosie's back, sent the hunchback crashing over him. The pressure on his shoulders broke, allowed pain to sweep in and take its place. Guil twisted, kicked out from under the Composer and sprang to his feet, dizzying clangs of cymbals exploding in his head. "Rosie, stop it!"

"I have to loll you."

"You can't do it, Rosie." He backed off as the hunchback crouched and came at him, his hands twiddling, vibrating like plucked strings, blood lust in every cell, justified by his purpose.

"Couldn't I?"

"Damn it, I know you, Rosie! I love your sister. You once said I was your only friend. Remember that? In the arena on Coming of Age Day—"

"None of that."

"But—"

"None of that because it doesn't matter. Friendship, love... they're high on the priority list, but they don't mean good goddamned if you aren't whole yourself, if you are only half a man." His words were thick with saliva.

"Then what does matter anymore, Rosie? I just don't see what else could really matter."

"What matters, Guil, is that I'm not a freak any longer. I've made it. They accepted me. They worship me—or will after I have been dead sufficient years. The whole of life, Guil, is getting up there, getting to a point where you aren't a tool or a tapestry. That's what most everyone is, you know. One or the other. The tapestries are for entertaining, to amuse. They shamble through life so other people will have something to talk about. They are the dregs. And it may not be because they can't make it—it may be because other people keep them from making it. Then others are tools for the real workmen of this world to wield and

even break if necessary in order to screw, bolt, nail, and brace themselves to a higher ledge. Now, I am a toolmaster. I can command the tapestries to be unfolded or hung in a closet or burned and forgotten. I can screw myself to the highest ledge there is and never feel the workman's blade in the slot of my own back. That is what the hell matters, Guil. But you could never see that and adapt to it You aren't the type to see that, Guil."

"Thank God, I'm not," he said.

"Yes, you would look at it that way. Perhaps, if your stigmata had been more pronounced, if you had had to fight your way despite horns on your head and clawed hooks on the backs of your hands—perhaps then you would have understood the tool-toolmaster relationship."

"But we can talk about this," Guil said. "You're talking about it right now. Let's sit down and—"

Rosie moved faster than Guil had thought he could, still crouched, grotesque in his postured animalism.

"I wouldn't let the Populars kill you, Rosie." He backed behind a chair, grasped it in preparation for lifting and throwing it.

"No, perhaps not" There was madness in his voice. "But don't you see what it would be? How dense are you —you, Meistro's son? I would be a Musician in a Popular world—a *freak!*"

"The Populars have hunchbacks of their own. Many stranger things than horns and claws."

"But I'll be a *Musician*, and there will be no changing that I won't be able to compose. I'll have no appreciative audience. I'll be a Musician, deformed or not, in a world that does not appreciate music—indeed, in a world that will have reason to loathe it!" He gasped as if breathing was a torturous process. "I'll be as good as dead."

"And you will kill me to stop me, tool that I am."

"I will."

Guil threw the chair.

It caught Rosie on the shoulder, though he tried' to duck it, knocked him backwards and down. But he was up again faster than Guil expected. He came over the chair in a leap and hit the floor running. Guil ran too, stopping behind a waist-high bookcase breaking the center of the room. Rosie didn't stop. He jumped over the case and came down on Guil, tumbling both to the floor.

Guil swung a fist, smashed it into the boy's lips, felt blood spurt over his fingers as he mashed the delicate flesh between the hunchback's teeth. He drew back on the punch just in time to keep from hurting his own hand. He struck again in hopes the whole thing could be ended quickly and without death. But Rosie replied this time, bounced the other boy's head off the floor. Bells bonged majestically in Guil's head, and blackness rang up at him between the *ding* and the *dong*. But blackness had to be denied. It was inviting and would give relief from all this pain, but if he let unconsciousness claim him, Rosie would guarantee his death in the short moments that followed.

Guil drew his left knee up, fighting a headache that was a razor-nailed lizard in his brain, smashed it into the hunchback's crotch. Rosie howled, rolled sideways, gasping for air, and retched. Vomit spread across the floor. His face had gone

ghost white, but still he tried to fight. He made it up on his knees despite the heaving spasms that wrenched his stomach, was hit by another fierce wave of pain as his manhood protested what had been done to it.

“Rosie, please,” Guil pleaded. “This is ridiculous. We are supposed to be friends. To hell with your tool-toolmaster relationship.”

But Rosie was not to be appeased. It was too late for his pride to accept defeat, even if he might have decided that he could survive well enough after the revolution. And, of course, he had not even made that decision. He gritted his teeth and stood, staggered toward Guil with his hands reaching to clutch.

But his hands never made it. Guil smashed another fist into the hunchback’s chest, again denying him air and sending him backwards to fall into his own mess, blood smeared across his face, his horns unconcealed and glittering bluntly.

“Rosie, stop it!”

For a moment, it seemed as if he had balled up the proverbial towel and was ready to toss it in. He stood, swaying from side to side but apparently oblivious to his condition. Shaking like a man with a tropical fever, he removed the Medallion of the Composer from round his neck and held it by the center of the two foot chain. He sucked in his breath and sniffed away the bubbly fluid that had gathered at the ends of his nostrils. Then, moving his feet farther apart in a stance that was meant to give him a firmer base, he began swinging the Medallion like a morning star mace.

“Put that down!”

The air sung with its passage.

Guil was terrified now. He felt that he had a better than average chance when it came to defending himself with his hands, but he could see no escape from a deadly weapon of this sort which allowed Rosie a much greater reach than he would have had bare-handed. “Rosie, this isn’t any good. You know it isn’t.”

But Rosie had no breath to talk, to answer, to refute or agree. He was worn, but he was committed, and he concentrated all of his energies on the Medallion. He whirled it faster and faster, its sharp edges catching the meager light and glinting wickedly with the reflection. The edges were beveled to a relatively thin knifelike blade. With the speed the hunchback had given it, it was as deadly as a sonic knife, the only difference being that this blade must physically connect where a sonic knife could kill at a distance. Guil had only to remain out of its reach. If he could. If...

He backed.

In a way, he was fortunate that Rosie had come here in the manic, wild peak of emotion he had. Otherwise, he might have thought to bring a sound whistle to put Guil to sleep before killing him. Then he would have had no chance. Not even the slim one he now enjoyed.

Enjoyed?

That was not the word, not the word at all.

He backed a little faster.

And Rosie jumped, swinging the brilliant trinket.

Guil dodged, ducked. The Medallion swung over his head, pulling a detectable cool breeze after it.

Rosie lowered his arm to correct his aim and catch his quarry.

Guil fell, for there was no other way to avoid the weapon. The Medallion sliced the air inches above his head, just about where his stomach would have been...

Rosie screamed in frustration, his face a fierce mask of desperation that turned Guil's insides around and around as if they were on a phonograph turntable. This was surely the face of someone he had never seen before. It was a demon mask, a madman's vision of the denizen of Hell. Guil rolled, grabbed the Composer's feet, jerked as hard as he could, and toppled him. Lunging onto him, he tore the Medallion from the struggling fingers and tossed it away. It clattered across the floor, the echo ringing back as it came up against the bookcase.

This should have been enough. Rosie was disarmed. The fight could not continue, for Rosie had no strength to use his fists. It really should have been enough. But it wasn't. Guil threw fist after fist into the hunched shoulders...

Rosie gurgled, choked, and shrieked, sounded as if he were a hundred small animals running in fright.

Guil felt pain in his sides, realized the mutant was bringing the spurs on the backs of his hands into the game. Springs of blood welled up where they dug in, and crimson rivulets followed the scorching paths they made down his flesh. He grabbed both of the other's arms and muscled the wicked hands away from him.

Panting, he felt a great thrill of triumph pour down through him.

Then, as he held the hands of the hunchback away where they could do no harm, he realized nothing had been won yet. As soon as he released the hands, they would come back, gouge even more deeply into him. For a moment, he gave way to panic, then realized what he had to do. Letting go of the left arm, he grabbed the right with both hands. Hissing breath between his teeth with the force required, eyes bloodshot and stinging, he rammed the hand back against the floor again and again, over and over until the spur crunched audibly and dangled loosely from the flesh, no longer a valid weapon.

Rosie's free hand had raked his thigh three times, though only the last had been serious. Still, he bled from all of them, and bleeding had never been recommended as a healthy exercise. But the pain in his chest and on his sides was not what concerned him. He had a great fear now that, in this last few moments, the hunchback would put on a burst of energy and go for his eyes. The spur that remained would tear easily through such soft tissue...

Again, he had to muscle the other arm away from him, though he found it easier now that he had both hands to work with. He pushed it away, swung it down, smashing the spur on the floor. Over and over... It seemed as if it would never break, but when it finally did, it tore the skin around it and broke cleanly with the bone to which it had been anchored.

Rosie heaved, trying to toss him off.

Guil threw more punches into the other's shoulders, liking the way they felt as they bounced off him and left bruises behind. A part of him looked out of a barred window in his mind and cried and screamed at what he was doing. But that part of him was no longer in control. A little fragment from some dark nook of his soul had clambered into the driver's seat and was calling all the shots now.

When the mutant would still not surrender, he drove his fists ruthlessly into the face, sweat bathing his skin, his heart beating like the heart of a rabbit. His mind clattered and rattled as the jailed part of his psyche strained at its bars. The

horrible realization had come that he, as all the Musicians and Populars, had a barbarous base to him, though it might have lain deeper and might have required a stronger trigger to release it. He struck gleefully, without reservation. As blow after blow set a savage rhythm against the other boy's body, Guil began screaming again and again: "You goddamned violent bastard!"

It bubbled mindlessly from his lips in a dull, monotonous chant while the imprisoned part of his mind tried to analyze it and in this manner see from where it came and what was meant by it. "You violent, goddamned bastard!" Who? Who was the bastard, the barbarian? Rosie? Himself? Or neither? Was he screaming against just one man or against a way, a society, a manner of doing things? Did his rejection of society, then, roll back his rejection of Rosie and eventually his rejection of himself?

When he was physically drained and Rosie's face was a mass of bruises and cuts, and when the hunchback was weeping and clutching piteously at him in a plea for mercy, for friendship, Guil fell upon him weak and weeping too, the questions that plagued him still unanswered.

Together, they stained the blood and the vomit with their tears...

"I'm sorry, Rosie," he said, his hand on the door palmer. The Medallion was wrapped around Guil's neck now, a necessary plunder if he were to keep the Composer from leaving and spreading the alarm as he should have done in the first place. If he could not leave the room after Guil locked it, there was no way he could summon help. A private room in a Musician Tower was perfectly private, as good as a cell.

"Sure, Guil. Go on." There was no bitterness in the voice, only resignation. Rosie, in all his talk of tools and toolmasters, had forced Guil into playing by the same rules, into degenerating to the hunchback's own philosophy. Or, perhaps, as sensitive as he was, he knew the philosophy was an ugly one to live by. Perhaps there had been doubts in his own mind whether going on in this way was worthwhile. In the end, Guil had fought better under this philosophy than he himself had.

Guil stood, looking at the bloodied Composer, and he was stunned by the sour knowledge that he had scarred the man. It took something more out of him than the strenuous battle had. To have fallen—even this briefly—into the mold he had seen in the Musicians and found disgusting, was a very unpleasant event. It was well known, of course, that environment played a large role in the development of any individual's personality. He had thought he was different. The truth was bitter.

But Rosie was right. There were tools and toolmasters. It was a good analogy. The toolmasters jammed their blades into the slots in other people's backs, twisted and used everyone and got away with it. The only hope anyone could have in this world was to become one of them, to take up the skills of a toolmaster and brutally use others to your own ends, to fulfill your own desires. No, another part of his mind said, there was another way to avoid what they wanted to do to you. Withdraw, leave, find your own way outside of society.

He thought about that. All through history, judging from what little he knew of Earth's past, there had been segments of society that wanted out of the social mold, that did not care to be either a tool or toolmaster. Gypsy bands were among

them. He could recall the greatest movement, one that supposedly had changed Earth society for centuries before a normal tool-toolmaster setup could be restored. It had started as a movement called the Hippy. The name had evolved over the years until there were literally millions involved with it.

But there was a problem. Here, on this postwar Earth, there was nowhere to run. The other city-states would be just as hostile. And he would have to bear the additional burden of being a stranger. If he went into the ruins, the natural, or artificial mutants would eventually do him in. If he went to the few areas that were still wild and untouched by either city-states, city-state farms, or ruins, he would also die, for he was a creature of civilization, not of the forests.

There was only one place, then, that offered refuge. It hummed darkly, spun, hissed beneath the floor of the arena, sustained by its own generator buried beneath it...

“Rosie—” he began, then realized there was nothing he could say.

He had destroyed a world. He had reached out and pulled down Rosie’s reality. There were no words to phrase an apology for an act of that magnitude.

Quickly, he opened the door, went out and closed it behind, locking it with his identisong medal. Forcing his shame and confusion from his conscious to his subconscious so that he might be able to operate intelligently through the crucial hours ahead, he hurried to the elevator and dropped to the ground floor. Moving warily, as if everyone could see he was a revolutionary and was out to get him, he made his way to the concrete core of the tower, the part that was not a sound configuration, activated the door and stepped inside.

“Hello, Guillaume. What brings you here of all places?”

The Musician tending the generators this shift was Franz! He had known but forgotten that the old man had mastered many occupations and amused himself by going from one to the other when he grew bored with any particular endeavor. Agony pricked every convolution of Guil’s brain. His hands tingled with the memory of the thin twanging of guitar strings. Someone, it seemed, had nailed his feet to the floor; he could not act.

He thought of Rosie and what he had done to the Composer, and he told himself that he had made the choice whether he liked it or not. There was Tisha to think of. And the Populars who ate rats. And the children of the Musicians who needlessly died in the arena. And, too, there was himself to think of. He knew he was not so selfless as to be able to exclude personal motivation. The revolt had to progress. And because of all these things that were wrong with this society, Franz would have to suffer.

Abruptly, he brought up a hand, chopped down, again, and a reluctant third time. He had tried to make the blows as soft as he could without making them totally ineffectual. Franz toppled to the floor, unconscious, the last waking look on his face one of disbelief and hurt that froze there and denied unconsciousness’ eraser.

Guil bent to the generators and looked them over. This was the main broadcasting station here in the Congressional Tower. Each building was maintained by these thrumming machines. There were ten of them, and ten lines ran across the floor, all but one disappearing into other machinery, then through the concrete core. Those nine went to the other towers, he knew, came to rest in

the huge, black amplifiers that pulsed out the intricate, multi-billion patterns that made each of the structures. Each amp would be regulated by computers and back-up computers that threaded the emanations that came from the cable, separated and directed them into proper conductors located about the building frame. Each generator was labeled, though, he did not need to read the inscriptions to know that they were prayers to various gods and to Vladislovitch himself. Moving to the other nine generators, he opened access plates in their sides and placed nine small bombs, each no larger than a pair of thumbs held side-by-side. They didn't even tick.

FIRST:

Strong had circled approximately one half of the city, keeping to clumps of brush and some black slag piles of melted debris so that he would not be seen by any Musicians, and he had not yet found any clue to Babe's whereabouts. At last, he stopped, crouched behind an ancient truck cab, looking through the windows, across to the neon stones. The glass had been smashed out years earlier, of course, so there was nothing but the skeleton of the driver to obscure his view. On the other side of the truck, there was a short stretch of waste, then the neon stones and a clear avenue along them to the smaller buildings and the towers that comprised the city. If he expected to find Babe—assuming Babe was in there—he could not do it by hanging back. When he was certain there was no one near, he rounded the truck and loped across the grass and stones, onto the neon stones, down them toward the relative obscurity of the alleyway ahead.

As he ran, he wondered how many years it had been since a Popular had dared to cross into this territory. Decades upon decades. Probably more than three centuries. The Musicians had quickly displayed their lack of love and friendship with the mutants. He came into the alley where the sun was blocked by a walkway roof between the two small buildings. He waited there, wondering what his next move should be, while he regained his breath.

He could hear the sounds of revelry echoing from some distance, perhaps three or four blocks. Some part of the festival was playing there, something that produced a good deal of laughter. Whether or not it involved Babe, it was the only trail worth following.

He darted out of the alleyway, across the street and into another covered passage that led toward a large square. He squinted and saw that there was a crowd out there, apparently gathered around something, watching. This was where the laughter came from.

As he started forward, down the alley, two Musicians entered at the far end and walked rapidly in his direction, talking loudly and laughing hoarsely...

Chapter 10

Four neon stones in two heads: a pair of manbats.

And, of course, Strong. His voice was heavy and unnatural as he strove for what he imagined were stirring tones. "Let the angel of the Lord chase them, let them be as chaff before the wind."

They stood beneath the Primal Chord, obscured by its black shadows, Strong with a hand-sized crossbow and a dozen clips of steel darts pinned over a loud vest of alternating panels of bright cloth and fur. The manbats had no weapons other than their claws and fangs.

Which were enough.

Guil found it hard to imagine that this night had been conceived over seventeen years ago. Seventeen years ago, Loper had struggled up the side of the Primal Chord, fighting impossible chances and incredible odds to steal a child and kill it. Guil's stomach turned yet again as he realized for the first time that he had been partly responsible for the real Guil's death. His existence had led to the Dream, the Dream to Loper's murder of the baby, He would forget that. There was too much else to feel guilty about to start digging up new things. The bombs?" Strong asked.

"All ready."

Then let's move to those trees," Strong said. His voice was almost the voice of a child. The dreams of seventeen years had started to reach fruition. Soon, he felt confident, all that which God had promised him would be his. The air was sown with gnats among the hoary willows, warmer than it should have been. Strong silently said the prayers which had become a part of him for so long. He thanked his Lord for what had been sent him and prayed that they might succeed with that which they had undertaken. He had prophetic visions of seven gleaming white archangels dressed in brilliant golden robes lifting him to a bejeweled throne. It never occurred to him that he might be quite insane.

Guil fixed his eyes to the towers and waited for Tisha. A moment later, he saw her, sleek in black leotards, a powerful sound rifle in one hand. He called softly to her, and she joined them in the willows as the towers of visible sound glowed around them. Guil took her free arm in his, said, "They should be going off—"

"Now," Redbat finished for him.

It was true. From the Congressional Tower came the muffled thuds of the tiny explosives as they wrecked the machinery in which they were planted. Then the Tower of Learning began to dissolve. It was an altogether awesome sight. The reaction began at the top of the building, far up at the glowing peak. It was not a simple fade-out, for the power could not be cut instantly. What was stored in the reserve batteries of the computers was used, moderately, to sustain the illusion-buildings. Since the points highest up were the hardest to sustain, they were permitted to go first. The red-cream-white ripples of the structure continued, sweeping from top to bottom as always. Near the top, however, the red ripple faded to pink, the cream to white, and the white misted completely out of the visible spectrum. Then the process slowly worked its way down.

Every time a white ripple reached the lower peak, another few floors disappeared. The color ripples began flushing outward at a faster rate as if frantically trying to counteract the decay and restore the tower to its previous majesty. But as they moved faster, the decay also moved faster, and the tower rapidly disappeared as if an eraser had been rubbed over it.

Those things that had not been sound configurations, the contents—in specific—of the various chapels and some of the private furniture, rained down on the lawn, smashing to pieces on the cement or merely crumpling apart on the grass, showering up in color-suffused fragments among some decorative neon stones.

Guil saw a pew slam into a running Musician and split him as neatly as a sharp knife would cut through pudding. Together, the man and the pew fell apart. It had all occurred in silence, for the victim had not even had time to scream.

He thought that he should feel revulsion at this death that was of his making, but he had seen so much death and violence recently that he could not bring himself to really care. And, by this time, the Musicians had metamorphosed (in his mind) into evil, sadistic creatures toward which he could feel little pity.

Turning to the other towers, he could see that much the same thing was happening. The great walls that had hummed for four hundred years now faded, shrunk, and were gone altogether, leaving their builders without shelter, alone and lost and confused on the bleak face of the earth. With a strange, distant horror (it seemed as if the events of the last week had rendered him incapable of feeling terror or horror as anything but a vague, misty entity clinging to the outskirts of his emotions) he saw what was happening to the people who had been in the towers. He supposed he must have realized this before he planted the bombs, but he had suppressed it, pretending it would not happen. As the walls dissolved around them, the floors under their feet, the people shot through the air like the pews and furniture had in the deserted building. They struck the ground with cruel force, died instantly, leaving only fragments of bone and flesh to mark the point where each had left this life.

Fascinated too much to turn from the horror even though he realized his interest was equivalent to the black and animal urges that had made it possible for him to defeat Rosie, Guil watched as a Musician and his Lady fell through a dissolving floor, holding hands. They struck another one that still remained solid, were gravely injured. Then down and down, passing through some levels and bouncing off others. Eventually, they parted and fell alone. When they struck the pavement, he could hear their impact. A leg—he could not tell whether it was male or female—stood separated from its body for a long moment, then fell and ran crimson...

“God,” Guil breathed, holding Tisha.

“I want away from here,” she said. “Please!”

Strong was laughing, breaking his uproar with lines from the Seven Books, nearly foaming at the mouth, eyes glazed with excitement.

He knows he will be a toolmaster after this, Guil thought. Here again was Rosie’s analysis of men and their social motivations. Strong was going to be a tool-master, and he was already experiencing the joy of planing and scraping and gouging and screwing, bolting and plastering human beings as if they were equipment, tools, or raw materials to be molded. Men were always interfering in the lives of other men, usually for the worse. Men could not leave men alone. They had to be using, twisting, forever hustling for whatever they could get to fulfill their own twisted view of the world. He was right He could never belong here.

The night was dark.

Over the tops of the trees, whistling like a flute, came an air sled culled from the prewar warehouses. Gypsy Eyes was driving it, and he shouted as he saw them, brought the craft to settle three feet above the grass on its gravity cushions. Pressing the hold bar, he climbed into the back seat, leaving the controls to Strong who mounted the machine and took them in his hands, fondling them as if they were women. “Chances?” he asked as Guil and Tisha climbed into the three person rear seat beside Gypsy Eyes.

Gypsy Eyes made a face that drew all his wrinkles in toward his nose. They will see this group and counterattack in five minutes if we stay here. There is one hundred percent probability in that.”

“So we move,” Strong said.

“Yes.”

Strong turned to the manbats. “Redbat, you know what to do next?”

“Perfectly,” Redbat said somewhat disdainfully.

“Then do it,” Strong snapped, pulling the hold bar up and slamming feet into acceleration pedals. Up they went—and fast.

Wind rushed darkly around them, and the plain of battle was spread in a panorama of wonder beneath them. All the towers had disappeared by now, except for the Congressional Hall which was under heavy guard by Populars to prevent it from being used as a Musician refuge. Only one other sound configuration remained of any size larger than weapons: the Pillar of Ultimate Sound. The tower around it had died. The Great Hall was a nothingness. The arena was only a bad memory—and maybe even that could be disposed of. Still, the ponderous black and brown pillar, throbbing with unidentifiable yet strangely recognizable tunes, lived on, sustained by its own generator, spinning the colors of its voice.

Commando teams of Populars dashed through the neon stone gardens, brandishing their crossbows and, here and there, a captured sound rifle. The Musicians were so taken by surprise that they ran about in stupid circles, waving at each other, shocked into disbelief, the disbelief giving birth to the madness of refusing to believe. And as they tried to recover and act, the Populars cut them down as if they were animals, darting them heavily or puffing them into nonexistence with the sound weapons.

“Chances!”

“Wait,” Gypsy said.

“Now! I want them right now!”

“Fifty-fifty.” Gypsy Eyes clutched the railing that rimmed the craft, bumping up and down on his seat as Strong shot them first one way, then another in order to see every aspect of the great conquest.

“Fifty-fifty? No better than that?”

“Fifty-fifty,” Gypsy Eyes confirmed, though he looked as if he wished he could give better percentages.

“But we haven’t even suffered a casualty yet!” Strong insisted.

“We will.”

“How?”

Gypsy eyes squinted, his eyes clouding. “There are two major possibilities. Two different groups are forming to mass counter-attacks. Either might succeed, though neither group is actually large.”

“You’re seeing this in the future?”

“In the possible futures, yes. Of course.”

“Where will they attack from?” Strong asked, hunching over the control as if the statistics had struck him a blow to the gut.

“Too difficult to give an answer to that,” Gypsy said. “Each group has three possible directions from which to swoop in upon the Popular forces. That would mean analyzing all six possibilities for probabilities, and that much figuring I cannot keep track of, considering the billions of shadow possibilities that also exist. As things develop, I’ll have a clearer view.”

Strong snorted. “Then keep looking and tell us as soon as you know anything.”

Tisha huddled next to Guil.

The sled slid on.

Guil wished they had struck right for the pillar, had not waited to see how things would go. They had chosen the land beyond as theirs, and they should not have hesitated.

Below, a group of cornered Musicians, their backs to a stone wall that was left over from pre-Musician days and had been polished and carved as a work of art, had brought out whistles and sound rifles and were making a valiant, if futile, last stand. For the moment, they might seem to be winning, but superior numbers could only wear them out and set them up to be picked off one at a time with more leisure.

Strong, concerned anyway, brought the sled down above them, keeping it a hundred feet up and out of sight in the darkness. He leaned over the side to watch. There was nothing for the rest of them to do but watch also. After all, it did not really seem as if people were dying but as if dolls, under some magic electric control, were playing out a violent puppet show on a very realistic stage.

Seven Populars ashed into glow bits and disappeared before they could open fire on the Musicians. The Musicians cheered each other and waved their guns in triumph. A second wave of mutants swept toward them, heedless of the sound weapons. They were fifty Populars with dart guns, and they must have been figuring on the sudden, careless rush to carry them over their enemy before any of the Musicians understood what had happened. There was a madness in their zeal that sent cold shivers through Guil.

Populars flicked out like bad bulbs and were gone forever.

Still, the wave did not fluctuate or threaten to turn tail and run. They came on despite the bursts of light that were their comrades suffering total negation. Four of them reached the Musicians and managed to fire point blank with their crossbows. But they only brought down their own number before they were gone too, nulled, dissipated, ashed...

For a second, everything seemed to freeze. There was no action.

The fighters were like wax dolls.

Only their clothes moved slightly, stirred by the wind.

Then a third wave of Populars under the direction of a shouting, gesticulating little dwarf at their rear approached the Musicians. They held boards before them as protection against the sound beams. Some crouched behind rolling barrels brought from the ruins of the Popular Sector to provide just such cover. The dwarf, oversized head bobbling excitedly, wiped his running nose on the sleeve of

his coarse shirt and directed the charge with expertise, pausing only to cough now and then into a yellow piece of paper. The Musicians picked him off first, right in the middle of a cough. Then, turning to the rolling barrels and the shielding planks, they began firing.

Barrels sparkled and were gone.

The men behind the barrels, startled, were gone before they could manage to stand erect.

The Musicians turned to the board-bearers and buzzed the thin shields out of the way. Some of the Populars, realizing the sudden desperation of their situation, threw their boards into the air and charged with a strange electric hopelessness that currented their bodies so that their muscles seemed to twitch as if repeatedly shocked. Shielded, they could not advance as fast as the dying wave before them, and, at any rate, the shields were useless to begin with. Even running, they did not make it. The last was sound-killed a dozen feet from the Musicians, his arms thrown wildly into the air at the last moment, his dart weapon rattling across the pavement in a surrender the enemy would never accept. And which, Guil thought sarcastically, the Popular would not have accepted had the circumstances been reversed.

Strong was worried. The power of the Musicians was frightening. Guil had underestimated the city's counterattack capabilities under the prevailing conditions. And if he had underestimated, Strong, in his fanatic self-confidence, had surely even guessed lower.

"Blessed be the Lord my strength, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight: My goodness, and my fortress; my high tower and my deliverer; my shield."

Certainly, they would need a deliverer and shield if more Musicians shook their grogginess and took up arms, laden with their superior fire power. Guil had noticed that the remaining Musicians in the corner, backed longed the wall, had destroyed the weapons that had belonged to their fallen comrades. They seemed determined to keep as many weapons as possible from falling into Popular hands if they themselves should somehow be brought to ruin.

Which they would be, of course.

Another wave hit them, fanning darts...

The Musicians sustained heavy wounds this time, five of the eight mortally struck. They pitched forward, darts prickling their bodies in countless places, blood oozing here, gushing there, pooling about the feet of the remaining three.

But those three, despite their unfamiliarity with the horrors of combat, had grouped and rallied with a defense system that seemed to be working. They stood in a triangle, facing one to the left, one to the right, and one directly front. They fanned their weapons, the humming beams crossing and magnifying one another so that where they hummed alone they burned Populars, and where they crossed they even destroyed the darts in midflight. With a single bark of command, the leader who faced front could shift the triangle slightly to meet any new angle of attack that seemed dangerous. It was a deadly, impenetrable wall of negating vibrations, and the Populars were forced into a retreat minus two-thirds of their original numbers.

Strong was praying. Very loudly.

Then salvation came...

...for the Populars: the manbats.

They swooped down from above, three bats for three men. The Musicians fell, their weapons skidding away from them, spinning across the street into the waiting hands of the ecstatic mutants. The manbats battled with fangs and claws, tore at the enemy flesh with maniacal glee. Even from the sled, Guil could see that the bats' eyes burned with a potent flame more savage and primitive than anything Nasty had possessed when he had attacked Guil. This was sheer bloodlust, the rending of flesh and blood and bone for the pleasure of it, and it reached its slimy hands toward Guil's stomach and petted him toward illness.

Guil wanted to throw up, but he couldn't. Rather, he felt that he should puke. It was an obligation, was it not, for the sensitive to physically rebel at such a sight? But rebellion at this crude man-against-man spectacle was something no longer in him. When had that sensitivity utterly died? With the first understanding that his parents had been willing to give him away, to use him, to sacrifice him for a cause—then to warp his life twice? No, it had not died then, but it had begun to. Had it died with the realization that the Musicians had warped other men into grotesque freaks in order to complete the chain of their society, in order to give their lowest class an object to which it could feel superior? No, but it had sickened severely with that knowledge. Had it died with the carnage below? Had that sapped his compassion for mankind? Perhaps, though it would seem to be a slow deterioration rather than a sudden death, with each of these things contributing to the weakening of its structure.

The death of compassion had been an outgrowth of the understanding that the man who was abused this moment would as likely abuse someone else the next. Show compassion upon a beggar and make him into a rich man, and he will eventually turn upon you and compete with you to win your own riches. He will leave you a beggar for your kindness, refusing to stop and return the favor owed you, possessing the knowledge that if you were made rich out of his pity, you would break him and make him a beggar again.

Guil told himself that not all men were this way. Indeed, he argued, he was not. But he could remember a week earlier when Rosie had won his Medallion—and all Guil could think of was that Rosie would go down in history and that he would have known him. A touch of selfishness? Perhaps. The system broke even the good men. The system was bigger than all, and the system used people. It was the toolmaster of toolmasters, using even those who fancied themselves as users.

The system would not allow a man the privacy of his soul and the pleasure of living life as he saw fit. The system forced the toolmasters to use him, and to avoid the masters and live his life in his own way, he must pull strings, use people—in short, be a toolmaster himself. He was not, therefore, living life as he wanted. It was not really a vicious circle; it was a set of concentric circles, all madly whirling through even more sets. No place was still or quiet. No place of peace. Save one...

"That's more like it!" Strong laughed as the manbats shredded the Musicians with electric, jolting, screeching glee, then pulled away, their bloody grins punctuated with specks of what had been their enemies, their green eyes greener than ever before.

The pillar, Guil thought. That was the one place...

"I have it," Gypsy Eyes shouted.

"What?" Strong had become so enthralled in the raging slaughter below the sled that he had momentarily forgotten all else—even, it seemed, the prayers from his Seven Books.

"Those two groups of Musicians," Gypsy Eyes said.

"And?"

"One has been destroyed by a commando team. I can tell, because they have totally vanished from the possible futures."

"Let the angel of the Lord chase them, let them be as chaff before the wind!" The prayers were back now.

"The other group is concealed by a stand of oaks a hundred yards west of the Congressional Tower, at least, that's where they are in most of the immediate probabilities."

"Chances?"

"Still fifty-fifty," Gypsy said.

Strong didn't like that. His face contorted into a hard, angular mask of anger. "Which way will they attack?"

Gypsy Eyes concentrated a moment, leaned against the railing and clenched it tighter as if he would gather strength from the hard steel of the craft. They'll come around the perimeter of the West Neon Stone Garden and attack from the rear, the direction of the major ruins. It is all slated as a surprise, and I imagine they think themselves extremely clever. There is a ninety-two percent probability that this is the avenue of attack."

The anger in Strong's face subsided as he dealt with this positive piece of prediction. "Good enough. We'll sneak behind them with a force of manbats and drop unawares." He kicked the accelerator with a massive foot, bucked the sled, and plunged them on, stopping only to confer with a manbat and have the creature relay his orders to Redbat. Then they were on to the stand of oaks, gliding silently *like* a large moth.

There were approximately eighty Musicians in the group that waited in the oaks, all robed in shimmer-cloth, the brilliant fabric that would always remain intact once its basic patterns had been generated, its own innate energy charge holding the patterns in countless coils. From what Guil could see as they drifted on their moth through the night above the mob, all eighty were armed with sound rifles, some with sonic knives as well. The initial burst of destruction had caught them off-guard, surely, as the other Musicians who had already died or had not yet rallied, but these were more quick-witted and had come to terms with the situation in surprisingly short order. And these, if any, would be the ones to come out of this alive. They were toolmasters, leaders. And, considering the fact that everywhere battles raged Musicians destroyed the weapons of their dead allies, this counter-attack mounting among the oaks was better armed than any of the Populars.

They might just have a chance.

"Chances!" Strong hissed.

"Still fifty-fifty," Gypsy Eyes whined.

Tisha tried to snuggle even closer.

"Something has to break," Strong said. "Something just has to!"

Then Redbat was there with his legions.

They filled the air, flapping, gliding, making shrill sounds to one another as they jockeyed for position. They dived with such speed and in such a vertical angle that Guil thought they must surely smash into the earth and shatter themselves to pulp. But, at the last feasible moment (no, the moment was not feasible; they were beyond the brink of disaster; it was of the nature of a miracle that they could recover in-so short a distance) they thrust their wings out, breaking their fall, and were on the Musicians.

The night was a shattered mirror.

The screaming reached them where they sat on their lofty sled like spectators at a game.

Bats fell on half the Musicians, tore into them with unrestrained fury. The landscape was a bubbling froth of combat that exploded and steamed and whirled. The excitement was too much for the winged Populars; their bladders could not hold up in the fury and confusion. . Guil saw Redbat strike a Musician's neck, rip upward with claws. He flapped madly to gain height, pulling the Musician's ruined neck away from the rest of him. Satisfied, Redbat dropped back into the skirmish.

"Let the angel of the Lord chase them..."

Malignant, awful angels: bat-winged and fanged...

A new element was added to the scene now. The Musicians had recovered from the surprise. Of the thirty left alive after the initial attack, eighteen now wore the yellow sound shields. Some had been carrying or had thought to grab their shield generators, had stuffed the wallet-sized affairs into their voluminous robes and had affectively rendered themselves, now that their wits were again with them, indestructible.

Almost as if to testify to this invulnerability, one of the manbats swooped upon a shielded Musician, smashed legs first against the glow and rebounded, screaming in agony, his legs ruined, shattered beyond repair. Another Musician mercifully gunned him out of existence.

Or was it out of mercy?

Guil could not decide. It might have been anger. Or worse. It might have been simply a desire to kill.

"Attack only those without shields!" Redbat was shouting, his voice a loud, ghostly hiss that carried well in the cool night air despite the uproar of conflict.

The manbats heeded their general, striking the un-protected with a vengeance too brutal to watch closely. They gutted, flayed. They went for eyes and genitals. But that sort of macabre joviality could not be sustained without casualties. The animal side was dominating their reasoning—and that could prove disastrous.

Now that the Musicians did not have to worry for their lives (the shielded ones, that is), they raised sound rifles and sonic knives and were calmly and with disturbing accuracy cutting and dissolving the manbats. Dozens of the winged mutants fell off their victims as they chewed overlong at a face or worried at the crotch of a dead man. Sonic knives denied them their wings. Sound rifles popped them into glow ashes. Some Musicians simply pointed to the sky and waved sonic knives at enemies they could not see but whom they knew were nonetheless there.

Strong pulled the sled back out of range of the knives. They continued to watch. In fact, they could not look away. Here hinged the whole crusade. Gruesome as it

was, it would either put meaning to the previous deaths or make all those who had died fools who gave up life for a pointless cause.

If there was any cause that *wasn't* pointless, Guil thought. He had not fought for this cause, really. He had merely acted as a catalyst for a change that was about to come some day—with or without him. He liked to think that, anyway. It made him more detached, less personally involved with the blood.

Lord God, to whom vengeance belongeth; O God to whom vengeance belongeth, show thyself!”

Guil was not certain whether Strong was looking for a holy sign to mark his campaign with godly grace and to assure him victory, or whether he was, literally, expecting God Almighty (in one of the many forms authorized by the Universal Church) to come forth from the stars and set foot on the battle, crushing the Musicians, saving the manbats by letting his foot land so that the spaces between his toes brought the manbats and other Populars a favored safety. As Strong looked skyward with the phrase on his lips again, Guil thought this latter thing must be true.

But would not the Musicians be shouting the same things to their gods? Would Chopin and Grieg and Rimsky-Korsakov and Vladislovitch come streaking from the heavens in a thunderous symphony, wrench the vile manbats from the face of the earth and cast them into the airless void beyond the sun? Of course not. Neither side would witness the arrival of their divinities. Gods, Guil saw now, were part of the toolmaster-tool concept. The users made them up to satisfy the used. Gods were as grease and oil, making the tools work better and longer and with less friction.

He realized that he had never really believed in gods, but that he had never analyzed religion to understand his lack of faith. Or to understand why other men needed gods. It was a far deeper thing than superstition. Gods, as men interpreted them, were nothing more than panaceas, candies to pacify the people.

His head spun with his discoveries of this night, these new perceptions so rapidly gained. Tonight, not that day in the arena, he had come of age.

At length, all the Musicians without shields were dead, strewn hideously across the ground. The battle had progressed toward the great courtyard in the center of the neon stone gardens, and it seemed as if the Musicians might quell the rebellion yet.

“Chances?”

“Only a thirty percent chance of success,” Gypsy Eyes reported.

Strong’s fingers danced nervously over the controls without pulling or pushing any of them. His gods seemed to have abandoned him to his own fate. The night was incredibly dark. But he knew this could also be a test to see whether he was still faithful. The Seven Books were full of tests. “We’re going down. Gideon, can those shields be broken with sound rifles?”

Guil thought a moment “Yes. It takes a longer hold on target, but it can be done. There’s a danger the shield might strike back along the rifle’s beam and negate the gun as it is negated itself. You might run out of captured sound rifles pretty quickly.” When he was finished, he wandered if this bit of advice had increased the degree of his guilt.

“We’ll have to risk that,” Strong said.

Pulling back on the controls, the big Popular took the sled down toward the battle...

FIRST

Strong stood in the dark, covered alleyway watching the two Musicians come toward him. They were silhouetted in the light from the courtyard behind them, and he would have been able to pick them off quite easily if he had thought to bring a crossbow. Then he realized that he, too, must be outlined against the light from his end of the corridor, and he danced sideways against the cold wall of the building.

The Musicians had not noticed him. They came on, still laughing and slapping at each other in high good humor. He tried to find some place to go, an indentation, doorway, anything to conceal him—but he had no luck. Just as he tensed for the inevitable battle that must come, one of the men stopped and exclaimed that he had forgotten something or other that he had meant to bring home from the Festival. They argued a moment about the advisability of going back, then turned and went back into the courtyard and out of sight.

Strong sighed, realized he had been trembling, and was angry at his fear. He moved slightly away from the wall and hurried to the end of the alley and the courtyard beyond. He crouched at the mouth, just at the edge of sunlight, and looked about. There were booths and pennants and games. Musicians wandered here and there, amusing themselves as best they could, considering the terrible heat of the summer day.

In a way, the heat was a blessing. If the courtyard had been crowded, his chances of finding Babe would have been about nil—and his chances of being apprehended would have been astronomically high.

The group of young Musician boys who stood in the center of the courtyard, ringed about something they found highly amusing, was still there. He tried to see what it was that caused so much laughter, had little luck. He was about to give up and look elsewhere when the boys shifted to make room for whatever they encircled, and he got a glimpse of Babe.

They had done something to the young mutant, though Strong could not guess what. There was a mesh cap of shimmering sound material over his head, and the device made a low warbling sound. Babe's face was slack, loose, like the face of an idiot. Strong could see that he was drooling, his tongue lolling. The boys had made him a mindless hulk, and they had placed a bitch hound in the circle with him, had encouraged him to rollick with her...

Chapter 11

Populars lay everywhere, battered and dismembered by the sonic knives. They gave mute testimony to the fact that for every one that was dead here, another three had been nulled by the sound rifles.

As they went down to the battle, Guil wondered how the toolmaster-tool relationship could continue from the dawn of society to the sunset of Earth. Didn't others realize that the system devoured and never produced? Did people not see what was so crammed beneath their noses? No, certainly he wasn't the first to see the scheme of it. Rosie had helped him along with his understanding, and therefore Rosie had seen it first. Most likely, everyone saw it. But the system would go on because of two things. First, many of those who saw the scheme and recognized it for the deadly, sapping, spiritless thing it was would not think to change it, but to become a part of it, to try for the toolmaster position in life where some peace could be attained. Thus, the constant struggle between individuals for various kinds of power would never cease. And that explained the wars of the past, why one civilization had fallen to another that became just like it. It wasn't that the tools had been disgusted with things and had essayed to change them. Simply, another toolmaster had been trying to gain power and more tools—and to do that meant war with other toolmasters. Secondly, there were those who did not want to become a part of the system, did not want to use or be used. But the system was always bigger, and their realization always came too late. When they understood, they were trapped. Often, they became the easiest tools of all for the masters to use, for they discovered that absolute submission to the masters (the presidents and longs and ministers and generals, the senators, councilmen, lobbyists and priests) brought them peace from harassment and punishment, brought them at least a few moments to live as they pleased.

Of course, there had been those who had taken a way out similar to that which he and Tisha had chosen.

Strong set the sled down in the center of a great plaza, moved among the Populars, commanding and receiving attention. The counter-attack was proceeding this way, he told them, and things looked bleak. He was quick to clarify that this did not mean they should quit—only that they should fight all the harder. He delivered a brief prayer which some of them listened to, but which many ignored. When that was done, he sent a detail to draw together their scattered forces, ordering them to return to the plaza as two separate units. He ordered the manbats out of the battle completely and explained what had to be done against the shields.

The front row of their defense was strung shoulder-to-shoulder across the courtyard. A second row of mutants stood directly behind them, a third row after that. The third string had the few sound rifles that had been captured. Guil saw that the first two rows were nothing more than a fleshy barrier to stop sound beams, to hold the Musicians up a minute or two until the sound rifles in the third row could engage and disrupt the enemy shields.

Nothing more than sacrifices.

Not even that.

Cannon fodder.

Surely they knew it! Still, they stood calmly as the gunners in the third line laid barrels between their heads, stretched across their shoulders. Guil and Tisha had sound rifles, but surrendered them to Populars more anxious to use them. It was a useless gesture, Guil thought. If they were not condemned to damnation now, they never would be.

The Musicians appeared and began fighting their way across the plaza against the camouflaging front of disordered Populars that had concealed the three rows. Now these disorganized troops, having suffered heavy losses, fell behind the prepared defense. The Musicians, realizing that the battle had slackened to give clear way to the three lines, raised their rifles and began picking off Populars in the first row, puffing them to nothing, swinging the barrels, puffing, swinging, puffing...

But they had not even begun on the second row when the Populars opened fire on the dazzling yellow shields and split the night with their banshee screams.

Amber flickered and blazed.

Darkness receded beneath the hands of a false day.

The air crackled, snapped, hissed.

Guil stood behind a cyclops who manned one of the firing positions. He could almost feel the tension building along the beam as the humming tones of the shield and weapon met and fought. The air seemed to stir like a sentient creature just now coming to life. Abruptly, the shield of the cyclops' target bunked twice and was gone. The tension went with it. The sentient air died. The beam now centered on the unprotected Musician blew him into a cherry dust.

The cyclops swung his gun slightly and sighted on another shield. The beam lanced out, coursed over the Musician's armor. The atmosphere grew tight again. Seconds passed, and the shield remained intact. The cyclops was beginning to perspire. He knew that there was a chance both the gun and the shield would go, and no one had told him what that would do to him.

The air sang.

Guil stepped back a few feet.

A bolt of pure orange light snapped back in an arc from the Musician's shield, exploded in the innards of the gun. The shield had been destroyed, but so had the sound rifle. And the Popular who had been firing it Guil turned away from the body.

Here and there, the disaster was repeated as both shield and gun were wiped out in the backlash of the beam. But wherever this happened, some other zealous Popular would step into line with a new gun and resume the battle. Clearly, the greatest threat to the revolution's success had been met and surmounted. Only triumph could follow in this night of sound and fury.

"Chances!" Strong's voice boomed among the thunder of the weaponry.

"Ninety-four percent for success," Gypsy Eyes shouted back.

Guil dropped back from the firing line as the last of the shielded Musicians was brought down. A desperate attack of unshielded Musicians had begun to the east end of the plaza. The Populars were happily swarming there, certain of their eventual triumph, fired by fanaticism, foamed into battle frenzy by Strong as he called scripture to them with supposedly holy words that promised divine blessings upon their actions and their souls.

No matter that those words were written for ancient, long dead soldiers in distant battles in time.

Grabbing Tisha's arm, Guil dragged her to the fringe of the war zone and to the west end of the plaza near the neon stones that still glowed, maintained by their own generators buried deep in the earth. "The pillar," he said.

“Rosie?” she asked.

“What about him?”

“We can’t just leave him here?”

“He tried to kill me,” Guil said.

“He was upset.”

“He upset me, that’s for sure.”

“He’s my brother.” There was an unrealistic feeling to the argument, for he did not really want to leave the mutant behind. Neither was he pleased with the prospect of trying to take him along. Rosie might still feel combative, might still feel that he could salvage the city-state by murdering Guil. Tisha was arguing the other side just as unsurely. “He’s my brother,” she repeated weakly.

“Okay. Let’s go. But well have to hurry.”

Hand in hand so they would not get separated in the push and shove of the action, trying to stay as much to the shadows and the clear areas as possible, they made for the Congressional Tower. When they got there, they found five guards at the doors with rifles. They had probably scored massive kill tallies as panic-stricken Musicians, seeing this structure still erect, tried to rush the entrance. Of course, with the sound rifles, there were no remains.

Fortunately, one of the guards was the Cyclops who had fought the rats in Corridor F a week earlier. He remembered Guil and Tisha, or they otherwise might have been negated themselves. “What do you want?” he asked, his voice not as friendly as Guil might have expected.

“Strong said I could have the pleasure of killing my false father, Grieg,” Guil said. He did not know how transparent his deception was, but he hoped the line would seem logical enough to this brute.

“We aren’t supposed to—”

“Strong ordered it!”

The cyclops looked him over carefully. “Okay. But be careful. They won’t know anything inside about what is going on out here. We don’t want to alarm them.”

“I’m the one who told you that,” Guil snapped, pushing through the milky doors into the tomb silence of the main foyer.

In here, the Musicians that had apartments slept peacefully, lusting in their sensonics, oblivious to the uproar outside. Guil stopped at the central core to check on Franz. The teacher was still unconscious. Guil did not know why he worried for the old man’s safety; the Populars would have him in the end, just as they would have all the others.

They went to the elevator, throbbed upward on the sound currents. For a moment, Guil had visions of the building fading as the others had, of Tisha and himself flailing helplessly on the long, long fall, bouncing from floor to floor...

They found the halfway that passed Guil’s room, though it now seemed alien and strange to him. He could scarcely believe that he had ever lived here now that the end of it was so close. As they walked briskly toward the door, he felt like a prowler. No, more like a patron of the arts walking through a musty museum, for this was a museum of sorts, the last artifact of the Musician colony on Earth,

He used his identisong to unlock the door, palmed.

The panel slid back on darkness haloed by false stars.

The sensonic lay round and sinister in the corner.

And in the center of the room was Rosie...

...hanging by the neck from the exercising bars...

For a moment, they stood disbelieving, unable to accept it. Then Tisha began to cry. Guil quickly closed the door behind them and walked to the corpse. The neck stood straight, the head high from the shoulders for the first time in the hunchback's life. His neck was clearly broken.

"Why?" Tisha asked.

He had told her, briefly, of the confrontation earlier in the night. Now, so that she might always understand Rosie's motives, he told her the story in detail, careful to phrase things as the hunchback had phrased them, incidentally telling her of the influence the Composer's philosophy had had on his own.

"We can at least cut him down," she said at last.

Guil got a sonic knife from his things and severed the cord, stepping back as the heavy body crashed to the floor, bounced, and lay still. "Don't cry," he said.

"But—"

"We have things to do. He did what he wanted."

He took her and forcibly turned her from the scene, went with her to the door, out into the hall, leaving Rosie behind as a fixture of this grand museum, the last Composer of the Musician world, refusing in the only way he knew to become a tool. They dropped down the elevator shaft to the ground floor, embraced as they fell and found some solace in the circles formed by their arms.

Outside, they could see that the battle still raged. It was also evident that the Musicians would lose.

"The pillar?" Tisha asked.

He saw, and was happy that her tears were gone. "We're going to have to pass by some of the fighting to get there."

"Let's go."

They went into the plaza, trying to stay close to the edge where neon stones glittered but where the battle did not rage. Ahead lay the humming, swirling pillar. They were halfway to it, at the rear of the present skirmish, when Guil saw Strong striding from the uproar, face lit with sweat-lathered insanity. "The girl, Gideon."

Strong said "The war is won, and the girl cannot be a part of it."

"What are you talking about?" Guil asked.

"You're the prophet. You know you're the prophet. And she is of the enemy you helped us slay. And she's a woman. The books report that prophets are chaste, Gideon. Prophets are chaste. They abstain, you see." While he spoke, he came closer, reaching out for her.

Before the madman's words could fully unfold in Guil's mind, he had Tisha, thick fingers dosing about her neck...

"Stop it!" Guil shouted.

"You are a prophet, Gideon. You were named for a prophet—"

Guil leaped on the Popular, raked his hands over his face.

Strong shook him loose as if he were a flea.

Then he found the sonic knife in his hand, the same one with which he had cut Rosie down from his self-made gallows. He sliced with it, careful to keep it out of Tisha's way.

He's my father! Guil thought. The thought was a silent scream inside his head.

But he could not stop.

Strong screamed, twisted, still holding the girl but forgetting, for the moment, to continue to choke her.

Guil sliced again.

Strong fell.

Tisha screamed, was free.

The faces above Strong were swimming in and out of a strange dream mixture that now and again contained some of them, often contained none of them. Who? Where? He tried to focus his eyes, but could not clear away the growing haze. Then the haze rippled, and he was looking into the past.

He saw Babe in this past Babe was in a circle of Musicians, lying on the ground with a bitch hound...

Strong screamed and ran toward his brother...

Then everything rippled again, the haze cleared, and he was looking back up at the ring of people that stood about him, watching him die slowly, die completely. He stared around the circle, looking from face to face. Most of them were mutants. Most of them did not look too concerned, only mildly interested. Didn't they know who he was? Didn't they know he was the father of the prophet?

The prophet? He looked, found the boy. He could not understand the expression on the boy's face. It was not sorrow either. And yet it was more than mild interest. He tried to pry off the face of the boy and see what worked in his mind, but he could not do it. The boy's mind was too alien to him.

Then one head became clearer than the others in the circle, came bobbling out of the dozen faces and grew sharper, larger. It was a black face, hooded in black cloth. It seemed to expand and expand until it filled the entire sky, until it stretched from horizon to horizon, the features of it as big as mountains and valleys. He knew the black face for what it was, and he cried out wildly, seeking to escape but unable to move. His legs had been cut off, of course. There was no escaping Death. But he could not be consoled by the inevitability of it He could think of but one thing to mutter hatefully in an agonized, withered voice: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

There wasn't any answer.

Guil turned from the body as its screams ceased. Would the whirlwind of this night never die down? He almost laughed, then checked himself, though what he now had come to understand was ironic enough to provoke laughter. Why did toolmasters exist? Why did men scramble to control one another? The answer was not difficult to find. In fact, it was deceptively simple, just as the solution to the problems in the arena had been deceptively simple. Answer: they were all afraid of Death, the Erlking, and they grasped desperately at immortality. Vladislovitch had not been able to bring that; if he had, perhaps being a toolmaster would no longer be necessary. With immortality, each man could be himself and to hell with domination and submission. But without a real immortality, the only way a man could hope to live forever was through the memories he left behind in other people. If a man was a Grand Maestro, he could count on immortality of this stripe. He would never be completely forgotten. With intangible fingers, he could reach from his grave rot and stir his memory in the minds of men. A common man's immortality, on the other hand, lasted only as long as his family survived after

him. Ah, but if a man could rule, could bring pain to some and joy to others, could use people to assure himself of a place in history, then he would never die. Never... Ever...

Finally, Guil did laugh. He could hold it back no longer. He saw that he had been born too soon. He would have fit perfectly into a world of some distant future when Man had finally produced physical immortality, in a world where there was absolutely no need for toolmastering and where men would be free at last—the Ninth Rule conquered and used. Born too soon.

“What is it?” Tisha asked.

“It’s just that,” he said, wiping tears from his eyes, “what he feared the most is exactly the thing we don’t fear at all. He fears Death. And Death is the only immortality, the thing he wanted all along.”

She took his hand and held it tightly. “Come on. Hurry. They’re looking at you funny. The pillar.”

He turned with her to run the last few hundred feet, and they collided with Redbat. The mutant’s eyes were hot, the green like strange, bubbling lava. “You aren’t deserting us for the enemy, are you?” Redbat asked.

“We—” Tisha began.

“We aren’t on anyone’s side anymore, Redbat,” Guil said. He felt flushed, exultant. “Strong tried to loll Tisha. He was a fanatic. You know that. We aren’t deserting anyone. We’re just leaving.”

“Not yet,” the mutant said, scuttling back a step and fluffing its wings, then drawing them in tight again.

Green eyes glowing...

“What?” Guil asked.

Redbat blew air out of his nostrils, blinked his mammoth eyes. “These men. They’ll look to you as their new leader now that your father is gone.”

“They won’t,” Guil said. “I don’t have the stigmata. I don’t fit in.”

“They will. They’ll look to you. I want that leadership, and I don’t think you should have it after what you’ve done.”

“Fine,” Guil said. The leadership is yours. All yours. My blessings. Come on, Tish.”

“Wait!” Redbat pushed a claw against Guil’s chest “We will have a fight.”

“You’re crazy!”

“The winner of the fight is the leader. The power goes to him.”

“I give the power to you. Don’t you understand that?”

“They will not believe you surrendered it,” Redbat said. “They will not trust in my authority.”

Guil frowned, looked around to the other Populars, back to Redbat. That is not true. You have witnesses.”

“Fight!” Redbat stiffened, claws extended.

“It’s more to you than just leadership, Redbat You know they would believe you and accept your authority.

You owe us a favor, you know. You owe me a favor for killing Nasty for you. You said so that day in the cave.” Redbat said nothing.

“Let us go now without a fight. That is the favor I ask. Let us depart in peace.”

“Glory, my dear boy,” Redbat said, his voice thinner than usual, “is a thing not easily attained. There will be a history of this one day. They will tell how Strong conceived the plan and how it was Redbat who led forth the new nation. How Strong perished is already settled. But how Redbat came to power must be a dramatic story, not a diplomatic coup hardly worth the telling and certainly not memorable. I hereby state my intentions of revenging the murder of Strong. Besides, I don’t like the way you look.” He grinned, thumb-sized fangs curving over his lips. “Fight!”

“We should leave together,” Tisha said. “Otherwise, we might not cross at the same point. We might not find each other on the other side. And that means we both have to use the pillar.”

I’ve killed one like him,” Guil said. “I guess I can damn well handle another.”

“Nasty was a weakling,” Redbat said.

“We’ll see,” Guil answered.

“Yes, I guess we will.”

And, circling, they began their minor battle while the larger combat roared behind.

Redbat knew the boy’s strength. He did not go flapping in on his neck as Nasty had done. Instead, he circled warily, waiting, waiting either for an opening or for the boy to tire of the game and leap first. And that was exactly what happened. Guil jumped, hands latching onto the wings of his opponent when they had been aligned for the neck.

Guil felt claws sink wickedly into his flesh, seeking knowingly for the spots where Nasty had sunk claws and fangs the week before, tearing and scratching. Flesh sliced like ripe fruit and peeled away beneath them. Guil threw his fists in windmill flurries, caught Redbat in the face. The light cartilage of the mutant’s nose snapped, crunched backward and released a jet of blood. But the manbat only opened his mouth and gasped breath that way, holding on, twisting the claws and seeking an opening to tear at the boy’s jugular vein.

Guil battered at the fragile wings as the noise and lights galloped about them. But he could not seem to land another decent blow. Redbat’s head slipped back and forth, in and out, up and down like a snake bobbling to the tune of a flute.

The manbat suddenly found an opening and sank teeth into Guil’s arm.

But he had to let go, for he had no nose with which to breathe and needed his mouth to suck air. Fangs were out. Still, the claws could and did slash murderously.

Mercilessly...

Pain as real as ice.

Pain as real as fire.

Then the manbat leaped against him, toppling both to the ground.

Guil was on the bottom, pinned by claws and wings. Redbat ripped his claws loose from the boy’s sides, hissed and splattered blood and saliva over Guil’s face. His eyes were a madman’s eyes—the eyes of a man who sees immortality before him and knows he must seize it before it moves on and loses him in the stream of eternity.

Guil thought of all the murderers who had killed without reason—or a noticeable reason, at least. Prewar Earth history was full of them. So was some

Musician history. Assassins. Mass murderers. All were hungering for immortality. And so it was; they received it. The infamous lived as long as the famous in the journals of men.

Kill a hundred people and someone, somewhere, will be talking about you a thousand years from now, using you as an example of some mental instability, but talking about you nonetheless. Kill a leader, a chief, and the same is true.

And why did men let the killers live on? Why give them the immortality they sought? Because, Guil thought, most men wished they too could have gained an historical niche for themselves equal to that of the killer. We are fascinated by the fact that they not only became toolmasters themselves, but that they used toolmasters (as opposed to the common people who are tools) to gain their immortality.

“Now you’ll die,” Redbat said, bringing claws up to rake down Guil’s face and gouge out his eyes. “And I will start living!”

But Redbat had spoken prematurely. The claws never connected with Guil’s face. Suddenly, the manbat pitched forward, eyes glazing, crashed full length over his intended victim. Dead... Guil rolled from beneath the furry corpse, and waited till his vision settled. He saw Tisha standing over him, the butt of her sound rifle glistening with Redbat’s blood.

“I had to,” she said.

He could feel his own blood seeping from his sides. He nodded, took her hand, and led her toward the pillar that shimmered powerfully before them. As they grew nearer to the brown column, a fragile sort of peace descended on them...

FIRST:

Strong looked out from the alleyway to where Babe lay with the dog, to where the others laughed, where the sun beat unmercifully upon a scene that he wanted to strike completely from his mind, burn out with a hot poker and leave only cool scar behind. But there was no way to deny the memory now. He had seen how they had degraded Babe for their own fun, and the picture would haunt him forever.

Without thinking what he was doing, without bothering to plan, to gauge distances, to outline a course of action, he charged from the alleyway into the plaza, toward the Musician boys that had done this thing. He reached the edge of their circle before they saw him, ripped into them with his massive hands, punching, pounding, slamming them down and kicking them hard, over and over in the neck and in the ribs.

For a long time, he moved like an automaton, a mindless construction programmed only to destroy. He tore at them, made them bleed and cry and slobber on the pavement. He was aware that some of them had escaped, would be bringing back help, but he did not let that deter him. When he had finished with the half dozen he had beaten, when none of them breathed or moved or had hearts that fluttered, he went to Babe and took the mesh cap off him, tossed it aside.

He took Babe in his arms as if the mutant truly was yet an infant, ran with him back through the covered alleyway, back across the adjoining square into the

second alleyway, on farther until they were moving through the neon stones, beyond the dilapidated truck and into the ruins they called home.

Later, when it became clear that whatever the sound cap had done to Babe's brain was permanent and not temporary, Strong tried to go back into the city. Shell, his father, restrained him, and eventually his fervor cooled enough so that he could be trusted to remain in the ruins. But he remembered how the Musicians had bled. How their bones had broken. How they had died... And he began to feel that there was something special about him. Perhaps he had been chosen to strike back at the oppressors.

As the days went by and he saw more and more of the mindless Babe (drooling, mumbling, staring vacantly) the feeling was fortified. The Dream began to flesh out. He knew he had only to wait until the proper time, and he would be given a chance to wash the streets of Vivaldi with Musician blood.

Chapter 12

Guil was thinking of the song that had been played at dinner that night before Coming of Age Day...

See Father, the Erlkings near...

The Erlking with crown and wand ...

They reached the pillar just as several of Redbat's chiefs found his battered corpse and garnered the story of the fight and of Tisha's treachery from the few nonbat Populars who had seen it. They looked after Guil and Tisha, chattered excitedly among themselves as the two tried to gain a few more precious feet.

"They'll follow us," Tisha said. "They'll stop us."

"Give me your rifle."

She watched as he braced the gun in a statue of Chopin standing in the plaza. He tilted it so that the barrel aimed at the pillar. "What are you doing?"

"It will engage the configuration of the pillar," he said, turning it on. "A few minutes after we're through, it'll negate the whole thing." He took her hand and started forward with her.

Behind, there was a flapping of wings...

A manbat ahead of the rest of the pack crashed against Guil's shoulders. The boy whirled, threw it from him into the pillar. Shrieking, it disappeared, its screams so quickly choked off that one would have thought a knife had been drawn across its throat.

Carefully avoiding the thin, humming beam from the sound rifle that was working on the patterns of the pillar, they stepped into the pulsating column and were swallowed by the smooth convolutions of its buzzing, whining, throbbing, countless melodies... *in seinen armen das Kind war todt...*

Before them, the sky was black from horizon to horizon, stung with faint brown stars. To the right were the chocolate mountains. To the left, an ocher plain...

Silence seemed to radiate from the land.

They walked forward, but as they walked, they seemed to flow with the land. The black grass grew through their feet and tangled in them, withered when it could not hold them. Ahead stood the manbat Guil had thrown through the pillar.

“There’s something wrong,” Tisha said. “Do you feel it?”

“Yes,” he said. “If this is Death, where is everyone? There should be others. Many others. We’re not the first to die.”

“Guil!” she said.

“What is it?”

“The stars! Look at them! They form Rosie’s face.”

And he saw that it was so. But when they tried to speak to the hallucination, it did not seem to know they existed. They could not reach out to Rosie.

Next, Guil saw that the moon was Redbat with his wings folded into a circle. He had no fangs now, and neither were his hands marked with claws.

They called out to him, but he did not respond—as if he did not know they were present.

They came to an obsidian tree, onyx leaves glistening with the strange moon’s light. When Guil reached to touch it, his hand moved through it and felt nothing.

“I’m afraid,” Tisha said. “It isn’t working out right. It is as if this isn’t real, like a dream.”

“Hallucinations,” Guil said, referring to Rosie’s face in the stars and the form of Redbat in the moon.

Then, before any more could be said, the sound rifle Guil had left propped in the statue of Chopin finally succeeded in negating the molecular patterns of the column. The walls of this world seemed to close in upon them. Their bodies erupted into millions of fireflies, into a bright shower of white dust that glowed and glimmered. Each of them felt energy leaving his body—and a strange new vibrant force seeping in.

The bright dust particles settled, congealed, and became their bodies again.

“What happened?” Tisha asked.

“Simple,” a voice said beside them.

They turned and found Rosie, grinning.

When they looked to the stars, his face was no longer there. And Redbat was no longer the moon.

“You were in the land of Death,” Rosie explained. “But you were not dead. You had not died to get here. That makes you an anachronism. You could not really be a part of Death until you had shucked your life energies adapted to the world outside the pillar. When the pillar collapsed, you were killed. Thus the hallucinations dissolved, and you found the reality. Death is the next plane of existence, and now you are adjusted to it.”

Guil took her arm in his.

He saw other people now, each engaged in other tasks.

“The nearest city is this way,” Rosie said.

They followed him toward the rise as the night moved rapidly toward day in this new world. The stars came down, marking the sky with umbrageous streaks that punctuated the constant rhythm of the booming surf that edged some vast, uncharted sea beyond...

[**Note:** The many errors in the text have not been corrected.]

