

# **THE GAMEMASTER \***

*A Mystery Novel in a Science-Fiction Future*

**Earl Doherty**

**\* A Gamemaster is one who takes part in a game to direct or assist in certain mechanics of the play, but not as a competing player.**

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Cosmópolis: a thousand years after the advent of space travel, this fabulous resort ship plies its glittering path between the stars. On all the worlds of humanity, rich and poor alike dream of visiting it some day. Its Captain, Philip Cardis, is a living legend. It is he who designed and built the exotic pleasure palace. It is he, in an age when the art of gaming has become a cult, who adapted the lowly Intersect to a cosmic scale, enlisting five hundred worlds to take part in his Stellar Intersect Game.

But Philip Cardis is also a mystery, a virtual recluse, a man with an unknown past who now wields tremendous influence. And that is what worries the ancient Chairman of the Concourse Council, and why he is sending a new undercover investigator to Cosmopolis. Where others have failed, perhaps Miles Destan, Historian, himself a reclusive academic who seems to share more than one affinity with the enigmatic Captain, can penetrate the man and his secrets.

In the course of his investigation, Miles Destan meets—and uses—an array of fascinating figures on the ship. Among them are Pallas Dhin-Asper, the beautiful headstrong royal daughter from the planet Umber where the women govern society and raise a famous hunting stallion; Glenn Berenson, a nomad gambler at cards who pursues his own interest in the willful horsewoman; Nathan Salmi, the autocratic ruler of a powerful planet and Pallas' mortal enemy; and Destan's former lover Jan Winston who, now a member of the ship's staff, aids him in his attempt to unravel the mystery of Cardis and Cosmopolis. After a search that takes him across diverse worlds Miles Destan returns to Cosmopolis for the climax of his obsessive quest and a momentous confrontation with the Captain.

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Part Two - <http://jesuspuzzle.humanists.net/gamemaster2.pdf>

Part Three - <http://jesuspuzzle.humanists.net/gamemaster3.pdf>

Part Four - <http://jesuspuzzle.humanists.net/gamemaster4.pdf>

Part Five - <http://jesuspuzzle.humanists.net/gamemaster5.pdf>

Somewhere between Vega and Barnard's Star, a silent sound depressor kicked into operation.

Imbedded behind one of the overhead lumination strips, the depressor's generator deadened the intensity of all vibration in the room by almost ninety percent. Conversation carried on at normal speaking level would penetrate no further than a few paces.

In the center of the room stood two men. One of them leaned against the only sizeable piece of furniture: a desk fashioned from rare marbled styrix wood, devoid of ornament and showing signs of much use. Across its dulled and scuffed surface lay a mix of papers in haphazard piles. In an arc behind the chair, all within easy reach, stood a communicator, a holograph viewer, and an unassuming computer terminal.

The same man's hand rested on a control panel set into the desk top. By moving the lumination dial to a precise position and then tugging it, he had activated the depressor. Now, almost idly, his fingers moved to an adjacent key and a screen filling half the opposite wall lit up in a holographic map of five hundred stars.

The man leaning against the desk spoke quietly.

"It's been eight weeks since we uncovered the last Council agent. I can't believe Allen Jaynes has given up. His intelligence network isn't as skilled as he likes to imagine, but he's a persistent old man when he thinks he's on to something."

"We haven't slackened security." The other wore a somewhat different uniform from the first and stood noticeably taller.

"I know. I'm nervous because we're getting so close. There's not much more can be done off-ship, but I want you to put extra security people on the shuttle boat starting tomorrow. It may be possible to spot an agent before he gets aboard. From here on, I intend to go over every passenger list and indicate anyone who might warrant special scrutiny. In fact, we might even have use for somebody in Security who could draw on, shall we say, certain seductive talents."

"Which sex?"

"Hmm...I suppose it could be either, couldn't it?"

The hand made a further adjustment on the control panel and the entire image on the screen went into rotation along the perpendicular axis to the galactic plane, as though an observer were traveling in a great horizontal arc around the depicted sphere of stars. Both men watched for a few moments.

The taller man asked, "What could Jaynes do?"

"Do? It depends on what he found out—or thought he did. He's feisty, that one. Give him half a pretext and he'll send in his precious fleet and damn the consequences. I am not about to underestimate him. I can't afford to at this late hour."

The other tried to be reassuring. "Our security is good. We've neutralized three so far—and rather easily, too."

"But who have we missed? Eight weeks seems too long. And there's less than that much time left to go. I'd give anything to be able to look in on Allen Jaynes right this minute." His glance went to the ceiling, perhaps to the hidden sound depressor, perhaps to the reaches of deep space which began thirty meters beyond that point. "It's unnerving to be caught in the middle like this!"

The map's rotation came to a halt and started up again at right angles, as the theoretical observer swung himself over the top of the vast volume of space. Without taking his eyes from the slow carnival wheel of stars, the first man asked, "Are you having any second thoughts? Any qualms?"

The other answered without pause. "No. I find that revenge is a potent motivation."

The first man stood upright and placed a silent hand on his companion's shoulder. Then he walked over to the screen.

"But first there is something else that must be completed." He was talking to himself, for he had stepped beyond the limits of the other's hearing. His eye picked out one of the points of light that swung slowly up and down in a tight elliptical path not too far from the map's center. One hand went out as if to reach in and touch it.

"Right here."

Miles Destan had looked at the stars from the surface of many planets, but he never tired of the exhilaration he experienced upon realizing that he could cross those great gulfs and stand where light itself, departing on the same journey, would not reach for many years or lifetimes. Perhaps because he lived more intimately than most with the beliefs and limitations of the ancients did he feel this awe at modern space travel.

The terrace he walked gleamed pale in the light that issued from the enormous stone and glass façade at his back. Evening was far advanced, showing no remnant of the white sun he had glimpsed, lowering in a distant liquid blaze, a few hours earlier. Now, when his eye was drawn out over the dark featureless plain before him, to the far-off featureless horizon, the icy stars against the jet abyss looked frozen in the midst of a mad plunge over the rim of the planet, and he wondered what powers were responsible for the fact that he was alive and that he lived in these times.

Because of his work, part of his mind dwelled in the past. Whenever he pondered a night sky like this, his thoughts went back to the early days of space travel more than a thousand years before, when men and women had first aimed their primitive craft at the stars. Crossing expanses vast and empty of life, they had established the first humble colonies, isolated, generations from home. By the time a robot return boat brought back to Earth news of success, the expedition's sponsors had usually passed on, and their lifestyles with them.

Miles Destan knew he was paraphrasing an ancient maxim whenever he asked himself: if John Addison had not existed, would humanity have had to invent him? For John Addison had developed the power crystal that revolutionized space travel. Light could now be outraced by even the smallest craft with an Addison crystal mounted in its drive tube. Where colonists had once taken fifteen years to reach Procyon and found New Bristol, a week's vacation could see one there and back, with five days in between to explore the fabled Atherton caves and underground lakes.

He assumed school children still repeated the story of the Roger Bacon. During his own youth a few decades ago, though the event was more than seven hundred years past, the tale had continued to be a source of fascination. Once the Addison crystal was developed, the nations of Earth had established Project Interception. Several expeditions already on their slow crawl across interstellar space were overtaken and their surprised members transferred to faster-than-light vessels. Only the unfortunate Roger Bacon could not be located. When the wayward ship finally reached its destination it found a thriving colony half a century old.

It was hard not to think that John Addison single-handedly had changed the course of human history. Not only had he put the stars within easy reach, Addison, with the immense wealth gained from the power crystal, had set up the greatest of Earth's giant corporations: New World Enterprises. New World mounted exploratory surveys, prospected mineral-rich planets, developed climatization techniques. It invented the homing beacon as an aid to hyper-space travel. It expanded into the communications field, for the crystal could be adapted to make communication across interstellar space a matter of minutes. Two systems were developed: the open broadcast that found its way to any receiver within range, and the closed carrier beam, by which private communication could be dispatched to a selected destination. Both were still in use in Miles Destan's time.

But of all the activities to New World's credit, the most far-reaching was the Universal Emigration Scheme, for it destroyed forever the political nature of stellar expansion. New World supplied exploration, organization, ship and materials to any group willing to pay—now or later. Thus began a steady exodus of the disaffected, the power-hungry, the fanatics; of escapists, adventurers and idealists; minority groups of racial and religious interest; others bent on setting up their own commercial enterprises on a new planet: any who could raise the money for New World's services or who undertook a contract to pay for them in the years following settlement—no less than a planetary mortgage. New World always saw to being paid, even if it took several decades, and only once was it forced to repossess.

By the time the huge conglomerate broke up and the pioneering spirit had gone into decline, four centuries after Addison's death, humanity sprawled across one hundred light-years of the galaxy, inhabiting over seven hundred worlds. Some were important in the interstellar civilization that developed, others began and remained as backwater planets. All were considered part of the community of Man, and were collectively referred to as The Concourse.

Miles Destan had to confess a great admiration for the legendary John Addison. He could think of few other figures who had so affected the lives of their contemporaries and of every generation that followed.

The man who walked the terrace with him had been content for some minutes to leave his guest to his thoughts. Now he spoke. His voice bore the cracks of age, as did the skin of his face, but beneath ran a foundation that was still vigorous, and the eyes glinted with an intensity that had not paled over three-quarters of a century.

"I respect a man who is moved by the stars, Mr. Destan. It ensures that he does not exaggerate his own scale....Or perhaps your thoughts were elsewhere?"

"As a matter of fact, I was thinking of John Addison."

"Ah yes. Would either of us be here without him? Yet we shouldn't overlook all the smaller people who have made their own contributions. Surely one man alone does not determine the whole of subsequent history."

Destan glanced at his host, rough and grey like the façade of the building he was so much a part of. "That is a question I often ask myself." Somehow he sensed that the old man knew this.

They continued on. The terrace covered a quarter of an acre, its pock-marked slabs interrupted by patches of low needle bush and truncated aspexia trees. This was no recreation spot. The terrace had a severity which matched both the scrubby empty plain surrounding it on three sides and the great square edifice that dominated its northern edge. Perhaps everything looked softer by sunlight, but Destan had made planetfall only in the late afternoon and having lodged himself in the capital had traveled the short hop out to the Council complex by mid evening, as requested. Now he walked the terrace behind the Assembly building, enjoying the cool breeze off the plain and the studded vault overhead, and still he wondered why he was here.

His host made a comprehensive gesture. "I'd like your opinion, Mr. Destan: did Marcus Sand make the right decision when he chose Sigma for the seat of the Council, rather than a more metropolitan world? How does this planet strike you?"

Destan examined the idea for a moment. "I might have said that Sigma lacks personality, but that's not really true. Never have I seen a world so flat, yet the quality gives it a certain grandeur. It's just that the planet doesn't impose itself on you too obviously."

The old man smiled like a tutor pleased with a pupil's response. "And no doubt—were you to think about it, Mr. Destan—your perception of the planet would extend to the Council itself, would it not? A body of altruistic delegates not seeking to impose

their will upon the Concourse, but whose grandeur of vision must inevitably become obvious to all." A gentle tone of self-mockery flowed out through the cracks. "Or so we hope."

Destan was well aware of the irony. Over the Chairman's words, he had thought to detect the distant laughter of the Hierarchs. "Such processes take time," he said.

"Yes, of course, you would know of such things. Forty-seven years is a brief space, I suppose. Yet Marcus Sand would have anticipated much more by now. The Council still treads a fine line, Mr. Destan: between grudging lip-service from those we supposedly represent, and total indifference. Did you know that the Federationist party is actually suppressed on some worlds?"

"So I understand."

"I am convinced that one day Marcus Sand will be looked upon as the most important figure of our time. If nothing else, he did a great service to the Concourse when he used the Council fleet to weed out the bulk of the pirates. Never mind that it was also a convenient pretext for its formation. But of course he did much more than that. Even in my own term much has been accomplished, though largely behind the scenes." He gave a snort. "What those stubborn fools don't know won't hurt them—yet."

The old man's glance flicked toward his guest. "But perhaps all these issues seem like petty infighting to someone not directly involved in Concourse politics."

Destan got the distinct impression he was being fed bits of views and information and then prodded for a reaction. As he had done countless times over the last two days, he asked himself the question: what did the Chairman of the Concourse Council, whom he had never met before this night, want with him: a reclusive academic who had arrived at middle age, and whose interest in the affairs of the present had all but ceased two decades ago? He knew the Chairman to be an academic as well, though not of the same Guild, but Destan hardly believed he had been summoned to a clandestine interview simply to reminisce about the past.

Allen Jaynes looked too sane for that.

"I'm sure these issues are very important, Mr. Chairman. The advantages to some form of Concourse union are obvious." Did he really believe that, or was he just telling the old man what he wanted to hear? He added, "I'm no great admirer of the Hierarchs, or their excesses."

"Bah! It's not just the autocrats. From dictator to democrat, they're all the same. You'd think that sacrificing any of their precious autonomy were tantamount to selling themselves into slavery! Why do you think they see to it that the Council fleet is kept to a minimum? The patrols are there to protect the interests of

all, but they can see it only as potential interference!" The Chairman brought his agitation under control. "Some day we'll all suffer for their pig-headedness."

They had taken only a few more steps when Allen Jaynes whirled on his guest. "But another factor has been introduced into the equation, Mr. Destan. I don't know whether it's a purely random one or not, or of how much consequence it may be." He seemed to have reached some decision. "But I want you to help me find out, if you can."

Destan's face could only register a blank.

"Yes, I know. You have no idea what I'm talking about, or why I asked you to come here. That's as I wanted it. I did some digging to get you, Miles Destan. Let's see if my efforts have not been wasted."

He turned toward the great glass doors that led into the building and signaled. The assistant who had received Destan upon arrival emerged, and Jaynes strode to meet him. His guest followed in his wake.

"Are the clips ready, Seth?"

"Yes, sir. They're in the order you specified."

"Good. As soon as we're seated, run the first clip. I'll signal you between each one."

The assistant disappeared inside. Jaynes took Destan's arm.

"Come, Mr. Destan. I may be dragging you out of your natural element, but I think you may find something in common between the two. In fact, I'm counting on it." As they neared the entrance to the lobby, the light from within gleamed on the unobtrusive circular badge which Miles Destan wore on his lapel. It was the emblem of the Historians Guild.

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The two men entered a dark and empty auditorium. Like some ancient Greek theater, its tiers descended in a steep semi-circular sweep. Of the thousand seats only seven hundred and twenty had been assigned a permanent occupant: delegates to the Council from all but a handful of the inhabited worlds of the Concourse. On the front of the central podium, barely readable in the gloom, was an inscription honoring the Council's founder and first Chairman, Marcus Sand. It bore the date 1015. Alongside—a formal touch—the date by Old Earth Reckoning: 2984.

Over the Chairman's podium hung a great convex disc glowing expectantly, a helioscreen waiting to take on life. "What I want to show you will provide a little background," said Jaynes, and his step was almost sprightly as he mounted one of the aisles to a level several rows up. Destan followed at a more reserved pace.

"Have you ever played Intersect, Mr. Destan?"

"No, sir."

"Nor had I, until recently. Academics rarely indulge in games of any sort, I find. There we seem to differ from the rest of the human race. But you're familiar with it, of course?"

"One would have to be a hermit otherwise."

"Quite true, quite true." There was a current of elation running through the old man's voice, as though a rein had been loosed. They sat down.

Immediately the glowing lens flared to full brightness, etching the two men's features and casting sharp-edged shadows behind every seat and lectern. Over the image of an arena filled with several thousand spectators floated the soft modulated tones of a commentator. The camera made a grand sweep of the tiers, then focused on a large transparent chamber located on the central floor.

Jaynes spoke quietly. "This is a copy of a telecast from Brechen about two months ago. One of the Intersect Finals."

The commentator was saying: "...two players are about to take their positions within the soundproof chamber. Entering now from your left is Carl Sandor, Grand Master of Brechen: a slight, intense young man who enlisted in the trials for the Southern League only two years ago; already he is noted around the circuit for his painstaking, defensive play. And to the right of your screen, Mily Bratisov, Grand Master of Russkaya: flamboyant, aggressive, a player notorious for his seemingly reckless moves. Twice he has reached Finalist for the 18<sup>th</sup> Division..."

The camera passed through the chamber wall to take in the two figures and the objects within. At the very center, seemingly suspended in mid air, stood a cube, almost three meters to a side and entirely transparent, its shape defined by its surface features and subtle reflections of the surrounding light. As the camera zoomed in for a close-up, the commentator's voice flowed over it like a lubricant.

"There you see the Intersect cube, a gift to the Division by President Willis, himself a great devotee of the game and a Master in his own right. No doubt he is watching the proceedings here today. As you can see, the cube is suspended in a small anti-gravity field, the newest innovation in tournament play. All support and rotational struts have been eliminated; movement of the cube is effected entirely from each console..."

The view was close enough to show the twenty-five terminus points on each face, distributed in five rows of five.

"Are you familiar with the rules?" Jaynes asked.

"Only vaguely. Most of my impressions come from the Stellar Game."

Now the camera drew back to show the players approaching narrow consoles which curved up from the floor, ending at waist level. These were placed on opposite sides of the cube, about four meters distant; they could then be raised to a height which brought the players' eyes to a level slightly higher than the top of the cube. The commentator went on. "The victor in this five game match will advance to the Stellar Intersect game on Cosmópolis in six weeks' time. His opponent will be Adria Flack of Providence in the 9<sup>th</sup> Division. She won her match against the unpopular Bruno Gatwick on Circe last week, much to everyone's delight..."

Jaynes interjected, "What has always surprised me is that a pretty cerebral game like Intersect would develop such a huge following. I understand over ten billion people were watching this telecast. Of course, it's grown to fanatic proportions since Captain Cardis and Cosmopolis arrived on the scene."

"...The players are ready at their consoles...the Coordinator gives the signal for the game to begin, with the opening move—red—going to Mily Bratisov. And there, as you can see on your upper right split, Bratisov with his customary precipitate style has just activated his first terminus..." One of the shadowy terminus points in the middle row of five on the top side of the cube, viewed from above on the split screen, lit up in a vibrant red glow. After a few seconds, under the guidance of his opponent, the cube began to turn, swinging one of the side faces into the top position.

Jaynes made a signal in the air and the clip cut off, throwing the hall into gloom once more. "It's not my intention to teach you how to play the game at this point," he said casually. "There may be occasion for that later."

Destan blinked. And just why would the Chairman of the Concourse Council want him to learn Intersect?

Now the lens brightened again to show a still photo, a view across a great luxurious chamber filled with people who sported a riot of styles in exotic and ostentatious apparel.

"This picture was taken by one of the guests. Surreptitiously, since Cardis allows no cameras within his personal area of the ship. The photo is fourteen years old. What you are seeing is the first reception given by Captain Cardis after Cosmopolis was launched."

Destan's gaze roamed the crowd of revelers, frozen as in a diorama in some historical wax museum. Light dazzled from jeweled strands and ornaments, from the sequined hair that had been one of the fashions of the time. The sparkle of the jewelry was rivaled by a gaudy spectrum of skin toning and hair tinting. Somehow, whoever had taken the picture had managed to position the camera above the crowd, perhaps concealed in an extravagant headpiece like those that protruded at several points throughout the room.

Jaynes remarked, "That first passenger list was top heavy with aristocracy. And as you can see, the reception itself was a star-studded one. I could point out a dozen famous names of the time, including a couple of Hierarchs still in power today. The man in the purple tabard—a little to the left of center—is Silvestri of Cordella. He hasn't mellowed with age, that one. And the dark woman with the braided ziggurat, standing near the aquapanel on the left wall, she's one of the ruling family of the Celanese cluster. From what we can make out, there's a liberal sprinkling of mistrani of both sexes, though they must have been brought by the guests themselves; the management apparently doesn't provide them outside certain concession areas of the ship."

"I thought Cosmopolis had a reputation for catering to all classes?"

"It does now. Evidently Cardis decided it's in his interest to appeal to everyone, which is why, I'm told, he offers a graduated accommodation fare. They say even the working man can afford to visit Cosmopolis—if he saves long enough. But you can be sure few of them ever get invited to a Captain's reception."

The obvious question entered Destan's mind and he peered more closely at the image in the lens. "Is Cardis in this picture?"

"We're pretty sure he's one of the figures on the far side of the room. But even if I could point him out, you wouldn't see much. Most of his face is obscured and he seems conservatively made up. But that leads me to a question. What do you know about Philip Cardis?"

"Know? I only know what everyone else knows, I suppose. He's the builder and Captain of the resort ship Cosmopolis. And he adapted Intersect to the Stellar Game—a rather fantastic creation, one must admit." He thought for a moment. "I guess anything else I could say about him would really be about Cosmopolis, although I've never been there. What more is there to know?"

"A good question, Mr. Destan. But perhaps I should have asked you what you *think* about Philip Cardis?"

The Historian could detect an increased alertness in the old man's demeanor. He answered slowly, as if treading a minefield of unknown consequences. "Given my line of work, one might think that Cardis would not be a man to concern me greatly; nor have I followed his career that closely. But I daresay there are some, even in my own Guild, who would find him...intriguing."

Jaynes smiled. "Intriguing. Yes. That a man such as yourself would think so is significant. As you are no doubt aware, to most people of today Philip Cardis has become a veritable living legend. Not only did he give them Cosmopolis, though precious few of them will ever get to see it, he gave them the Stellar Intersect game. If

you were to ask the average man or woman on any world to name the most prominent figure in the Concourse, you can be quite sure that the vast majority would tell you the name of Philip Cardis of Cosmopolis." The Chairman leaned forward to glare at the screen. "And yet—what do they really know about him?"

Before Destan could formulate a question, Jaynes made another signal and the image in the lens changed. Now they watched a short news clip: a nine year old broadcast by the Orion network of a ceremony held on Amarant to celebrate the launching of the very first terminus satellite for the Stellar Intersect game. Taking part in the proceedings was a uniformed man by the name of Kyle, whom Jaynes identified as Cosmopolis' first officer.

"I wonder why Cardis himself didn't attend?" Destan ventured.

The old man pounced on the question. "Why not indeed? Especially so, when ceremonial presentations such as this were designed to encourage additional worlds to take part in the game. Are you aware that there is not a single recorded occasion on which Philip Cardis departed Cosmopolis after the launching of the ship? Are you aware that in all the publicity material issued by the Cosmopolis agencies, in all the reams of features done on the ship in the last fourteen years, not a single picture of Philip Cardis appears? In fact, he never gives interviews, never reveals anything personal about himself—"

"But surely many people have seen him on Cosmopolis."

"Thousands. I myself have talked to several who have spoken to him. He's an ordinary man. Not ten feet tall. Not disfigured. Apparently a man of simple tastes and moderate appetites."

"Perhaps he has a thing about privacy."

Jaynes gave a loud snort. "Such a man would not have built Cosmopolis."

Destan said slowly, "It strikes me that since we actually know so little about him, the people of the Concourse are enthralled over a myth and not a real person."

Jaynes' eyes, stark in the light of the lens, bored into his own. "Yes, Mr. Destan. And I am beginning to think we have overlooked that real person for too long."

He stood up, and his bellow took Destan aback. "Seth! That's enough. Lights please!"

"I first began to feel uneasy about Philip Cardis five years ago, some time after he started the Stellar Intersect game. My job involves more than chairing the Council assemblies, and early in my term I formed a small, unofficial group of reliable delegates to do some probing behind the scenes on the more troublesome worlds. By now our intelligence network is pretty extensive, and we're not above trying undercover tactics to influence Concourse politics."

Destan now sat front row center, while Jaynes paced the rim of the podium, gesticulating as he spoke.

"When Cardis and Cosmopolis first appeared on the scene we accepted them both at face value. Even the Stellar Game we accepted, probably because it was so fantastic, so flamboyantly in keeping with the Cosmopolis image. But then I found myself taking another look at things: the fame and mystique Cardis was drawing to himself and his ship; his research activities. You know about those exhaustive surveys he's been making for years, don't you, for the Cosmopolis Library? It seems there isn't an aspect of society or politics or history that doesn't interest him."

"The Cosmopolis Library is said to be a remarkable source of information. Though most academics turn up their noses at it."

"I've no doubt. At any rate, Cardis has scrupulously avoided getting involved with any power bloc or political movement. Yet he seems to have made it a point to cultivate friendships here, contacts there. And, of course, through the Stellar Game he now has a direct connection with all the major worlds—supposedly non-political, but still one of tremendous influence.

"Several months ago I persuaded the group we should launch a discreet investigation. None of us knew anything about Cardis' background, which world he came from, his early career. But we found that no one else seemed to know either; and what's more, couldn't find out. We met a blank wall. We looked into the Stellar Game and found that it seems to have been entirely Cardis' idea; Cosmopolis actually constructs all the terminus satellites for the game. We talked to a couple of Physicists and were surprised to learn that no one really knows much about how the satellites work, partly because few academics get involved in popular pastimes, but also because Cardis hasn't made any of the scientific information available; and academics being the way they are, they weren't about to approach him."

The Chairman transferred his pacing to a worn patch of flooring between podium and tiers. "Then recently we began to receive unsettling reports. Cardis has been making discreet contacts with several of the more troublesome Hierarchs. Nothing definite, and certainly nothing obviously subversive. But he seems to be reviving old friendships or establishing new ones. Occasionally he's extended an invitation to visit the ship, and there have recently been several of those, slated for the near future.

"We sent three agents to Cosmopolis at different times. But we didn't know what to look for; we were fishing. The agents were unable to intercept any communications, uncover any plans. Cardis is virtually unapproachable unless he extends his own invitation and there was no way of setting that up. They tried to make contact

with certain crew members. One tried poking around in some prohibited area and ended up in the brig. Do you know the only secret we came up with? Cardis has his laundry done every third day. It's in a staff service manual our last agent purloined." Jaynes had stopped and was glaring up at the empty tiers as if daring the auditorium to laugh.

Destan laughed. "Maybe there's nothing else to uncover."

"Mr. Destan, I would truly like to believe that. But I have to follow my instincts. I can feel something. Something is going on in Cardis' mind." Jaynes seemed to add a subtle emphasis to his next words. "Those instincts tell me that Cardis' whole career involves some kind of intention to influence the course of current events."

The Chairman stood before his guest and now his voice became disarmingly casual. "So—we've decided to try a different approach, Mr. Destan. Cardis is the key. Somehow we've got to get at the man himself."

Destan's smile died, as the realization long forming in his subconscious emerged into the light.

"I want to send *you* this time, Mr. Destan."

The Historian stared.

"Come, don't say anything yet. I always feel a man can think best on his feet—particularly when they're moving."

Jaynes led him out of the auditorium and the two strode down the wide hallway surrounding the heart of the building. The corridors were silent and empty; the delegates' offices that lined the rim were closed for a seasonal recess. Along the walls the echo of their footsteps whispered like some faintly ominous stroke of fate, or so it seemed to Destan.

The old man spoke quietly. "We know that Cardis is something of a recluse, but he has an academic bent, and I suspect his researches for the Cosmopolis Library reflect a personal interest. I've given careful thought to the kind of man who might stand a chance of getting close to him. You may think choosing an academic was natural but most Guild members have some kind of antagonism toward Cardis; he infringes on their territory without being one of them. But you're different, Mr. Destan. You work on your own, you have few prejudices. I feel sure that were you and Cardis to meet, both of you would sense a mutual affinity. Also, you don't look or act like an intelligence agent—even though you've proven your investigative capacity. Your history of the disenfranchised classes on Xi Delta 3 showed that much. That took digging; and in the face of official opposition."

You seem to have researched me pretty thoroughly, Destan thought.

"I'm not going to make any patriotic appeals, Mr. Destan. I'm

merely offering you a job I think you'd enjoy. Naturally, you'll get a few days' briefing and some basic training, though not enough to compromise your ingenuousness." They had reached the spacious rotunda at the front of the building. Security guards stood at the entrance. Through the wall of glass Destan could see the other two structures making up the Council complex, as well as the distant lights of the sole city on Sigma.

The Chairman said, "You don't have to make up your mind immediately, Mr. Destan. I'll give you ten minutes."

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The next day, while waiting for his first briefing, Miles Destan found himself momentarily alone in Allen Jaynes' private office. Amid a scattering of missives and memos on the huge desk, Destan's eye was caught by a set of clipped pages bearing the logo of the great Leipzig Universities Congress held on Vega 3 in 1055—seven years before. Destan himself had attended. Out of what archive had Jaynes dug this up?

Destan picked up the transcript. Somehow he could no longer feel surprise when he read the title sheet: the seminar at which he had lectured...the title of his paper...and his own name. He leafed to the next page and scanned the familiar words while he waited...

It is said the task of the Historian is to discover patterns in the flow of human affairs. We seek to understand how history has been shaped, to identify the factors that periodically have turned its course in new directions. So central to our work is this endeavor that each new generation of the Guild is impelled to develop fresh theories or rework old ones. Of these, the rejected child is surely the so-called Great Man theory, and this is the subject of my paper today.

To put it simply, can one man or woman, possessing a unique personality and acting with an untrammelled free will, produce the momentous events that change the course of history? And this includes those changes for the better as well as those for the worse. Or is the greatness of such individuals only illusory, their actions determined by larger, impersonal forces over which they exercise no control?

We can cite obvious examples. Can it be said John Addison was a unique individual, that only he could have given us the invention that set humanity on its future path? Or were current forces destined to lead to the development of a hyper-drive power source; if not by him, then by someone else? Can we look at the recent figure of Marcus Sand and see the Concourse Council as his own unique creation? Or was it an idea whose time had come?

And who, we may ask in passing, are the so-called "Great Men" of today? Have such individuals always been aware of their own stature? Have they always been recognized for what they are during their own time?..."

The Mirac spaceport was a model of unconcerned confusion. Three scorched depressions on a sprawling stony field masqueraded as landing pads, tenuously linked to inadequate shipping facilities by crumbling tracks of bitumen surfacing. Over these, in cargo trucks as ragged as the roads they traveled, moved incoming shipments of farming equipment, spare parts, fertilizers, clothing, simple furnishings and the rare luxury item. Out over the same tracks went cartons and casks of exotic foodstuffs, notably Miracan genisee, a subtly flavored paste made of crushed genisee leaves: an essential ingredient in the sauces of any self-respecting culinary establishment of the Concourse. The folk on the farms and the workers in the processing plants labored whenever the weather on their sultry planet permitted, took a pride in their product and shrugged at all accusations of inefficiency.

On this afternoon, all three landing pads were occupied. The cargo vessel Aberdeen squatted at the north end of the field. To the southwest stood a gleaming Sidurnia spaceliner making its monthly stop on Mirac. Today it carried a record complement of passengers, both arriving and departing, which two occurrences took place an hour apart. The reason for this unusual traffic sat near the southeast corner of the field, completing a great skewered triangle: the shuttle boat from Cosmopolis.

The spaceport personnel were forced to scurry. Transferring five hundred passengers and their luggage from the shuttle to the liner, and then repeating the process in the other direction, was an unprecedented task. Vehicles of every sort were pressed into service. Under a sun-washed sky of lazy blue, the travelers rode, skimmed and bumped their way across the field; a motley fleet of wagons and ramshackle drays ferried trunks and suitcases. While a few persons registered indignation and demanded their own private conveyance, good spirits were maintained by most, especially among the party making its way from liner to shuttle. Here everyone seemed infected with an anticipatory excitement and camaraderie.

The shuttle bulked half the size of the spaceliner, but squat and saucer-shaped, its surface a burnished shade of copper. It smouldered on the dry field. Past attendants checking registration discs, a stream of passengers mounted the ramp and entered the craft, emerging into a spacious chamber that filled most of the shuttle's diameter. Shallow rows of flight seats lined the entire arc, save for the opposite point where a bulkhead blunted the room's circumference and doors led somewhere beyond. Floor and circling wall bore material in intricate patterns of luxurious blues and purples. Overhead, the pearl-gray concave expanse was broken up in a wheel of fluted motifs, with regularly spaced lumination strips. The party spilled into the central space.

They were met by other attendants in the blue Cosmopolis livery. When everyone was seated the port doors swung shut, the craft hummed to life and rose clean and swift from the somnolent green surface of Mirac.

As the shuttle passed beyond the planet's influence, its own gravity unit engaged. The passengers relaxed. Ahead of them lay a two-hour journey at sub-light speed, past the outer orbit of the Mirac solar system to a rendezvous with the waiting resort ship. Cosmopolis itself never put into any port, preferring to keep to the reaches of deep space as it plied its way among the stars.

In the center of the lounge attendants set up an enormous table which they proceeded to laden with various cakes, confections and refreshments. A hostess extended her invitation to the company, the passengers left their seats, and soon the buzz of voices and clink of serving ware submerged the shuttle boat's hum as it sped outward from Mirac's sun.

One man remained for a time in his seat. He wore a quietly conservative travel suit with tentative splashes of color on cuffs and epaulettes, intended as a bow to the occasion. His head was uncovered, revealing hair slightly gray at the edges. A broad, bent nose presented the most notable feature of his face, for the mouth was noncommittal and the expression in the gray-green eyes one of reticence. It was a face that lacked the mark of a turbulent life or clash of volatile emotions, and though he wore the emblem of an academic Guild his mien suggested no indulgence in either their notorious fellowship or their affectations.

During takeoff he had been musing about the choice of Mirac as the rendezvous planet. Connections there were awkward and accommodation would have been difficult. Yet it was characteristic of Captain Cardis, as though not even the least of the Concourse worlds were beneath his attention. No doubt the populace had experienced an unaccustomed moment of excitement.

Voices from the row ahead broke his train of thought.

"I'm sure it's not a coincidence, Lilli. Mother Fortune must have arranged it so we would arrive on Cosmopolis the very day of our Tenth Renewal celebration."

"I'd rather she'd arranged it so it wasn't so expensive, Gorta."

Judging by their headdresses, the couple's home world was Calydon.

"We'll make it up at the factory, Lilli. Besides, after ten years with no vacation off-world I wanted to give you something special."

"Oh, I'm excited, Gorta, of course....But maybe we should have taken the Counselor's advice and visited the Springs instead."

They spoke in Concourse Common, the universal language of diplomacy and communication which by now had supplanted local tongues on all but the most provincial of worlds. The man behind them noted the clipped accent typical of many working classes.

"That's all right for him to say—he's been to the ship twice himself. But it will be worth it all to see Cosmopolis and meet Captain Cardis."

"Gorta, don't be foolish! I'm sure Captain Cardis doesn't hobnob with every Tom, Dick and Hagith who comes to his ship. He'll hardly have time for people like us..."

With a wry smile at their differing expectations, Miles Destan rose and joined the gathering. For a time he hovered about its edge watching as the guests slowly eddied around the buffet and drifted out into the open spaces, bubbling and chattering. Within his range of vision stood a hundred diverse peoples of the Concourse, offspring of a single planet some fifty generations past. Already those descendants showed signs of diverging evolution from the parent stock, in an ever-widening variety of human physique, pigmentation, mannerism and personality. Only on Cosmopolis, perhaps, could such a mix be seen at a glance: although here, he reflected, they would all be putting on their best faces.

The room was a tumult of color. Most of the passengers seemed to be vying with one another for dramatic or exotic effect. A flowing swatch of red marked the passing of a Shakor nobleman and his companion, florid capes enclosing all but their long sleek skulls. Olive green skin toning was a current fashion on many worlds; here it presented a recurring motif, especially among the mistrani who also made a practice of shaving their heads, creating little chlorophyllous islands in the gaudy sea. Three Elean women, slitted eyes dabbed with silver, shimmered in ice blue body stockings molded to shapely contours. They moved like a three-petaled flower: joined by the proximity they maintained, but constantly looking outward as if to attract some passing bee. The trio had already drawn appraising glances from several of the males in their vicinity, though none as yet had attempted an approach.

One of these was a solitary man of about thirty, fair and casually dressed. He wore his apparent charm and good looks without obvious conceit. There was about him an air of one well traveled, for he displayed little of the wide-eyed animation infecting others around him. Perhaps daunted by the Eleans' close stance and unfamiliar with their triadic sexual customs, he soon turned his attentions in another direction.

Destan's gaze followed him. He watched as the man's interest became aroused by a young woman who stood near the fringe of the crowd. Nor did the Historian wonder why. Though modestly made up, the woman presented a striking figure, tall and straight, with a broad face that bore strong, lucent features. Her cinnamon trousers and close fitting jacket gave evidence of a well-formed, athletic body. Short dark hair swept back from her temples, shaped, it seemed, more by some natural force than by any beautician. The deep tan skin tone, too, looked natural. In her mobile expression lay the suggestion of willfulness, high spirits and an aristocratic bearing, seen now through an apparent preoccupation, as with her two companions, another woman and an older man, she cautiously scanned the other passengers. The young man kept his distance and watched her at intervals.

Destan turned away. None of their faces, nor any other that he had seen so far, matched the two pictures in his mind. Just before his departure from Sigma, Allen Jaynes had shown him photos of two men: one, coarse-featured and intimidating, was the face of a man accustomed to wielding power; the other, the impassable mask of a diplomat. The Chairman had information that both were on their way to Cosmopolis and he wanted to know if they too were part of the pattern of contacts which Cardis had been making in recent months.

Casually, Destan's eyes roved the lounge. The coarse-featured man would have stood out. He was nowhere to be seen. Destan made his way to the central table and surveyed the selection of wines and cordials, then chose a pale Balboan claret and filled a goblet to the one-quarter mark. As he turned he found himself facing the man in the second photo.

"Fine stuff," he blurted, gesturing with the goblet.

The other man nodded. "Cosmopolis doesn't stint. This Medala '42 is a vintage year." His own glass went to his lips while his eyes flicked over the man before him, lighting on the Guild emblem. "You are an academic, I see. Taking a break from your research?"

He seemed open enough. His green and gold suit was quietly impressive, one an interworld corporate might wear to an informal occasion. He extended the palm. "I'm Tibor Holocheck," he said, telling Destan what he already knew.

"Miles Destan. Actually, I'm here to *do* research. I'm attached to the University of Rhodes, but on this trip I'm under contract to the Association of Concourse Universities to prepare an information booklet on the Cosmopolis Library. The Association has finally been forced to admit that there is some merit, perhaps even scholarship, in the Library. Now they want to make their own official evaluation and offer a guide book for circulation among the Guilds."

Holocek admitted he knew little about the academics and their attitudes. He asked, "You haven't been to Cosmopolis before, then?"

"No. And yourself?"

"A few times."

"As a vacationer, I presume—unlike myself." The last words made the thought natural.

Holocek paused and sampled the Medala '42 once more. His eyes had a peculiar heavy-lidded figuration which made him seem at once blandly artless and subtly dissembling. "Not always. I hold a diplomatic post on Carpathia and sometimes my business takes me to unlikely places."

"Ah, an ambassador," said Destan ingenuously. "I didn't realize Cosmopolis maintained diplomatic relations with individual worlds."

"No, no, of course not. Cosmopolis is hardly the equivalent of a sovereign state."

"I suppose not." There came the inevitable pause as both men sipped at their drinks.

"Have you met Captain Cardis yourself?" Destan asked.

"Only once. At a reception a few years ago."

"What's he like? He seems to be a figure who provokes a good deal of fascination."

Holocek responded with a condescending gesture. "Oh, he's an ordinary man, like you or me. I spoke not much more than a few words with him."

Destan concluded that Mr. Tibor Holocek was not going to volunteer the reason behind this particular visit to Cosmopolis. He tried a different tack. "The Captain must be an extraordinary enthusiast to have gone to the trouble and expense of developing the Stellar Intersect game."

"Yes, indeed. He is as proficient as a Master, so I understand. I myself am a player of the fourth rank—though I don't expect the good fortune of being asked to play with him."

"He sometimes plays Intersect with his visitors?"

"Only occasionally." Holocek's eyes had been wandering and now he inclined his head across the table. "That young man is a Grand Master from Amarant as you can see by his insignia." Destan

looked over to see a high-strung adolescent with bright darting eyes and fluttering mannerisms. "There they learn Intersect before they walk. Perhaps he will manage a game with Captain Cardis. Perhaps he may even be able to win it."

Holochek turned and helped himself to another confection. Destan, surveying the lounge, remarked on the diversity of visitors drawn to Cosmopolis and then noticed again the tall girl and her party. He asked idly, gesturing with his glass, "Can you tell that woman's identity from costume or insignia?"

Holochek looked up, paused, and briefly searched Destan's face. Then he volunteered: "As it happens, I have some passing acquaintance with her. Her name is Pallas Dhin-Asper of the ruling house on Umber. She is Gatrín, which means daughter of the Matriarch; but she is only third eldest, so it is unlikely she will succeed her mother."

Destan inspected her with a new interest. "She is an attractive woman, though I must admit she looks a little intimidating—at least to me."

Holochek gave a short chuckle. "Not just to you. Umber is a female dominant society. Are you academics so isolated? There the women raise the Hrabas. Surely you have heard of the Umber stallion, the finest horse in the Concourse? It is their only export and much in demand on many worlds for riding and hunting."

"And yet she seems ill at east about something, wouldn't you say?"

"Undoubtedly the Umber plains are more to her liking than confined spaces like this."

It struck Destan that all this seemed more than just passing acquaintance. "I wonder then why she would come to Cosmopolis?"

Holochek turned him another, hesitant glance. "As to that, I wouldn't know." His tone indicated their conversation had run its course. "I've enjoyed speaking with you, Mr. Destan. Now I think I will return to my seat."

He gave a farewell nod, which Destan returned, and moved off through the crowd.

Destan watched Pallas Dhin-Asper for a time. Jaynes had made no mention of important visitors from Umber, one of the Concourse's lesser developed worlds about which he himself knew little. Was this too another contact with Cardis? He glanced at his timepiece: in one hour they would reach the ship. Destan doubted he would have the opportunity—or the facility—to approach this woman here on the shuttle but he would try to keep an eye on her. Jaynes had warned him he would have to improvise.

\* \* \*

The older man in the company of Pallas Dhin-Asper remarked, "It does seem, Gatrín, that General Salmi is not aboard."

"I am not surprised, Dion. My mother felt sure he would be on Cosmopolis already. But it's just as well. It may work to our advantage if he has spent a few days away from Balkin before our meeting."

"Yes, perhaps it will soften him."

Pallas expelled a breath: an admission of the wishful thinking entailed in such an idea. Abandoning her survey of the room she turned to the Umber Minister for Interworld Affairs. "It's hard to believe he's agreed to talk with us on neutral ground where we might approach him as equals." The tanned brow creased and the voice betrayed a recurring apprehension. "I still ask myself why. And why Salmi would be willing to come himself rather than send an ambassador."

Not for the first time did Dion attempted to be reassuring. "I consider it a hopeful sign, Gatrín. At least some definitive decision may be possible."

Because his was a position of growing importance in Umber's government and involved many off-world contacts, the Minister's outlook was more cosmopolitan, his behavior more forward, than that of most Umber males. Toward the Matrín's youngest daughter he was properly deferential but never ingratiating. In fact, he had considerable regard for Pallas, her openness and general lack of affectation, but he knew that on this mission she felt unsure of herself. As to all that had passed through Matrín Fedría's mind in appointing Pallas to these negotiations Dion was not sure, but when the crunch came he had no doubt Pallas would handle General Salmi in a way that no one else could. For now he would try to keep her calm and reasonably optimistic.

Flexing restlessly, Pallas said, "To be honest, I'm just as pleased not to see the General here. My memories of him when I was a guest at his estate on Balkin are not pleasant—even though I was only fifteen."

The woman who stood beside her, completing the party of three Umbrians, was shorter than Pallas, with dark striking eyes and hair an unusual shade of silver-blue, swept back like that of her companion. She too possessed good looks and an athletic carriage, but where Pallas exuded an aura of natural sensuality this woman seemed hard-edged and competent. She was only two years older than Pallas and on this occasion served as secretary, bodyguard and traveling companion.

Her smile softened her appearance. "You needn't worry on that account, Pallas. Salmi is in for a surprise if he thinks he will be negotiating with the same girl."

"I'm sure the General can count the years as well as I can, Vera."

Feeling a need to move, Pallas turned and threaded her way through the cluster of people to the buffet. A few moments later the young man who had been watching her from a distance sauntered over to the table as well, stopping just beyond arm's length. He too perused the selection of food and drink, now considerably depleted. For some time he had been wondering if it were worth attempting an approach in view of the woman's evident preoccupation and the presence of her companions. But then, even a passing contact now, a simple introduction, might serve a later encounter on Cosmopolis itself where conditions could be different. There was no denying her unusual appeal, and at this proximity the aspects of appearance and bearing which had aroused his interest were even more evident. She was virtually as tall as himself.

"That cake is sweetened with a Klaratel liqueur," he said, gesturing to a plate of puff-balls in front of her. "I'd recommend it. Its flavor is like ergin seed. Do you know it?"

Pallas looked at him in surprise. For an instant an expression of annoyance crossed her face: an ingrained protocol had been breached. Then she remembered where she was and her eyes relaxed.

"No." She kept her tone neutral. It registered on her that the man was attractive and not unworthy of a proposed assignation were she at home, but the thought remained at the back of her mind; her head was too full of immediate concerns. She turned back to the table, but reached for something other than the recommended pastry.

"My name is Glenn Berenson...from Pheiton, originally. An unexciting world. But then Cosmopolis would make any place seem dull. Have you been to the ship before?"

Pallas turned her eyes to him again, her mouth just opening as a powdered tidbit approached her lips, and Glenn's stomach seemed to relocate itself. Before she could speak, Vera came up behind with a quick but penetrating look at the man. "There's a mimist performing at the side of the lounge, Pallas. Let's go see."

Pallas agreed, but first the two women scooped up a pastry in each hand. As they turned to leave, Pallas gave a flicker of a glance toward Glenn, then was off. Glenn watched their retreating figures until they were obscured by the other passengers.

He failed to notice that their exchange had been witnessed with some interest by a middle-aged man whose suit bore a Guild emblem.

After half an hour Destan was convinced that the man in the first photo was not aboard the shuttle, and it occurred to him that

for figures of importance a safer and more private means of connecting with the ship might well be provided. But even for those who chose the public route Destan thought he could detect some protection. Mingling with the passengers were several who had the subtle air of security people; they were unobtrusively alert. Then it struck him that there might be another reason for their presence: the uncovering of at least one of Allen Jaynes' previous agents. Could Cosmopolis security be attempting to detect another such clandestine visitor before he set foot on the ship? Destan tried to reassure himself that Jaynes had sufficiently established his cover with the Universities Association and that the Cosmopolis agency, in its routine investigation, could have come up with nothing about one Miles Destan, Historian, to arouse suspicion. As for the small black case in his luggage, he had been assured it was probe proof.

Still, as a solitary visitor he might draw attention. Looking about for a means of engaging himself, he spied the young Grand Master from Amarant whom Holocek had pointed out.

The boy could not be much older than sixteen, Destan thought. He had a glance that darted this way and that, and hands which were never still. The Historian wondered how he could relax sufficiently to concentrate on anything, let alone Intersect.

He approached. "You seem to be alone on this trip, young man, as am I. Someone informed me you are an Intersect Grand Master and I was taken aback at your apparent age. My name is Miles Destan."

The boy brightened. He had a long narrow nose and high forehead which together with the quick mobile eyes gave him the appearance of a nervous bird.

"Leon—Leon Wessel. Why, I am surprised to hear you say that, as there have been six Grand Masters younger than I. Perhaps I will be the youngest to gain the Finals. I hope I shall win the championship of the 12<sup>th</sup> Division this year and then I will play on Cosmopolis." Destan sensed that the young man lived solely for Intersect.

"And what brings you here this time?"

"To visit the Intersect Gallery and watch the Stellar Game being played."

"I see." Destan recalled Tibor Holocek's comment about the Captain playing the occasional game with a guest. This young man might prove a useful contact. "I still wonder at the rank you have attained. You must have started young."

"I entered my father's Intersect chamber for the first time when I was two years old. Naturally, I did not play my first game until I was three."

"Naturally."

"May I ask what rank are you?"

"Actually," admitted Destan, "though I have a great interest in the game, I have never played it." This seemed to take the boy so aback that he came to a stop for the first time since Destan had laid eyes on him. "But perhaps as I have had the good fortune to meet you we might get together on the ship and you could instruct me."

Wessel indicated his willingness. Destan went on, "I realize I would be unable to give you any real competition, of course. But I understand that Captain Cardis occasionally plays with some of his visitors. Perhaps you will find yourself matching abilities with him."

"That would be a real honor." The boy's eyes sparkled.

"I'm sure he would feel the same."

Destan kept his eye on the security people. He had lost sight of Pallas Dhin-Asper some time ago.

But now a commotion arose from the direction of the bulkhead and half a dozen wide doors running the length of the flattened arc swung open, revealing a chamber beyond. From within came a glitter of stars. The lounge hushed as the smooth voice of the hostess flowed from the address system.

"The shuttle is now approaching Cosmopolis. We invite you into the observation deck for a view of the ship."

The hubbub resumed as the passengers streamed through the doorways and into the forward chamber. Here was the missing segment completing the diameter of the lounge. Destan had never seen such an expanse of observation wall on any ship as from floor to crest and across its full width the outer shell swept up and back in a fully transparent arc. The view was breathtaking.

Although he had to push certain apprehensions back into his subconscious, Destan moved out into the center of the chamber. Other passengers around him were making delighted exclamations as the ebony depths of space, the white hot glitter of stars and nebulae flooded their vision. The opening of the chamber only now, Destan reflected, at the end of the two-hour hop, was a mark of someone's sense of theatricality.

And there before them was the great ship.

The shuttle was forty kilometers out and decelerating, its cant nose down. Cosmopolis could be clearly seen in the pale light of the distant Mirac sun, floating like a huge petaled wheel in space. A million stars behind it formed a jeweled setting.

The ship was made up of four saucer-like pods, all lying flat in the same plane and arranged in a circle. The pods were joined at the ship's center by tubular passages like spokes of a wheel, with an 'axle' extended perpendicularly above and below, containing the propulsion tube. Other passages joined the pods at their peripheries and at two of these locations, on opposite sides of the ship, stood

an enormous transparent globe that projected out into space. As they watched, the vessel grew ever larger.

Destan found Tibor Holocek at his elbow. "Quite a sight. I always find it rather spine-tingling." Destan was silent, thinking only that photographs did not do it justice.

"Each pod is over one kilometer in diameter and almost two hundred meters deep. The one on the right is the Captain's pod, the one closest to us is the Service pod, and the other two are the Alpha and Beta resort pods. That upright shaft in the center is the drive tube, with the propulsion end below. Cosmopolis travels in an 'up' direction relative to its own position."

By now Cosmopolis filled almost the whole sky. The hull's details could be made out. The entire surface glowed dully through a sheen of cold copper. Destan could see they were making for the top of the Service pod where wide bay doors had just slid open.

Holocek pointed. "See the globe to the left and the one on the far side? Those are the famous Floats where there's no gravity. Look—you can make out the people inside. It's quite a sensation, floating free like that with the stars all around you."

"And those bubbles in the middle of the resort pods?" One of these protruded from the convex top of each pod, covering a third of its diameter.

"They cover the Promenades. And that raised disc on the Captain's pod houses the bridge. But don't worry, Mr. Destan, you'll learn all about the ship soon enough."

Suddenly the shuttle corrected its cant and Cosmopolis dipped below. The voice of the hostess requested all passengers to return to the lounge and take their seats.

The laden table had been removed. The staff attended to last minute duties. Presently the shuttle descended into the bay of the Service pod, engaged the arms of the docking platform, and came to rest.

Down an airlock flowed the passengers as the shuttle emptied into a bright, commodious lounge that curved in a long arc flanking the central bay. As he set foot on Cosmopolis, Destan's perceptions were alert and sensitized. Perhaps they would penetrate the black case while unloading his luggage; perhaps here in the debarkation room security people were waiting to confront him. He glanced back to the vast docking bowl, separated from the lounge by a wall of glass. There lay the hulking shuttle discharging its load, belly resting on a platform a full two decks below. High overhead the bay doors were sliding shut, blotting out the stars, while suited figures scurried at the luggage holds, preceding the air that would presently rush in to replace the vacuum of space.

Though he had barely stepped inside the door, the complexity of the place, the enormity of his task, seized at him. He was on his own, swallowed up. He began to sweat.

This would not do. All around him were eager, animated faces that would make him stand out like a mourner at an Addison Week Festival. With great effort, he suppressed his spasms of anxiety.

He saw that receptionists were greeting the debarkees and directing them across the lounge to a double set of open doors. Unchallenged, Destan moved with the crowd into an auditorium beyond, as the company spilled down the steps, filling up rows that dipped to a dais in front. He stationed himself in the rearmost row and watched the party from Umber as it took places below him. Umber: his knowledge of the planet was meager. Somehow the mainstreams of Concourse history had passed it by, and it was one of the few worlds that had never figured in his researches.

His eye fell on the young man who had approached Pallas Dhin-Asper on the shuttle. Judging by the direction of his gaze, his interest in the Gatrin had not been dissuaded. No doubt a fantasy of romantic adventure quite common among visitors to Cosmopolis, thought Destan, and something about the man, an easy charm and self-confidence perhaps, suggested he could handle it.

An idea began to take shape in Destan's mind.

Presently a hostess mounted the dais, a darkly handsome woman in the ubiquitous blue uniform of Cosmopolis. She greeted them in a voice warm and quietly animated.

"On behalf of Captain Cardis, welcome to Cosmopolis. His ship exists for your enjoyment and for the benefit of all Concourse peoples."

Behind her a holograph field sprang to life. Three-dimensional moving images kept pace as she began her orientation by reviewing the layout of the ship. On the main deck of each resort pod and the Service pod two circular corridors traveled completely around the deck: the inner one a third of the way from the center, the outer one four-fifths of the way. Connecting inner and outer circulars were six straight radial corridors that continued on to the edges of the pod. Passengers were lodged on the upper level of Alpha and Beta.

The hostess briefly outlined the functions of the Service pod, but she gave no details of the Captain's pod except to say that here lay the Intersect Gallery where the Stellar Game was played.

In her survey of the ship's attractions and entertainments, Destan found much to marvel at, particularly the Floats and the Alpha and Beta Promenades. Each of the latter, enclosed within the huge central space of the pod from main deck to roof, was an environmental replica of one of the worlds of the Concourse, faithful even to day and night cycles and complete with authentic flora and fauna. The world of the Beta Promenade was changed every six months; in the Alpha Promenade one could visit the planet Earth.

Among her references to the running of the ship the hostess had a word about time. "Cosmopolis runs on Standard Concourse Time. Each 24-hour day is divided into three periods, morning, afternoon and evening, for the convenience of ship operations and your own activities. Please feel free to keep whatever personal schedules you wish, as all facilities function around the clock."

Finally, the hostess reviewed the ship's security operations, then added: "Our ground rules are simple: no weapons or acts of violence are permitted. And no entry is allowed to restricted areas without authorization. Attendance to these two rules will ensure that you do not get to know the detention quarters at first hand.

"As to safety on Cosmopolis, you have no cause for concern. In the event of a major emergency, each pod can be isolated and even disconnected from the rest of the ship. As well, each pod is equipped with lifecraft which can be launched should evacuation prove necessary. Such an emergency has never taken place.

"One final note: Cosmopolis is a moving vessel. We stop at a system every fourth day. At those points when the ship passes through the light barrier you will feel effects similar to those on a spaceliner: a slight vibration for a few seconds and a momentary

nausea. On Cosmopolis these effects are less than usual and there is no need for cautionary measures; often you will fail to notice them entirely."

A wonder of modern technology, Destan reflected.

"I wish you a pleasant visit and ask you to have regard for your fellow passengers who number about seven thousand. Your crew is a little under two thousand more."

The guests, following the hostess' parting instructions, filed out and sifted into either wing of the debarkation lounge. Pallas Dhin-Asper's party went off with those to be lodged in the Beta pod while Destan joined the ones assigned to Alpha, as did the young man who seemed to harbor designs on the Gatrin of Umber. Destan kept him in view. When they were broken up into smaller units according to cabin section, Destan ignored his own disc's docket and joined the young man's group.

They were led in their turn to an elevator and descended to the main deck. Crossing the inner circular corridor the party, which numbered about thirty, entered one of the radials and here their attendant, a young woman, brought them to a halt.

Down the center of the corridor, as in most corridors of the ship, coursed two opposite slideways separated by a two-meter gap and traveling at a speed of one hundred and twenty meters per minute. With practiced grace the attendant showed them how to mount and dismount, and in an erratic chain the party gave it a try. All went well until a comely young lady wearing a bright paneled robe slit up each side to the waist overshot her dismount and collided with a gaudy gentleman who sported the ritual sash of the Brotherhood of Vintners. Sash and robe flew up as the two went down. The resulting melee of colored fabric, two slender legs and a rounded crest of pink underwear resembled a Catamandaran ostrich with its head buried in a djinta bush. Everyone broke up. After assuring herself that neither had suffered injury, the attendant urged the party onto the slideway, pointing out that if they didn't proceed there would be a general collision with the party coming up behind.

The incident loosened tongues and remaining constraints. Destan noted that a good half of the group seemed to be singles; of the couples, many were the same sex. One mixed couple was accompanied by a woman who could not have been other than a mistrana, with unusually full lips and plucked eyebrows, though she maintained her close-cropped orange hair like a coating of velvet plush.

As they were carried down the broad corridor, Destan was struck by the Service pod's stark simplicity: flat, unadorned walls, doorways with square shapes and plain sliding closures. Many stood

open, affording glimpses into sprawling chambers devoted to operations he could not always identify. Occasionally, blue-frosted technicians passed in and out of view.

After a minute or two Destan judged it was time to establish contact with his man before he became otherwise occupied. He moved up beside Glenn Berenson.

"You seem to have no trouble with the slideway. I take it you have been here before?" Since there was no weather to discuss, questions such as this comprised the standard opening gambit of conversation on Cosmopolis.

The other man seemed to emerge from preoccupations that had little to do with his immediate surroundings. "Yes, I usually pay Cosmopolis a visit every year." He gave Destan a relaxed half-smile and something about the way he had phrased his reply, together with certain aspects of his appearance, led Destan to believe he could identify the man's occupation. The easy, sophisticated air, the stylish but unflamboyant dress, the subtle predatory look: marks of a professional gambler. The breed, in an era that had made gaming into a cult, formed a cosmopolitan substratum throughout the Concourse, and Cosmopolis, no doubt, offered them an attractive playing ground.

After introductions Destan moved quickly to his point. "I think I noticed you on the shuttle, Mr. Berenson." He put on a knowing smile. "I was standing across the table when you approached a certain young lady. Do you know who she is?"

Glenn's eyebrows went up. "No. Do you?"

"Not by personal acquaintance. But I too thought she was intriguing—though I'm a little too old to take on a challenge of that magnitude. But I know something about her world. Are you familiar with the planet UMBER?"

"Only the name. I've never been there."

Destan repeated Holochek's brief account of Pallas Dhin-Asper and her home, as though from his own knowledge.

"You mean she's some kind of princess—on a world where the women run the show....That's interesting." Destan could not tell from the other man's expression whether the information had discouraged him or merely altered the stakes.

They reached the outer circular corridor. Here, as at all the ship's intersections, the slideways were interrupted and the party walked across and remounted, continuing down the radial edge of the pod where they entered a broad junction. Destan noted a security post barring unauthorized entry from the other direction. Here, their attendant informed them, guided tours of the Service pod began twice daily.

Beyond and angling to their right stretched two passageways:

one ran straight for over half a kilometer to the Alpha resort pod; the other, branching left, followed an arc which also reached the other pod, but at its center, distantly in sight along the curve, lay the access to the Alpha Float.

The party entered the spacious main shaft, and in its polished surfaces, an almost glittering ice-blue, they sensed a first, tentative spark of the magic of Cosmopolis that had been conspicuously absent in the Service pod. Instead of slideways, a wide service artery ran down the center, flanked on one side by a sleek raised walkway. Along the other, two pairs of silver rails plunged down the wall of the tunnel. At their point of convergence in the distance, the watchers made out a moving object which in the space of a single breath swept half the way toward them along the top set of rails and a few moments later slid to an effortless stop in the dock's upper chamber. The party climbed the stair and clambered into the quietly humming coach.

The car sped along the wall of the shaft. Glenn Berenson had taken a seat next to Destan and now he asked, "By the way, is there a prince?"

Destan had no idea of Pallas Dhin-Asper's marital status but he replied, "From what I understand, no. But I wouldn't refer to her as a princess, Mr. Berenson. She might not like the connotation."

Glenn eyed him curiously. "What makes you think I'll get a chance to call her anything?"

Destan smiled. "Perhaps it's a vicarious wishful thinking. We academics aren't always totally wrapped up in our books." Although he could no longer say this of himself.

Glenn stared through the glass as the tunnel wall raced by in an electric blue blur. "She's intriguing, I'll admit that. Cosmopolis is a big place, though. I might not bump into her again."

The car came to a stop at the other end of the shaft. Through this junction passed considerably more traffic, for it linked the Alpha resort pod with the Alpha Float. A cluster of gaily garbed people milled about, awaiting the return of the single transport car that plied the outer passage. Destan doubted that he would essay the weightless experience; it would awaken unpleasant memories. It was enough that he had come at all.

The party looked with some anticipation toward the radial corridor that began across the junction, but the attendant led them instead to a nearby elevator and they were carried directly up to the cabin deck. By slideway they traveled corridors glowing with the quiet coverings and scents of luxury until they reached their own block of a hundred suites.

After dispensing final instructions the attendant bade the party goodbye and left them to disperse to their cabins. Destan said

farewell to Glenn. "Perhaps I will see you again, Mr. Berenson. I wish you luck in your pursuits."

"And yourself as well." He went off wearing a mildly curious expression.

Destan checked his disc, oriented himself and set off for his own cabin, almost a quarter of the way round the deck. At the door he pressed the metallic tab to the lock sensor.

The suite consisted of sitting room and bedroom plus facilities, a décor elegant but unfussy, colors subdued and fabrics tending to simplicity, something remarkably close to what Destan might have chosen for himself. Doubtless there was a range of cabin size and décor available. Had Jaynes kept him in mind even when arranging the accommodation?

A set of cabin keys lay on a small table and beside this stood Destan's two pieces of luggage. He could see no sign of tampering, though they had almost certainly been through a probe. Unlocking the larger one, he looked at the small black case tucked to one side. It too seemed undisturbed.

He hesitated, closed the lid and carried both suitcases into the bedroom. Might he even now be under surveillance? If so, it would mean he was already under suspicion. Best that he know right away.

A careful search of the rooms turned up nothing. He retrieved and opened the black case. Everything seemed just as it was when Jaynes had turned it over to him: bugging devices, lock decoder, miniature camera, contact amplifier. Jaynes had also included three mini-range explosive pellets, and the technician had given him instructions on their use along with the rest of the equipment. But Destan felt that the scope of his activities could not be envisioned to include such measures. He intended to get access to Philip Cardis by means more subtle than blowing in his door.

Suddenly Destan felt exhausted. He stripped, showered, set the bed's sleep field at theta waveform for a period of three hours and lay down. Unmodified oblivion came two minutes later.

The party from Umber was installed in a spacious suite of five rooms on the cabin deck of the Beta pod. The central chamber resembled the common room of a rustic inn: walls of deeply etched wood wearing a resinous gloss and bearing rudely sculpted lamps, a cross-hatched motif of oaken beams overhead. The chairs and divans had squat lines and rough-hewn frames and coarsely patterned upholstery. An artificial hearth occupied part of the rear wall.

In one incongruous corner was a standard visicom. Before it stood the Gatrin of Umber, in voice contact with the central switchboard; beyond the communicator's angle of view waited Dion and Vera, both exhibiting an air of tension.

Pallas identified herself to the operator and requested the call number for the quarters of General Nathan Salmi of Balkin. She recorded the number into the machine's memory bank. Then taking a deep breath she punched the code.

The screen glowed to life. White haze dissolved into the head and upper torso of a stocky man with heavy features. His large flat ears lay like weathered outcroppings against a scalp of short sparse hair. Broad, high-crested cheekbones supported quick, intelligent eyes, eyes that had never flinched before any man. When his own screen revealed the image of the woman on the other end, his mouth, heavy-lipped to the point of sensuousness, broadened in an expansive smile.

"Gatrin Pallas! You see, I have been waiting here, expecting your call. Did you have a good journey?" The voice conveyed ease and cultivated charm, a quality somewhat out of keeping with the forceful visible personality.

Pallas spoke in an even voice and met his gaze with a neutral expression. "It has been an interesting experience, General. Three years have passed since I was last off-planet."

Salmi's smile did not waver. "I trust you will have the impulse to enjoy the ship while you are here. But first, to business, right? Please consider myself at your disposal."

"We will need a period of sleep before long, so perhaps some time after that—"

"I have seen to it that the Conference Room is available for the next full day, Gatrín Pallas. Shall we say today at 1900 hours, then? That will be sixteen hours from now."

"Yes, that will be fine. We will be a committee of three."

"Aha. You will outnumber me then, since I will be bringing only one aide." Pallas gritted her teeth at his condescending good nature. Salmi went on, and his eyes seemed almost to gleam. "I am looking forward to renewing our acquaintance after so long. Eight years, is it not? I can see that much has changed with you."

Pallas said curtly, "At 1900 hours, then. Good day, General." She broke the connection.

As she turned toward her companions a delayed flush ignited her dusky features. "How dare he speak to me like that—reminding me I was only a girl when he saw me last? I am here as a representative of Umber. Will he still treat me as an adolescent apprentice?"

Dion made a gesture of reassurance but left his own thoughts unspoken. If he could judge by Salmi's tone, the General had seen the Gatrín as anything but adolescent. It crossed Dion's mind that there may have been a reason for Salmi's willingness to come to Cosmopolis which none of them had anticipated. Or had the Matrín's mind been even that devious? Suddenly the negotiations promised to take on a new and potentially explosive dimension.

Vera cautioned, "It was an obvious ploy, Pallas. Don't let it work."

All at once Pallas deflated, sinking heavily into a chair. "Maybe my mother made a mistake sending me. I'm only the youngest and I've had little experience in diplomacy." She stared at the floor, frowning. "So much depends on this meeting. To think that we might actually go to war with another world."

"Let's hope it will not come to that," protested Vera.

Again Dion kept his reflections to himself. Perhaps more depends on it than you imagine, Gatrín. Even a limited war on a barren rock could have dramatic effects on Umber society, for I don't think the men would let themselves be left out of this venture. He said, "Experience is no guarantee of success, Gatrín, as I myself have discovered on Balkin. But here, with you, who have known the General under other conditions—" He struck a note of optimism. "And besides, Ambassador Holoček may prove to be the hidden trump we need."

Pallas' voice was subdued. "Yes, and if all else fails I have my own hidden trump."

Before the others could question the remark she jumped up. "I'm hungry—and I need more open spaces. All these tunnels—ugh!"

Let's go down to the main deck, Vera. They call this the greatest entertainment center in the Concourse: wouldn't you like to see it?"

Vera looked down at her traveling suit. "Well, yes—but we'll have to change first."

Dion said discreetly, "I will review the brief once more. If you wish, Gattrin, I can contact Ambassador Holochek shortly and inform him of the conference hour."

"Yes, please do so." Dion retired to his own room.

A half hour later Pallas and Vera emerged from the suite. Above their closely molded trousers of Umber ramskin, Vera sported a ribbed chemise whose cloth was a silver-blue match for her hair, while Pallas, to complement her tawny coloring, wore a tunic of smoky russet, clasped by an ornament of carved yellow bone. Both had relinquished boots for leather strolling shoes.

The cabin's guide book indicated a set of elevators nearby. As the two women hopped onto the slideway, Vera laughed, "You were like a curing pot ready to bubble over when you got off the 'com. Have you always hated Salmi so much?"

Pallas frowned. "Not when I first met him on Balkin. Mother sent me there for some off-world tutoring and I stayed three months on Salmi's estate—he was most cooperative. I became friends with Sonja, one of his nieces. She thought she was being mischievous by telling me stories about her uncle: about parties and mistresses. She even described some of Salmi's 'unusual' sexual practices, though how she got to know about them she didn't say. She was only two years older than me and I thought she just had an imagination.

"But soon I began to feel Salmi was taking an odd interest in me; odd for a girl of fifteen, anyway. Then one evening Sonja and I sneaked into a private courtyard where Salmi had a huge swimming pool. It was almost dark. We walked around looking at the statues; all of them were nude and there was one of a man and woman copping, standing in the middle of a fountain with the water streaming down their bodies. It was crude but effective. Then Sonja said I should wait there a minute while she went to get something and she ran off. I didn't like the idea but I sat on the edge of the fountain and looked over at the pool. Can you guess what happened next?"

"No. Tell me!"

"Salmi came up out of the pool. He was naked. Salmi is a big man, though not fat; he keeps himself in good condition. At first he pretended not to see me. Quite honestly, I was petrified. The man dominates everything and everyone in a room and out there in the courtyard in the dim light he seemed monstrous. And I was still a year away from my Initiation."

"Maybe it was just a prank by Sonja."

"No, I'm pretty sure the two of them set it up. But he kept up the charade. He peered over at me and said, 'Who's there?' Then he walked over. I just sat there—I was determined not to run. He stopped about a stride in front of me, with his hair plastered all over his body and the water running off him. He said, 'Did you come for a swim, Pallas? I don't mind, but you'll have to take off your clothes'."

The slideway had reached a junction and the two women stepped off. The elevators lay a few steps down the radial.

"What did you do?" Vera demanded.

"I stood up and tried to sound even angrier than I was. I said, 'How dare you approach me like this?' Then I walked around him and over to the gate. All I could think of was whether Sonja had locked it on her way out, but she hadn't. The next day Salmi was cordial as though nothing had happened."

When they reached the elevators one opened and discharged two gaily dressed couples with glowing red discs painted on their foreheads. These were Sengarese steppelanders who made a cult of their ageing sun, binding themselves never to forsake its waning rays lest it finally go to sleep from want of obeisance. The disc was applied from the fresh gum of the firk tree that flourished in the languid beams bathing the steppelands; the gum gave off a penetrating heat which lasted for two weeks, thus delineating the length of time a Sengarese could spend off-planet. The men beamed at the two Umbrians in open admiration, with eyes that lingered over them as they passed.

"We had best be ready for anything," Pallas sighed, as the elevator began its descent. "One thing is certain: I intend not to think of Salmi for the rest of our day. Let's just enjoy ourselves."

Emerging from the elevator alcove they found themselves on the threshold of a different world. The hostess and the guide book had called it a corridor, but what they now looked out upon was a grand avenue: a broad sweep of gleaming tiled walkways, roadstrips for vehicles, wide landscaped boulevards with exuberant foliage laced and splashed with colors no single world of the Concourse could have boasted. Down the center of the avenue, like a sentient river nourishing its banks, flowed the twin channels of the slideway, spanned by an occasional footbridge, delicate and fancifully scrolled. On either side rose walls of translucent plastilline, curving through a high arch and diffusing a soft cool light.

Pallas and Vera stood for a moment in a daze. They were in one of the six radial corridors, almost halfway out from the center of the pod. Presently Pallas oriented herself and pointed right. "The outer circular corridor should be in that direction." The two women

made their way toward the middle of the avenue and mounted the slideway.

Ahead and behind were people dotting the strip, sailing past just out of arm's reach, strolling the walkways or fording the boulevards. Many were intent on their own business, others frankly gawked about at their fellow tourists as though these were the fascinating sights they had come to see as much as the ship itself. Pallas and Vera were carried past broad arches leading to chambers that ranged in size from a ballroom to a city block. After a few moments they dismounted to take a closer look at the attractions within.

This section of the pod was an athletic complex. They found gymnastic facilities, fencing halls, whirlracing pits. Wandering one immense area they passed several tennis courts, then stopped at a roloball yard, mouths agape as they watched the tiny two-man carts lurching madly about the court like overwound toys, colliding with fences and each other. Just beyond this lay a bullade field where an impromptu game had just begun between eight breech-clad contestants who leaped and vaulted with flexible poles over a dozen pits, reaching up with heads or feet for the elusive sphere that floated, bounced and careened in the clashing air streams.

"Good Mother, what are these people doing?" exclaimed Vera, just as a bullade player lost his grip and tumbled into one of the sandy depressions, only to be rolled up and out by the currents issuing from the center of the pits.

"I have no idea. But I hope they have good hospitals on this ship."

Further on lay a sprawling compound of spas: row after row of cylindrical steam chambers, whirlpool baths, scrubbers and oilers. Areas for men and women were separated but not screened. The two met at a huge swimming pool shaped like an hourglass and here they could see that the management had no objection to nude bathing, it being an era when the common Concourse denominator was decidedly liberal. Such scenes often dismayed tourists from the more conservative worlds, but they could usually be assuaged by a bystander's jovial comment: "Come, you're on Cosmopolis now!"

They arrived at the intersection with the outer circular corridor and stood looking in all directions. The radial passage continued on and dead-ended some 100 meters out at the edge of the pod. Crossing it was an even wider avenue that stretched in a great slow arc to either direction until it bent out of sight. The light radiated in soft scintillations from the curved surfaces and the trees were powdered with silver dust.

"Where should we go to eat?" Vera wondered.

"Let's get some advice."

They stopped a young woman in blue who exhibited large sad eyes. Before they could ask anything of her she inquired if they had seen a certain young man she had recently met who had unaccountably failed to keep a rendezvous. Pallas and Vera shook their heads sympathetically. At their own request for directions the woman pointed down the curve. "Past the next radial there's a concession area where they have cafés and wayside booths. Most of the expensive restaurants are on the inner corridor opposite the Promenade....And if you see Philemon, please tell him that I am very disappointed." She sauntered off disconsolately, with a half-hearted scan of some of the passersby.

Pallas and Vera looked at one another, then embarked on the slideway, to be carried along the gently curving avenue. Vera said in all seriousness, "That poor girl. If I see Philemon, I'll wring his neck."

Pallas gave a sober laugh. "No doubt it happens all the time. I suppose one enters a liaison on Cosmopolis at one's own risk."

Her glance was drawn through one of the passing archways in the outer wall and she gave a start. "I don't believe it, Vera, they've got half a planet in there!" They hopped off the slideway, followed a path through the boulevard, crossed the outer slide and walkway to the opening. There they looked in across an astonishing vista.

At their feet began a gently sloping strand of grass, extending green and cool until it merged into a wide beach of sparkling turquoise sand washed by a body of real water. It was like the rim of an ocean, for although the outer wall of the pod lay only 100 meters offshore, its indistinct quality created the impression of a distant hazy horizon weighing heavily upon the sea. The water lapped in leisurely waves against the beach. Above their heads floated a lazy expanse of sky-blue mist, tinged yellow and shot with light, as though the breakthrough of a brilliant sun were imminent.

The two women stepped through. Not far to their left the panorama ended abruptly as an outcropping of rock covered in shrubbery masked the wall dividing it from the extension of the radial corridor. In the other direction strand, beach and water swept in a long gentle concavity to the limit of vision where the sea's other boundary could just be made out at the next radial. But what arrested their sight lay halfway along and some distance offshore, tantalizingly near and yet somehow achingly unattainable: a castle that grew out of the sea, an airy construction of glistening walls and turrets and twinkling spires which to the eye seemed at one moment solid and at the next a creation of mist and pastel light. Blue marble terraces and charming pavilions beckoned and waited—in vain. Though bathers dotted the beach and bobbed among the waves, none, it appeared, had approached the sea castle, or maybe

they had tried and found some mysterious force keeping them ever at a distance.

"Is it real?" asked Vera, wide-eyed. "It's so beautiful!" She started across the grass.

Pallas followed. "Yes it is, but I suspect it's not meant to be reached."

They stood at the edge of the sand for some moments, Pallas soaking up the feeling of space, the illusion of natural surroundings and a planetary crust beneath her feet. The journey from Umber had been the longest of her experience, with only two brief stop-overs on solid ground; and that journey had ended on a spaceship suspended—or was it moving now?—somewhere between the stars. If she thought about it her insides balked.

Suddenly some of the nearby bathers scrambled from the water or got up from the sand and began a stampede toward the doorway. Others followed at a less urgent pace. At the same moment, the two women became aware of a flurry in the corridor and a few half-voiced cries.

"The Norns! The Norns are coming!"

Bewildered, they followed the stragglers out onto the avenue to find everyone staring up the curve at a strange sight beyond the double slideway; many of the riders had also stepped off to watch. Several cloaked and hooded figures, gray cowls drawn together so that only their eyes lurked at the edge of visibility, were making their way along the inner walkway in a loose chain, those in the middle joined by a rope which passed through loops at their shoulders. Two figures in front, one holding one end of the rope, the other gliding alongside, both their gazes roving ahead with slow sinister mien, seemed to be leading the procession, while another bringing up the rear held the rope's long trailing end and a bundle of extra cloaks. The figures thus constrained between them numbered three.

"Who are they?" asked a gaping Vera, to no one in particular.

A rasping deep voice grated on their backs. "You don't know about the Fates?" Pallas and Vera glanced around to the female half of a tall, gaunt couple with parched hair, their long pinched noses and double-folding eyelids a mark of adaptation to the sandstorms of Blue Star.

The Umbrians shook their heads.

"The three in the middle have answered their summons," the woman intoned sepulchraly.

"What happens to them?" asked Pallas, amazed.

"Who can say? They might find themselves pampered guests at one of the Alpha parties, or sharing a cage with a long-eared grapagus at the zoo."

Pallas thought she understood now. "Ah—it's a prank, then."

"Oh, no," interposed the man, in a voice the echo of a gravel slide. "There are no pranks on Cosmopolis. Merely calculated events to stimulate the neurics and relieve pressures. Even too much security can use a safety valve."

"But what if you don't want to go with them?"

"One can always ignore the summons...though many consider it unlucky—"

"Erko!" his companion shriled, sliding all the way up the scale to low C. "They're pointing this way!"

"Ah, but not at us, my dear. It seems our two friends here have met their Fates."

Incredulously, Pallas and Vera saw that the two leading Norns had stopped just across the slideway and were extending long, draped arms ending in peremptory finger tips directly at them. All eyes swung their way; the Norn in the rear began to unfold two more cloaks.

Vera glared. "Let that one try to throw a hood over me and there'll be another swimmer out in the ocean!"

Pallas pulled her onto the slideway and waved breezily at the retreating pantomime. "Another time!" she called. They turned their eyes ahead.

"I can't believe it," Vera wagged. "All those people who ran to see—they must really want to be kidnapped like that!"

"Perhaps that's what happened to Philemon."

Beyond the next intersection lay the principal concession area of the Beta pod. "It's worse than a carnival," exclaimed Vera, as they surveyed enormous chambers where tents, arcades, cupolas, pavilions were crammed together in a mad mélange, threaded by narrow lanes and winding walkways, some of which were raised over the jumble like spindly legs on a giant upturned insect. There seemed to be three times as many people per square meter as anywhere else.

Exchanging some funds for a supply of Cosmopolis tokens, the two women plunged in. They sidled past amusement booths that featured outlandish games of chance and skill, resisting enticements from the barkers who yodeled, cajoled and gesticulated; stared as patrons staggered from the kaleidosphere with eyes blinking away the dazzle of the optics and heads reeling from multiple assaults on other senses. They sauntered through a marketplace of eccentric shops and services. At a beautician's pavilion they paused with unabashed curiosity to watch the technicians tone skin and dye hair, apply tattoos, highlight olfactory signals, refurbish skin and features. They strolled lanes of boutiques offering every sort of ware, tempted by a dozen fascinating artifacts, reduced to laughter

or perplexity by as many others. And at refreshment booths along the way they wolfed down filleted cocoa-fish sticks, exotic fruits and marinated vegetables, honeyed bimblefizzes and bunches of cherry-like fruits from the orchards of distant Wenceslas, as fresh as if they had been picked on that fecund planet only the day before.

All sense of time and distance became lost. Passing through interconnected chambers, Pallas and Vera found themselves within a large courtyard surrounded by a motley cluster of open booths, tented galleries and theaters, plus a few buildings that rose to approach the arched and fluted ceiling. Set with garish mosaics into the stoneworked floor of the central patio was a blatant motif and the sprawling words: Seven Worlds Pleasure Dome. The two women made a wide-eyed circuit of the place.

From rough-hewn booths proprietors dispensed potions, love talismans and aphrodisiacs, many attached to claims of unusual efficacy and formulas passed down in secret through generations. There were parlors of exotic entertainments and erotic displays offering shows and participations after the many diverse fashions around the Concourse.

Experience the Ritual Dances of the Sorgenard Wine Growers! declared one marquee. And another: Discover the Secret Fantasies of the Kaluan Highland Princesses!

Pallas remarked, "I wonder if the Kaluan Highland Princes come here for enlightenment." She popped the last bimblefizz into her mouth where it exploded in an orgy of sour-sweet coition with her tastebuds.

One small cabin boasted a sign reading Seven Worlds Escort Service, but it looked hardly large enough to contain more than a bank of cyberfiles. Evidently the escorts were lodged elsewhere. Pallas wondered if they included mistrani, a Concourse indulgence not adopted on Umber and one she knew of only by repute.

But the centerpiece of the Dome was an elegant building set back from the courtyard as if to claim a higher degree of status and discrimination, and this was the House of Love. The carved oval gateway that opened onto its fronting gardens and porticos bore an inscription that only couples or triads might enter. Something about the façade of the House, its pale incarnadine hue, its sculpted outlines and soft recesses, beckoned with a promise of undisturbed and unqualified delights.

Vera's large dark eyes glowed. "It looks enticing, doesn't it? I wonder what it's like inside." She sounded a note of regret. "But we would need partners."

Pallas said mischievously, "As far as I know, Vera, there are no men from Umber currently on Cosmopolis."

"Oh, don't make me sound so provincial, Pallas. I'm not so

impossible to please. Surely there are social occasions on board where we could make proposals."

"I'm sure there are. But you might not find all the men quite as...cooperative as you are used to."

Vera's nostrils flared. Her temper was always short at the best of times. "I can handle any man in the Concourse, Gattrin! Just ask any upstart at the rites." A certain petulance intruded, not without impish overtones. "After all, it's been several days since we left home...which may very well have unusual effects on my behavior."

Pallas could not resist a final tease. "In that case, I can let General Salmi know you're available—ouch!"

At a point directly opposite the House of Love, just beside the main entrance to the courtyard, stood an establishment calling itself a Sensorium. In its own way this too conveyed a disassociation from the rest of the cluster, for it propounded its dedication to the expansion of the mind as well as the senses. It seemed safe enough to investigate.

In the foyer they were met by a steward who greeted them cordially. Pallas felt like a naïve debutante entering a sophisticated adult world as the concept of the establishment was explained.

"As you know, our brains receive signals by way of the senses: the impingement of light and sound waves, the stimulation of olfactory and gustatory cells, tactile contacts. But researchers have long been aware that even though our bodies have developed only five senses, the brain houses other receptor areas languishing in a condition of neglect. Here we can provide, in a controlled and safe setting, a means to stimulate these receptors. A heightened state can be induced in any or all of the normal sensory fields and even beyond for those who have a capacity for teleperception. Sometimes increased intellectual acuity and insight is achieved, visions of ultimate truths, cures of neuroses. Occasionally long lost memories can be awakened. Some have experienced a recollection from our racial past or, more rarely, a glimpse into the future evolution of the human brain."

Vera looked skeptical. Pallas asked, "How does one undergo this process?"

"There are three techniques. First is the General Application—at a cost of 30 tokens—which involves an hour's session in a helium recliner; the effects may last up to 48 hours. The second is the Enhanced Application—at a cost of 100 tokens—in which the point of a tuning pulsor is inserted just under the scalp behind the ear; with this we can achieve a finer focus for opening up the brain. Then there is the Radiant Application—at graded cost—in which one is immersed in an active bath within a laboratory attended by three technicians. Your period of immersion may last from four to 24

hours. Many of our clients have emerged possessing extraordinary powers of perception and acumen. They are transformed and rejuvenated by the experience.”

Pallas gaped at the steward. “Do people really put themselves through things like that?”

“Naturally, we would not recommend an advanced program until you had undertaken one at a more modest level.”

Vera asked dryly, “Just out of curiosity—how much is the 24-hour program?”

“Five thousand tokens.”

Pallas nodded. “Thank you. Perhaps on our next visit...”

Vera muttered as they emerged into the open, “I’ll settle for a heightened state in the House of Love. How bizarre everything here seems! Or is Umber really so backward?”

“No, but don’t think that Cosmopolis represents the Concourse norm.”

A young man had been loitering nearby and when the two women returned to the patio he approached. He was dressed in a rakish cap topping a multi-colored costume whose most prominent feature was a tasseled codpiece. Tight brown curls covered his head; blue eyes were set in a wide clear face, his teeth sparkled. He moved with the assurance of one who has an unqualified opinion of himself.

“Ladies! It may please you to know that you have captured the hearts of myself and my companion—the handsome fellow who waits over by the gate.” His hand waved across the courtyard. “We urge you to accompany us into the House of Love where we can show you many delights.” There was a theatrical air about him and he extended his arm toward Pallas in an extravagant gesture, all but brushing her chest.

Pallas stiffened and blinked rapidly, indignant at this blatant infringement of established prerogatives. Before the Sensorium steward she had felt adolescent; here she was Gatrin. Her eyes narrowed in a withering look that momentarily took the young man aback.

“Stand out of my way.” She walked past him, followed by a vigilant Vera.

But the bedizened harlequin was not to be put off so curtly. He loped, half sideways, beside her, so that his tassels swung. “If it’s wooing you want, we can provide it. If you wish to struggle, we can accommodate you. You will find us not untalented—”

While Pallas maintained her pace, Vera stopped and in a quick motion stepped behind the man and reached her hands to the base of his neck. She applied a sudden vicious pressure. In the next instant she moved away and the man sank to his knees with a look

of stunned pain. Several bystanders noticing the exchange watched curiously; a few chuckled.

They strode down the vine-canopied lane that led out of the courtyard. By the time they reached the outer corridor a little smile played about Pallas' mouth. "You realize, Vera, that you just broke the rule against violence on Cosmopolis. We really ought to control our instincts when we are away from home. After all," she added puckishly, "you never know but it might have been the opportunity you were looking for. He was not unhandsome, though I could not say as much for his manner."

"He was a mashga!" Vera retorted.

Along the next radial corridor a chain of open cafés fronted the avenue, where irregularly shaped flagstones cut the pearl-gray walkway into fragments. The fronds of the jinjilla palms bent low, glistening green and gold as though wet from a fresh rain. Barmaids bustled; barkeepers whistled. Glasses clinked and tankards clunked while the patrons drank sweet amber wines, hearty ales and a popular cocktail called an Andromeda Float, created on Cosmopolis. They nibbled and munched on a variety of side dishes.

The atmosphere was cheery and salubrious and it drew Pallas and Vera in to rest awhile at the Wandering Moon. They ordered drinks and a small salad of cheeses and fresh greens, and soon settled back in a relaxed frame of mind, letting themselves be lulled into a kind of torpor by the flow in front of them: the bobbing of the pedestrians, the gliding slideway riders beyond, the occasional passing of a service vehicle moving on silent wheels. The cocktail tingled and spread a warm glow over the skin.

"Where did everyone go before there was such a place as Cosmopolis?" Vera wondered.

"It's an astounding place—and we've seen less than half of one pod." She turned her head to look along the walkway and her eye fell on a figure several cafés up, approaching with a gait that was sufficiently peculiar to single him out from those around. "It never crossed my mind before last month that I would ever come here." As the man drew closer, a shock of disheveled hair and a rumpled travel suit accorded him an even more incongruous look. "I suppose..." She started. "But—I know that fellow!"

She intercepted him on the walkway. "Emmett! It's Emmett, isn't it?"

He looked at her, jolted out of some engrossing rumination. "Pallas?"

The three sat around the little table. "I knew Emmett on Balkin," she told Vera. "He was only a few years older than me but already"—she turned back to him—"it seemed that you were always in some kind of trouble with the authorities."

Emmett had pale blue eyes that looked out of place in a face so otherwise intense: cheeks drawn, mouth set in obstinate lines, hair prematurely aged.

"Yes, the Security Police. At that time they only called me a troublemaker and a malcontent. Since then they've graduated me to subversive. Of those eight years since you saw me last, three were spent in prison—a guest of our good General. There are many on Balkin who enjoy his hospitality."

Part of Pallas' mind began to play with certain postulates.

"For a while I worked with the Federationist party," Emmett continued. "During one of the brief periods when it wasn't being persecuted, that is." His glance kept darting out to the avenue, more from nervous habit, it seemed, than the expectation of seeing friend or enemy. "But it will take methods more direct than theirs to effect changes on Balkin."

General Salmi was on board Cosmopolis. And coincidentally a Balkin subversive?

She asked, "Are conditions so bad on your world now?"

"Yes, for many they have gotten much worse." An odd distortion seemed to cross the young man's face, as if he too were making certain computations at the back of his mind.

"I am sorry to hear all this." Pallas' eyes lost their focus. "It does not augur well..." The meeting. Does he know about it? But he would not be talking to me this candidly—

Emmett said, "But I wonder at finding you here. Especially now..." He paused and suddenly his face turned pale. "The UMBER dispute! That's why—"

In both minds conclusions clicked into place simultaneously.

Pallas leaned forward earnestly. "No, Emmett! You might think you are doing everyone a favor, but this is not the time or place." But were not her objections purely selfish?

Emmett had drawn back in his chair with an expression of fierce alarm. "Damn it, Pallas! Are you going to warn the bastard?" He rose abruptly to his feet. "Do you know how much hope others have placed in me?"

"You could never get that close to him," she said frantically. "He would never be without his bodyguard." But surely if anywhere, Salmi would be most vulnerable here on Cosmopolis.

Curious heads were turning. Emmett leaned forward to glare down at Pallas. Vera sprang to her feet, toppling the chair.

"Will you condemn us all to more slavery, just to get what you want?" Then he turned and darted out into the corridor to disappear among the strollers and the palms.

Pallas sat and stared at the table. The possibility that Salmi would be murdered on Balkin always existed, of course, but if an

assassination took place here, when he had come to negotiate...no, Umber's complicity would certainly be suspected, with repercussions at best unpredictable. And there was always the possibility Salmi could be persuaded...

Besides, if there was to be any such thing—

Vera tossed several tokens onto the table and grasped her companion's arm. Pallas went unresisting. As they returned to the outer corridor she said despondently, "It seems I cannot get away from Salmi despite my resolutions."

Vera put on a jaunty face. "Forgive the pun, but if you want to take a weight off your mind, let's visit one of the Floats." She flapped her arms and bobbed on the balls of her feet. "I've never experienced weightlessness before!"

Pallas smiled and came back to life and the two women set off to find the Beta Float.

\* \* \*

Glenn Berenson alighted from the lower rail car that shuttled between the two resort pods, traversed the junction and entered a radial corridor of the Beta pod. This time the management had made a mistake. They had installed him on the Alpha cabin deck, whereas the casino was located in the Beta pod. To request a change would probably have been simple, but for a variety of reasons he chose not to do so. Being at a greater distance, he told himself, he might spend a little less time in the casino. There were areas of the ship he had never seen despite half a dozen previous visits. Yet here he was, within two hours of arrival, hurrying to check out the old haunts. He sighed. A person had to make a living.

Besides, the woman on the shuttle (he still thought of her as Princess Pallas, despite Miles Destan's cautioning) was lodged on the Beta deck and he wanted no suggestion, even to himself, that he was tracking her.

But why was this woman proving to be such a preoccupation? He had observed her for only a few minutes and their brief contact had been decidedly inconclusive. Yet the attraction had been powerful and immediate. Aside from her striking appearance, the woman gave off something palpable—he could still feel it: an animal vitality, a self-willed directness free of artifice.

He grimaced. To a considerable extent he himself lived by artifice, as did most of the men and women who inhabited the world he moved in. His friendships were few, almost always short term, his involvements with women usually superficial. He called no place home. Some gamblers acquired interworld notoriety but most, including Glenn Berenson, preferred anonymity, moving from planet to planet, never building up much of a reputation in any one place;

even Cosmopolis Glenn visited only once a year. This was the only way of life he had known for the whole of his adulthood, and yet despite the restlessness that often dogged him it had always proven stimulating.

So what need did he have, he asked himself, for a perverse infatuation with an unsophisticated horsewoman from some backward planet? On the other hand, if he kept his wits about him it would remain just that: an infatuation. And as he had told Miles Destan, he might not encounter her again.

But even as the thought came he knew it was a bluff. One way or another he would manage to see her again.

The Cosmopolis casino rivaled in luxury the most affluent gaming establishments on any world. Tapestries spun by prime class weavers converted the walls into a gallery of abstract art. Underfoot, rich-piled Corinthian carpets made even a middle-class patron feel well-heeled. Quality oozed from every grain on the burnished table tops. Some of the rooms contained gaming facilities—including roulette, blackjack, whirling dervish—run by Cosmopolis itself, with odds fair and honesty impeccable, although it was no secret that proceeds from the tables were one of the five principal sources of the ship's income. There were open lounges where guests could organize games on the spot or, if one desired privacy, small secluded chambers could be requested.

Glenn strolled the complex. Little had changed. Today the patrons seemed fewer than he remembered and from a lazy chair in one of the lounges he watched the room listlessly for a time, more than once suppressing an urge to leave and seek out some other diversion. Perhaps later. If he allowed his brooding mood to get the better of him on his first visit to the casino, it would be an inauspicious start. It might even—Addison forbid—be considered bad luck.

There were a few games in progress throughout the room, as well as several individuals like himself, none of whom seemed in a hurry to organize anything. Presently, two women and a man came into the lounge. They took seats at a nearby table, brought out a deck of cards and were soon engaged in three-handed play.

By now the catalogue of card games played by men and women was extensive, using decks of several different designs and numbers of cards. The old play elements no longer dominated, for as strategy assumed prime importance the luck feature became less desirable. Deals and chance draws were minimized. Games like poker and its hundred offspring were still widely played, but more challenging generations now rivaled them at the tables. In Glenn's estimation the aristocrat of them all was Combo, a card game with a small initial chance element and none at all during play, in which

one could win or lose a great deal of money. It was one of his own specialties, though he chose not to play it regularly. Like a vintage wine, it was best brought out only for the right occasion. It had a habit of creating enemies.

He watched the trio idly. The woman who sat facing him had a gay sparkle. She was probably ten years older than himself, with brilliant silver streaks lacing her hair in random patterns. Her skin, of which there was a fair amount exposed, bore the gleam of some lubricous impregnation, likely from an aromatics steep. Light azure toning colored her face.

Glenn might not have noticed that the woman's eyelashes wore a coating of lacquer except that they seemed to flicker—on and off, on and off—catching the light as the focus of her eyes switched with increasing frequency from the cards in her hand to the chair where he sat. Soon she was looking at him openly. Suddenly, without consulting her companions, she leaned forward and called in a soft voice. "Hello. Would you like to join us? We're playing Bari, but only for low stakes."

Glenn made the effort to overcome his lethargy and joined them. The woman's name was Rima. Through half an hour's play she kept up a steady flow of one-sided conversation and although it distracted him, with the result that he consistently lost, the stakes were only nominal and the woman was charming. Evidently she had known many worlds and many experiences. Glenn found his spirits lifting.

When the other couple called a halt and went off without her, Rima drew her chair closer to Glenn and said playfully, "I hope you win more often than you did with us." From her body rose the odor of the oils, subtle and pleasing. They gave the skin of her arms and the wide triangles above and below her breasts where the outfit cut away the look of cerulean soapstone. He knew it would be slick and greaseless to the touch.

"Bari is only a diversion—not worth playing for a lot of money. Besides, I must have allowed you to distract me. It's not something I usually do."

"You mean when there are bigger stakes involved," she retorted. There was a slight space between her middle teeth which gave her smile an impish look. "You seem to know how to handle a deck of cards—even if your mind wasn't entirely on the game."

Glenn could sense she was fishing for some idea of his competence as a gambler, but today he felt little desire to play up his occupation. He made a noncommittal response and Rima did not press him.

At her suggestion they left the casino and entered a nearby tavern, a long sliver of a place with a black ribbon of a bar, fronted

by traditional swivel seats. Perhaps one in five was filled. Three bartenders served the patrons, preparing drinks by hand instead of servomixers. Class, thought Glenn. He ordered two Pink Asteroids: strong spirits distilled from the husks of oster-grains with a floating dwarf melon.

Rima nudged him and motioned toward the entrance. A trio was filing in, a smartly dressed couple followed by a second man wearing simple white garments whose face was made up in one of the strangest ways Glenn had ever seen. He could only describe it as some mythological creature of radiant aspect. Most mistrani—and this was certainly one—looked neutral to a point of blandness; for their role, whether male or female, usually involved a negation of their own personalities. Evidently one member of this couple—was it the man or the woman, he wondered: perhaps both—had different tastes for the third point of their triangle. And they were flouting it.

"Have you ever seen so many mistrani in one place as on Cosmopolis?" Rima whispered. Then she asked, almost conspiratorially, "Have you ever indulged in one?"

"My only three-handed games are played around the casino table."

Rima laughed a bright melodious laugh and Glenn looked at her sidelong over the edge of his glass. "Have you?"

She turned demure eyes on him. "Do I look like a woman who would pass up any of life's interesting experiences?"

Presently they left the tavern and as they strolled the boulevard Rima hugged his arm. "You know what I've always wanted to do here? Make love in the Float. No up, no down, no top, no bottom!" She pouted. "But it's one of the few pleasures they deny you on Cosmopolis. It would shock all those old gentlemen from the retirement homes on Millivar."

Glenn remarked, "I doubt those old gentlemen could negotiate the Float."

"It's not the only thing they couldn't negotiate. Come, Glenn. Let's go to the Float together. Then perhaps we can recapture some of the sensations in my cabin, where there is a very large bed—or even in the House of Love!"

The Beta Float, 300 meters in diameter, projected into space between the Beta pod and the Captain's pod, directly opposite its sister on the other side of the ship. As the car plying the passage drew near, those aboard felt their weight diminish until they were in free-fall, and any who had lacked the foresight to wear close fitting garments hurriedly applied the restraining clips provided.

The car wafted to a stop and outer space yawned before them. Clutching the railings that lined the vehicle instead of seats,

the passengers pitched and bobbed like so many bullade balloons as they maneuvered out of the car and onto a wide jump-off platform with a network of rails. Attendants tethered a little hand held propulsion unit to each person's wrist, channeling first-time visitors to one side for a demonstration of its use and tips on how to control weightless motion. Others were out within the Float to offer further aid.

Glenn and Rima had both visited the place before, but as they propelled themselves away from the platform and floated free toward the middle of the great transparent sphere, its limits discernable only by fragile reflections of light from the ship, the heady exhilaration thrilled them no less than ever. Perhaps to the seasoned spacer the sensation was no novelty, but the vast majority of people who traveled between worlds moved entirely within artificial gravitational fields. And for visual panorama, no observation deck could equal the Floats of Cosmopolis.

Behind them loomed the huge bulk of the ship, glowing softly in the light of a billion stars: stars that now drifted down like incandescent droplets, flaring in a Doppler-Alwyn effect as they approached from above, then shifting into strange distortions and flickerings like sparks from a dying ember as they receded below, leaving the eye to overtake their earlier light waves. Cosmopolis was moving now, cleaving space at hyper-speed, the upper end of her propulsion tube aimed like an arrow at her next port of call.

Today, with the recent arrival of the shuttle, the Float was crowded with drifting figures, many cavorting with slow-motion gymnastics, others content to be aimless and relaxed. Glenn looked over at Rima. She was feeling sensuous, stretching her body and twisting lazily, limbs luxuriously extended. The sight played like a spectrum organ over his already stimulated nerve endings. He was about to move up beside her when a man floating nearby called out.

"Rima!"

She looked over, startled. "Tamas! Are you on Cosmopolis? When did you get here?"

"I arrived today on the shuttle."

"I'm surprised you're not in the casino already."

Tamas approached. "Plenty of time for that. I'm delighted to see you, Rima." He became aware of Glenn and hesitated.

Rima paused and seemed discomfited. A curious look came over her face; she was evidently being forced to make an instant decision. "Oh, this is someone I've just met. Are you with anyone, Tamas?"

"Not on this trip. Care for a round?"

Rima turned back to Glenn and spoke quickly. "I'm sorry—this

was unexpected." She moved toward Tamas. "Perhaps we'll bump into each other again, Mr. Berenson," she called back. The two propelled themselves off in the direction of the platform.

In a daze Glenn looked after them and a wave of frustration ran up his body, making his eyes water. He took a long, deep breath, followed it by several more. Then after a silent curse he propelled himself with a surge in the opposite direction.

By some miracle no collision occurred and soon he bumped gently into the outer wall of the globe. For a while he drifted there, looking back over Cosmopolis. The two nearer pods, sleek and massive, billowed to either side. Above and below, the propulsion tube thrust through the orifice of the ship; beyond, just visible on the horizon, lay the upper decks of the two further pods. Over everything the stars were dripping down.

The other man was obviously a gambler like himself. Since Glenn had been reluctant to paint a glowing picture of his own prowess in the field, Rima had apparently decided that a winner she knew was preferable to a risk she didn't know. He sighed. Closing his eyes he gave himself over to the total disorientation of the floating experience.

Those eyes opened suddenly a few moments later when two female voices drew near and the name "Pallas" was spoken. A pair of familiar figures drifted past him, Vera pointing out certain shifting configurations among the stars. Quickly Glenn collected his wits and propelled himself unobtrusively alongside them.

He spoke in their direction. "Do you know that we actually don't see the stars that pass below the ship once they do so, since the light rays can't catch up with us, but we think we do because we're intercepting light rays already given off ahead of us and we catch up with *them*." He was surprised to find that what he had just said sounded like it made sense. Whether it was accurate or not he wasn't quite sure.

Vera frowned. Pallas looked at him a few moments, then said, "Do you know as much about the stars, then, as you do about flavored pastries? I remember the recommendation but not your name." She smiled.

The image of Rima evaporated from Glenn's mind. Pallas' face struck him at that moment as the most arresting he had ever looked at: the strong features, the clear dusky skin, the quality he could only describe, paradoxically, as feminine virility.

"Glenn Berenson. From Pheiton." He felt lost now for anything further to say.

"How unexciting...at least—that's what you told me."

Glenn raised his eyebrows, then remembered his impromptu comment on the shuttle. Impulsively his face broke into a broad

smile and something seemed to pass between them. "I left home at fourteen. You'd be surprised at how much excitement I've managed since then to make up for it."

Vera was looking back and forth with an expression of amazed perplexity. At the same time, all three were trying to maintain their positions facing each other, like some strange underwater ballet. Suddenly Pallas burst into a fit of laughter and Glenn followed suit, sending them both into slow somersaults. Even Vera was infected.

When they had calmed down, Pallas introduced herself and Vera. Glenn said, "In a way, I'm surprised to find you in the Float so soon and with no sign of being unnerved by it. Do you know that many cannot abide the place? Some have been known to develop a panic over the movement of the stars."

"I can believe it," Pallas replied. "I have never experienced such disorientation. No matter which way I turn myself my head feels 'up'. Like this...and it looks like the whole ship has stood on its side."

Vera said, "One could never see so many stars from Umber."

"Isn't Umber where those famous horses come from?" Glenn asked, neglecting to add that they were famous only since Miles Destan had mentioned them. The two women brightened at even this degree of familiarity with their home world.

"Our horse is called the Hrabas. It's a breed whose ancestors go back at least two thousand years. We have been raising it from the time we first arrived on Umber."

"It has gone through much evolution on our planet. We have developed special methods of breeding and training."

"Most of the connoisseurs on other worlds say it is the finest horse in the Concourse."

"And the strongest, don't forget—"

"Yes, it is quite fearless..."

Glenn got an inkling of what the animal meant to them but little picture of the society behind it.

A chime sounded from the direction of the Float's platform, requesting those who had been out since the last bell to come in. At Pallas' suggestion they all returned together and traveled back to the Beta pod, there to sample more refreshments and watch a group of acrobats in an amusement court. Pallas seemed relaxed, thoroughly enjoying herself, and Glenn realized that he had never been so captivated with any woman.

After an hour she declared, "I'm afraid that I am getting fatigued. We should return to our quarters, Vera."

"Perhaps you would consider meeting me tomorrow," Glenn ventured. When a slight cloud passed across Pallas' face, he thought: she doesn't wish to pursue it any further.

"My visit to Cosmopolis is a mixture of business and pleasure. Tomorrow is business. After that, the opportunity may return." Her glance flicked toward Vera. "But give me your call number—I cannot give you mine. If I am of a mind the day after tomorrow I will try to get in touch with you." Glenn sensed the return to a more formal distance.

He gave her the number. "I would be pleased if you did," he said. "If you do not get me in my cabin, you might look for me in the casino. I will likely be there much of the day."

Pallas' eyebrows made a fleeting gesture, then she smiled and said goodbye. Vera bade him a more formal farewell and the two women mounted the slideway in the direction of the elevators.

Glenn exhaled a deep breath. "This is not good," he told himself. "I will be distracted at the tables." And he was at her mercy: she might or might not call or come to see him. Moreover, he knew it would be the wrong move to attempt to initiate another contact himself.

Quite dissatisfied with the situation, Glenn returned to his cabin. He managed a few hours of fitful sleep.

In one of the lounges on the Alpha main deck, a televue receiver was tuned to the broadcast channel of the Orion network. Featured at that moment was a live interview with Dr. deLotbinière Panet, Prime Fellow of the Anthropologists Guild. Most occupants of the lounge were engrossed in their own conversations, but their full attention was gained when after a time the subject turned to Cosmopolis and its Captain...

- Q. It has often been said, Dr. Panet, that members of the Guilds engage in secret rituals and practices during their assemblies which are—to put it tactfully—questionable. As an Anthropologist, how would you analyze such behavior in a social class as sophisticated as the academics?
- A. It's a lot of nonsense—the allegations, that is. Sheer calumny! We have formal pledges to our various commitments and principles. You may call that ritual, if you wish, but they're not secret—and hardly "questionable"!
- Q. If there is no foundation to the rumors, why are they so widely held?
- A. I doubt that they are—by intelligent persons. Our feeling is that such rumors are fostered by certain segments of government.
- Q. Whatever for?
- A. Before Marcus Sand, all the Guilds practiced a strict non-involvement in the affairs of state. Unfortunately, he and the Political Theorists broke that tradition and now certain members of some Guilds seem to be getting involved with the Federationist party. The Hierarchs don't like it. So it's a smear. But if this interview is simply going to pander to the rumormongers—
- Q. By no means, Dr. Panet. Let me ask you how you feel about the sharp divisions in Concourse society today. Why is it that the various groups like the academics, the ruling classes, the Federationists, the business magnates, the

entrepreneurs, seem to live and function within their own isolated circles?

- A. That is a ridiculous exaggeration. However, we do live in an age of divergence and independence. The Concourse is so vast and complex that people cannot possibly embrace it all, so they form natural subdivisions and find their identities and security within those.
- Q. Would you say we lack a common rallying point? Perhaps we need some new crisis—
- A. My dear fellow! The concept of “rallying”—as you put it—83 billion people across 100 light-years is absurd! What would you want to have happen? We already have economic and social links throughout the Concourse which are quite remarkable as it is.
- Q. What about the Stellar Intersect game? Do you think it might prove a force for unity?
- A. (regarding the interviewer as though he might be better assigned to delivering weather reports from the Lu-Ching asteroids) An outlandish gimmick by a popinjay entrepreneur? Do you think social movements are determined by such bizarre things? (This elicited a chorus of boos from patrons in the lounge.)
- Q. Do you play Intersect yourself?
- A. Never bothered.
- Q. But surely you can’t consider Captain Cardis as merely an entrepreneur. Just look at his Library!
- A. I never have. And I have no doubt that it is grossly overrated by certain persons who come back star-struck by his extravagant vessel! (Another round of boos, supplemented by rude demonstrative gestures.)
- Q. You are not the first academic to express antagonism toward Captain Cardis, Dr. Panet. Is that because he works outside any Guild? Do not students and even Guild members unofficially make some use of the Cosmopolis Library? In fact, have not several been known to join Captain Cardis’ library and research staff, abandoning their own Guilds?...Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Panet has just departed the set, so I assume that the interview is over. Perhaps I could summarize some of the points he made...

“The Cosmopolis Library,” stated the guide book, “is dedicated to the history of humanity and its culture, and the multifarious societies flourishing on all the Concourse worlds. Much of it is assembled from previous publications. Other material is a product of the studies and surveys carried out by Cosmopolis research teams under the direction of Captain Cardis.”

So much time, effort and expense, Destan mused. For the sheer love of knowledge?

The Historian paid his first visit to the Cosmopolis Library within hours of his arrival. Located on the Alpha main deck with entrances on one of the quieter radial corridors, its premises proved quite different from what Destan had been expecting. The extensive network of rooms had a décor reminiscent of those secluded studies in private mansions where he had often searched out ancient publications in the course of his own career. The Library's three hundred thousand books were all shelved on walls. No stacks cluttered the central spaces; rather, elegant tables and patrician chairs invited perusal of each room's contents by the scholarly inclined. It was like the vast private collection of a generous philanthropist whose spirit hovered over all, and Destan almost expected to see Cardis himself appear to greet him.

In addition to the books which struck the Historian as a show-piece more than anything else, as much material and more was contained on microview and holographics available for study in scanner alcoves and projection stalls. Destan hardly knew where to begin, partly because he was not sure what he was looking for. So he sought inspiration by settling himself before one of the general catalogues to gain an overall picture of the Library's contents.

There he sat for two hours and this was the view he obtained: all the books plus the bulk of microview and holographic data were similar to the collection one might find in any well-stocked library devoted to Concourse history and culture, authored by professionals past and present, their names famous and obscure, on topics familiar and esoteric. Beside this, stood a considerable body of original material produced by Cosmopolis itself—its researchers and commissioned Guild members—most of which seemed to have the character of broad overviews, fresh looks, if Destan could judge, at a wide variety of topics covering many worlds. Destan knew the academics were often criticized for too narrow specializations, for producing few general studies on a Concourse-wide scale. It would seem, then, that Cosmopolis—which undoubtedly meant Captain Cardis—had devoted itself to filling this gap.

Destan found himself asking why. How much interest would the average tourist show in treatises on cultural traditions and political systems; on divisions of society according to racial stock, education, wealth; on common historical patterns among different Concourse worlds? Here, for example, was a study of communities built around the exploitation of natural resources, followed by a comparison with those engaged in developing synthetics. Should this be considered a technological study or a demographic one? Why would Cardis be interested in either? Perhaps he had set broad

guidelines and allowed his researchers to choose their own topics and approaches. Was he simply indulging in his own personal interests, or did he look upon himself as a man for all worlds, upon Cosmopolis as a ship for all peoples, and was simply carrying this image into every field, including the academic one of which he felt himself a part? So far it had won him no laurels from the ranks of the Guilds.

Destan was not in a position to answer these questions. As he installed himself in a scanner alcove he decided to restrict scrutiny of the Library to his own field of expertise: history and politics. But first, some basics.

Armed with a directory he began to punch out codes. On the subject of "Cosmopolis" he found little information beyond the ordinary: built fourteen years before at the Tashkent shipyards on Merander; a breakdown of certain data about the ship. To architects or designers there was no reference. He punched a code for Philip Cardis but beyond a one line reference as the builder and director of Cosmopolis, nothing. No background, no home world.

Not that he had expected it to be otherwise.

He leaned back in the chair. Jaynes had been right to ask the question: Who was this man? A man who had made such an impact on the Concourse scene, a man who had acquired such fame, influence and mystique—and yet no one knew anything about him.

Well, since Cardis had neglected to record any facts about himself, perhaps he had revealed something of his thoughts, his dispositions. Could they be discovered here? To what extent had he influenced his researchers and writers? Might there be certain key topics where his personal outlook could be felt? Yes, which even he himself had written...

Destan turned back to the scanner.

He began in the area of Concourse politics. The material produced by Cosmopolis itself could be easily identified: it was anonymous. Although it seemed well researched and competently written, it had that flavor of the summary overview, of having been written for the uninformed reader. Well, the average Cosmopolis vacationer was certainly that, though he wondered how many of them spent their time in the Library.

He let one study follow its course across the screen in full: a meticulous grouping of the worlds according to their political systems, ranging through those controlled by all kinds of dictatorial rulers, through oligarchies of clan, religion and ideology, and on through the various types of democracy. Each group and sub-group was individually analyzed, including its attitude toward the Federationist movement and the Concourse Council. Destan tried to glean some feeling for the personality of the writer behind the words, for

a bias toward any aspect of the subject. There was none to be had.

He passed over the social surveys, though he paused to scan one devoted to the cult of gaming. It had a certain condescending pomposity familiar in some Guild echelons. "...Our current mania for gaming is clearly the product of the era of stellar expansion in which ingenuity and risk-taking were a vital part of success. For us, the inheritors of those pioneers, these elements are embodied in our games, perhaps a dormant seed for the next flowering of the pioneering spirit that will carry us even further..." Surely nothing of Cardis here.

Next, Destan turned to a short history of the Concourse Council and the Federationist movement. He wondered how Cardis himself saw it: as a seminal force, or as the impotent expression of a foolish ideal?

"Out of Marcus Sand's fertile mind came a system unique in the history of representative bodies. He arranged that each delegate to the Council be appointed by the government of his or her own world, but from local nominees belonging to the Political Theorists Guild. This held the promise of creating a balance of loyalties between the world and the interworld interest..."

By the end of the article Destan believed he could detect a bias in the subject's favor. Would that be Cardis' own view or simply that of a Guild writer having sympathy toward the movement, as many academics did? But there was a subtle fascination conveyed for the figure of Marcus Sand that did not ring true of an academic.

This gave Destan pause. If the mind of Cardis could be unearthed from this mass of material produced by Cosmopolis, where would it most likely be found? The Captain was a recluse, but no less an individualist for that. Destan decided to play a hunch, one based on the apparent fascination for Marcus Sand, a hunch that would put him squarely into his own special field of study: the philosophy of history.

The hours slid by without notice. Destan scanned hundreds of items on Earth history plus several on the major colonized worlds. Before long, something began to emerge. There was a markedly different flavor to many of those that dealt with the great figures of humanity's past; occasionally even a topic like the rise of Rome, in which prominent persons were not usually portrayed as playing a critical part, was nevertheless slanted to glorify the role of the individual. In other words, Destan told himself with mounting excitement, here was an interpretation of history in terms of the infamous "Great Man" theory, one that saw human progress as a reflection of the deeds of great thinkers, innovators, conquerors...

Destan blanked the screen to sort his crowded thoughts. First, this was a theory which had been in disrepute for centuries, accused of lacking sophistication, not taking more complex factors into account such as the psychohistorical forces so emphasized in current thinking in the field. Destan knew for certain that no member of his Guild would have presented these topics in this light. But there was something else, something a cool, self-possessed academic would have been unlikely to impart: an excitement, the fascination of someone coming to the subject unjaded, maybe even for the first time.

He realized he had passed by one particular figure in Earth history, a prime candidate for the Great Man theory: Alexander the Great. Sure enough: a long study, full of that now familiar flavor. At one paragraph he locked the screen:

“The secret of Alexander’s success was that he risked his own person in the bid for his great ambition: the conquest of the Persian empire. Placing himself in the forefront of battle created both the charisma that impelled his soldiers to follow him to the ends of the known earth, as well as the fear and demoralization that sapped the spirit of the enemy. The force of Alexander’s personality was everything. This meant that victory and the future course of history hung by a single thread: Alexander himself—his decisions, his actions, his survival. It could be said that his every individual sword-thrust, at the Granicus, at Gaugamela, on the banks of the Indus, carried the potential to determine how the history of the ancient world was to proceed. When he did die, young and unexpectedly, before his work of consolidation had begun, that thread was cut. And the cutting itself set the future on a different path...”

Destan thought: Hardly a more graphic example of the Great Man outlook in purest form. And that unique excitement: here it seems to hang on every word.

Who had written all these? Had he in fact penetrated to Captain Cardis’ own mind? And that, Destan reflected, was quite ironic. For it was the closest he had yet come to an outlook that resembled his own. No, he thought, he had to qualify that. He had always been drawn to such a view of history, even obsessed over it according to more than one colleague, but thus far he had been unable to summon the courage to endorse it fully. But how strange, how ironic indeed, to have found its like here.

Where had all this led him? If he had indeed identified Cardis’ outlook on the great figures of the past—how history unfolded—what conclusion could he draw from it? The telling point was that

this view could not be derived from modern Guild philosophy. So where had Cardis gotten it? Could it be that it was a natural expression of his own way of thinking? Could it be that he had adopted it because it supported his own view of himself?

Long before Allen Jaynes had sounded his worrisome note about Cardis as a lure to snare his new investigator, Destan had found the figure of the Captain of Cosmopolis hovering in the background of his own thinking. For whenever he considered the present line of Concourse development, he had been unable to sense in what direction it was heading, unable to identify those figures of power who might be determining that direction. As yet, the Council did not seem a force to be reckoned with, nor might it ever. All this meant, as Destan saw it, that a vacuum existed and whether by instinct or premonition—perhaps through a degree of wishful thinking—the figure of Cardis had subtly but insistently offered itself as an element to fill in the gap. The Captain did not fit the standard characteristics of great men good or evil, but he enjoyed the quality of being a phenomenon, and in a vacuum phenomena had a habit of producing unpredictable effects.

How to penetrate the man behind the image? In the public mind, Cosmopolis and Captain Cardis were indivisible: together they had achieved a celebrity of mythic proportion. It was no surprise that certain persons were disturbed at the potential for power, and while not everyone in the Concourse may have perceived that potential, among those who had was surely Cardis himself. The crucial question was: had he engineered it?

Destan looked slowly about him, as though trying to penetrate the walls, the pods, the very fabric of the ship. And how would that power be exercised? Through Cosmopolis? The Stellar Intersect game? Whatever activities, known and unknown, Captain Cardis was engaged in?

Too much still needed to be learned. Destan blanked the scanner and left the Library.

\* \* \*

Five years before, during a period on Polonia spent in research work at the Cracow University, Destan had become involved with a teacher in the business faculty. He remembered Jan Winston as a warm attractive woman, two years younger than himself, good-natured and good-hearted. And vulnerable. He could still see the slender figure, the blonde hair bobbing at the shoulders, the sparkling almond-shaped eyes that could brim with joy as easily as tears. Destan knew that her feelings for him had far outrun their counterpart, and his own preoccupations and single-minded devotion to his work had eventually caused the affair to founder.

When, a short time after, Jan's tenure at the university had expired, she did not renew it. Instead she had gone to the Cosmopolis agency on Polonia and applied for a job. Her qualifications must have impressed them, for she had been offered a position as an assistant staff administrator on the resort ship. And there she had gone, presumably out of Destan's life for good.

Destan had not mentioned her to Chairman Jaynes, unwilling to be pressured into a possible abuse of their past relationship, although there was no doubt that after four years Jan might well occupy a higher position and be a party to some inside information about Cosmopolis and its Captain. In any event, he was going to have to wait until he had reached the ship to verify that she was still there.

And so she was, as a call to central administration revealed. Armed with her office code, Destan stood before the communicator. His misgivings about involving her in his investigation, he told himself, only added to those which already overtook him whenever he thought about their affair, the last he had known with a woman. And that was another reason for looking her up now: he wanted to erase those residues of guilt by seeing her at a time when her own feelings about the failure of their relationship had surely long since subsided.

He punched the call and felt an unexpected flush when Jan herself appeared on the screen and a look of sheer amazement came over her face. In thirty minutes they met at a café near the administrative offices of the Alpha pod.

"I think about you occasionally, Miles. But I never entertained the idea you would follow me all the way to Cosmopolis to renew our acquaintance." She laughed easily. Her graying blonde hair, longer than Destan remembered it, was pulled into a pert flounce at the side of the neck: a carefree touch to suit a rendezvous on Cosmopolis. She wore her conservatively cut uniform well over a still trim figure, and Destan looked at her with a trace of wistfulness that did not quite reach his face.

"I admit you would be sufficient reason to come all this way, Jan. But I have an assignment for the Association of Concourse Universities and I'm here to use the Library."

"I might have known!" Destan could see that her blue eyes had not lost any of their old sparkle. "Even on Cosmopolis you are here to work. Same old Miles! Have you changed in any other ways?"

He laughed and maneuvered the conversation around to Jan's life on the ship. She talked about her job, her promotions. Although there was a frequent turnover among many of the 1800 personnel, she had risen to senior administrator of the Alpha deck courtesy

staff. Destan assumed that other qualities he remembered about her—her sense of loyalty, her efficiency, her engaging personality—must be highly valued.

“Do you know I have been off the ship only once each year when I visit my parents? This is a wonderful place, Miles. I don’t know if I could be a permanent vacationer on Cosmopolis, but when one is working here it’s the best of both worlds. And you know that I always like to have people around me. I’m sure you remember my fears about being alone.”

“I think I would miss standing on solid ground more often.”

“Fortunately, that doesn’t bother me. And they are good to us here. We have everything we could ever want.”

“Do they work in romantic activities for you, too?”

“Oh, we’re left to our own resources in that department. But there’s an even mix of male and female and we seem to have lots in common. I’ve never been without...when I felt like it.” A certain wistfulness did reach Jan’s face. “The only trouble is, since a lot of staff members aren’t kept on as long as others, you take a risk when you get involved.”

Destan found himself uncomfortable and turned the conversation in a new direction. “This place is like a Never-Never land. Is it always the same? Does Captain Cardis have any new projects in mind?”

“There’s always his research, the Library and such.”

“Yes, part of my project is to investigate the credentials of the Library. My sponsors want to know how much trained scholarship is involved. Does Captain Cardis himself make any contribution to it?”

“Oh, that’s far beyond my sphere of activity, Miles. But why don’t you apply to see the Captain? From what you’ve said about your project, I’m sure he’d be willing to see you.”

Destan nodded. He sipped at his cup of dark Bugellian coffee. “What’s the Captain like?”

Jan considered a moment. “He’s affable, has a certain amount of charm, though often he seems at a distance. He certainly values his privacy. I see him only occasionally, at staff receptions—which I always think he attends because it’s good policy.”

“Have you ever talked with him?”

“Oh, yes. Not about anything important. Though sometimes when I look at his eyes I seem to see a lot of things going on behind them. Once I remember it was...a little disturbing.”

This was too nebulous. Destan said jocularly. “You mean you have been on Cosmopolis for four years and you can’t tell me anything special about him? What’s the use of knowing someone on the inside if she can’t give you some juicy information about the most fascinating figure in the Concourse?”

"If you're suggesting that I may have seen the inside of his quarters during off hours, I'm afraid I have to disappoint you, Miles. Although," she dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "they say it's been done."

"Really? Do you know of anyone?"

"Well, it's just a rumor—and it's supposed to happen only once in a while. Always a visitor, they say, never a staff member. But he is a man, so why shouldn't he have normal urges like everyone else?"

"Why not, I suppose? He just doesn't seem to have made it a part of his image."

"Oh, Miles!" she laughed. "Do you want them to print his track record in the guide book?" She stood up. "Come, let's go for a walk."

They strolled into a small landscaped chamber nearby. Gentle grassy knolls were threaded by walkways, and tall birches all but brushed the artificial sky. There were even birds, Destan noted, and he wondered if they ever blundered into the ceiling. No doubt by now the creatures were acclimatized to the limits of their world.

"I know the ground in this park is only four meters deep," Jan said, "but it's still real grass and trees nonetheless. You're right, Miles, it is a Never-Never land here. The trouble is, in places like that in fairy tales, no one ever grows up." She sighed, as though some more honest reality were penetrating the veneer. "You know, we travel all over the Concourse, we have visitors from every world you can think of. But sometimes I wonder what's the point of it all...."

She stopped and impulsively took his hand. It was still a smooth, fine hand, as she remembered it, though unused to granting spontaneous intimacies.

"Do you recall what it was like between us on Polonia, Miles? You were usually distracted in a strange kind of way. If you'd been a business tycoon or something, perhaps I could have understood it. But—well, Historians are just concerned with a lot of musty books. Yours were particularly musty as I recall. You didn't even seem to realize...that I was in love with you."

They left the walkway and started across the grass.

"No, Jan, I certainly realized it. But I have had few passions in my life—at least the last twenty years of it—outside my studies. You used to accuse me of spending more time in the past than in the present. That wasn't always so. And with you I couldn't help but be aware of the present—with your effervescence, and your love of life...and your body." There were those volatile eyes again. "But I was also aware of my own limitations. You would never have been happy with me."

They stopped beside a flowering frissbud tree. Destan reached out to pick a blossom, almost absentmindedly, when suddenly the image of the shallow ground, the metal ceiling overhead instead of real sky, made him uneasy. He was struck by an irrational apprehension that were he to pluck the flower it would be irreplaceable. He walked on, still holding the warm hand.

Jan asked quietly, "What are you referring to when you talk about twenty years ago, Miles? In the time we were together you kept back so much about yourself, it seemed."

There was little point in keeping it back now. Rather, it was as though he had arranged this moment so that he could offer some belated explanation for their past miscarriage.

"The first twenty-five years of my life were directed toward one thing, and that was to help my father develop his invention. He had his own business as a designer and manufacturer of electronic equipment on Penfield. He enjoyed considerable success and was admired by almost everyone who knew him. But he always had ambitions of achieving something special, something that would set him apart from everybody else. And he almost did—so I believe.

"For as far back as I can remember he talked about it. He referred to it as the "Destan crystal" because it was an advance on Addison's invention. You see, the nature of the Addison crystal requires it to be quite bulky, and the more power you want the greater the bulk. That's why there are low, medium and high power models in spacecraft, depending on the size of crystal they can carry. The same applies to communications transmitters. They need to be a fair bulk to push a signal across the Concourse at many times faster than light."

"I'm afraid I never concerned myself too much about those things."

"Few people do. But my father was convinced that he could tap an anti-matter force to make the crystal infinitely more powerful and that would mean it could be miniaturized. The smallest space-boat could travel as fast as the largest, transmitters could be virtually hand carried. It could be used in everyday machinery.

" 'It will revolutionize everything,' he used to claim. 'It will make me a very rich man and my name will go down in history like John Addison's.' "

They reached the green crest of a hillock. Destan stopped and proceeded to stretch out on the grass. "My father spent years on his calculations and on little tests in his laboratory. During those years I studied to be a Physicist; he wanted me to join him in his work. He said the two of us would be famous: Parker Destan and son." His eyes were focused far beyond the sky. "I knew I would always be in his shadow, but I wanted to be a part of his success."

"Did he really have something?"

But Destan could only recount the story as he had lived it. "When I was twenty-four, two years before I was to graduate as a Physicist, my father set up an experimental station on an asteroid in the Penfield system. He did it all with the help of only a business associate and seven workers. He was a stubborn individualist. He didn't like organizations like the Council. He mistrusted the academics, even though they might have been able to help him—even though he had encouraged me to join their ranks.

"He wanted me at the station for his first tests." Destan grimaced at the memory. "A thin little dome on an airless hunk of rock—I guess I was scared. But I stuck it out at first. Even at that point, though, I told him I wasn't sure his theory was actually going to work, that it might even have been dangerous. He said I would believe it after the first drive-tube test." Destan drew his hand across his forehead; he seemed to force himself to go on.

"After a week on the asteroid, helping my father and the workers with preliminaries, I couldn't take it any longer. I had to get back to solid ground and gravity. My father could see it, so he made an excuse to send me to Penfield to pick up some part he said he needed. I was to return in a few days. I felt that I could after a breather back on planet."

Jan wondered how Destan felt about Cosmopolis: another hunk of rock out in space, though this one had gravity and no one was forced to look at the stars. Was he suppressing the same kind of fears? If so, why had he come?

Destan went on. "While I was away he set up the test outside the dome. He was supposed to wait until I got back but he went ahead without me..."

"What happened?" It was a hushed whisper. Jan realized she was holding her breath.

After a further pause Destan said evenly, "He blew himself up. Along with the workers. And the station. And the asteroid."

Jan exhaled slowly.

"I didn't believe it. I told myself it had to be a freak accident. I spent a year going over his papers at home, trying to understand exactly what he had been doing, trying to vindicate him. I wanted to set up my own laboratory and develop the new crystal myself, in his name. But I couldn't work it out. Either his notes were incomplete or they were faulty. Whatever his discovery, it died with him—or perhaps he had none. In either case, he was not fated for the greatness he expected."

"His death must have been a blow."

"My whole life had revolved around him. Afterwards I felt that if my father could fail, what hope did I have? I abandoned Physics

and took up History. I became someone who studies and thinks rather than one who acts, someone who finds the past more fascinating than the present. I do not expect to make a dramatic mark on my time."

He turned his head and saw that Jan was suddenly staring at him with a peculiar intensity, a look of startled revelation.

"You blame yourself, don't you, Miles? In some crazy way you blame yourself for leaving—for not being there when the accident happened. Why? So that you could have died too?"

Destan muttered, "I let him down. Besides, I might have prevented it."

"How? From what you say about him, he would never have heeded you." She was almost angry. "Are you going to withdraw from life because of his rashness?"

Destan said nothing.

Jan allowed her emotions to ebb and presently got to her feet. Whatever Miles Destan was, he had been that way long before she met him.

They left the park. For the next hour Jan showed him some of the sights in the Alpha pod, but there was an awkwardness between them that brought the meeting to an inconclusive end. Destan said goodbye to her by an elevator bank that serviced the staff quarters, on the opposite side of the cabin deck from his own.

"I will send a message to the Captain asking for an interview. I'm sure he will be pleased to hear that some of the academics are inclined to give him official recognition. By the way, I am very curious about Captain Cardis' background, yet no one seems to know which world he comes from. Do you?"

"No, Miles, I don't. For some reason he likes it that way. Why don't you ask him?"

Destan nodded. For a few seconds Jan looked at him with her clear sympathetic eyes, then seemed to close off some idea in her mind. "I was very glad to see you again and have a chance to talk."

She kissed him on the cheek. "Contact me again before you leave Cosmopolis, promise?"

"I will."

She gave him the call number of her suite.

Destan wandered Cosmopolis for a few hours, then returned to his cabin where he brooded over the ship, over the elusive Philip Cardis, over his own life, until it came time to sleep again.