

HOODED SWAN • BOOK II

Rhapsody In Black



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DEDICATION
For Jack Spratling

PROLOGUE

I spent two long years on a bleak world circling a cold sun on the edge of the Halcyon Drift. I was lucky. There was air, and water, and the local vegetation was digestible enough to keep me alive—just. I was also unlucky. My ship was smashed and my partner was dead and even with a bleep sending out a perpetual cry for help the situation had a hint of the hopeless about it. Those two years did no more harm than the half-a-lifetime I had spent in space. A spaceman's expectancy of life is not so grand that two years can go missing and not matter.

I had little to occupy my time on the rock except survival and standing up the cross on Laphorn's grave every time the wind blew it down—which was often. I had memories, but I'm not a man who derives much warmth from memories, and they were more like ghosts that haunted me.

Ultimately, the wind began to talk to me. I listened. I was picked up by a ramrod which was searching for the legendary *Lost Star* and had homed in on the wrong bleep. The wind still talked to me—I had picked up a parasite, and acquired a companion for all time. I didn't like him (I thought of it as 'him'). He took some getting used to.

I felt bad enough after two years on the rock (I called it Laphorn's Grave) but the Caradoc Company, who owned the ramrod which lifted me, were intent on making things worse. They claimed a salvage fee. The court sided with them, and before I knew where I was I'd been dumped on Earth with a debt of twenty thousand hanging over the rest of my life like the Sword of Damocles. It's a hard life.

I went to look up some people. The man who'd taught me to fly was dead. All that remained of my distant past was an empty workshop and Herauld's grandson. Laphorn's family were alive and well and interested, but I wanted nothing to do with them. I'd had my fill of ghosts and I wanted to forget poor Laphorn. Even that was not to be. I had to get work, and the only work that was offered to me was a job flying the *Hooded Swan* for a New Alexandrian scientist/politician named Titus Charlot. The job was worth twenty thousand over two years but the contract I signed virtually sold my soul to Charlot. Charlot figured himself as puppet-master to the galaxy—alien races as well as human. I didn't see it that way, and neither did the galaxy. I knew as soon as I saw him that I was in for a rough spell.

The *Swan* was a great ship—the best—but her crew was makeshift. In the beginning she had a good engineer in Rothgar, but he soon figured out what was what and quit like a sensible man. The ones who stayed were all people I'd rather not have had around. Nick delArco was the captain—he'd built the ship and he was a very pleasant and gentle man, but he wasn't competent to take charge of a perambulator. Eve Laphorn was reserve pilot. Johnny Socoro—Herauld's grandson—was reserve engineer, and he got quick promotion, which made him big-headed as well as hot-headed.

Job number one was a crazy jaunt in pursuit of the good old legendary *Lost Star* bleep. It was the fashionable way of committing suicide just then. We won the race for our little-loved but much respected owner, but nobody reaped much of a harvest from the affair. People got killed, including my friend of mine named Alachakh. People do get killed, I know, but I'm not a violent man and I don't like to be around when it happens. The better I got to know Charlot the better I understood the fact that I was liable to be around when some more people got killed. The Companies, including Caradoc, were expanding at a phenomenal rate, and the commercial subjugation of the galaxy was well under way. New Alexandria and New Rome were the only forces trying to keep the lid on, and I was just one of the recruits to their cause. I didn't know how long the balance of power would stay balanced, but I knew I didn't want to be around when it tipped. Trouble and strife were on the way, and I didn't like

the prospect of being a pawn in the game.

I handled the *Lost Star* affair brilliantly. But that was only the beginning.

CHAPTER ONE

Calm down, urged the whisper.

I stopped, breathing heavily, to take stock of myself and of the situation. I was ankle-deep in cold, slimy water, and my flashlight was noticeably weaker. Perhaps I had every right to a touch of panic over my movements, but the wind obviously thought that I was overdoing it.

You can't go much farther at this pace, he said. You'll drive yourself to prostration. And there's no point. They gave up chasing you twenty minutes ago. They've got better sense than to lose themselves down here.

He was only trying to be helpful. In his fashion, he was always trying to be helpful. I found his eternal vigilance and limitless fount of common sense to be overly patronising and rather irritating. I had not yet conceded him the right to be as concerned for my welfare as I was, despite the fact that he had a similarly considerable stake in it. (But there was one important difference, of course. He could always find new lodgings if his present slum was condemned. I couldn't.)

'This light,' I told him, 'is going to go out before we've covered many more miles.'

So? The locals don't carry flashlights. They manage in the dark.

'All very well if you know where you're going, and have been walking blindfold around these caves since you were two years old.'

You're not afraid of the dark, are you?

'Yes.'

In that case, why did you ever start out on this idiot's crusade?

'You know damn well. You were there, remember? I didn't start the thing. I didn't want any part of it. It was Sampson and Johnny.'

They didn't force you to leave your comfortable jail cell.

'No, but with the door standing open like that, squatting in the cage till doomsday suddenly seemed to be a most unattractive prospect'

And so you ran. Well now, here you are. On the run and soon to be in the dark. We can go back, you know, and ask them to lock you up again. If that's what you want, decide now and turn round. If that's not what you want, then start thinking about where we're going, and why.

'At this moment,' I said, 'I'm not in a very good spot for sitting down to work out a strategy. Besides which, I'm in the dark in more ways than one.'

To this, he made no verbal reply. He held his peace, allowing me to go the way of my choice without further delay. I could sense neither approval nor disapproval when I went forward again. In all probability, he couldn't make up his mind what he wanted us to do either.

I stumbled on along the tunnel. My right hand balanced me against the wall which I was following while the left held the flashlight, swinging it in steady arcs to show me as much as possible of the way I had chosen to go. There was just black water and black stone, but it meant a lot just to be able to see it. The tunnel was wide here, and a comfortable height, and the flash couldn't do a very efficient job of highlighting the far wall. There was a circular yellow blur, and that was all.

I tried to run, but running through shallow water is just not practicable where any sort of distance is involved, and I had to settle for slow, purposeful wading. But I still concentrated all my effort on progress, and spared no part of my mind for contemplating destinations.

We can't just run, said the whisper, trying to prompt me. Not in a place like this. You can run until you drop, and still be nowhere. You've got to have some kind of a pattern in mind. You've got to decide the sort of hand you're trying to play. It's not enough simply to be down here. We have to have

a reason. Now you're here, you have to try to cut yourself some kind of slice of the action. It's not enough just to wander around and get lost. There must be thousands of miles of cave and shaft in the honeycomb. You could die and your bones need never be discovered. You've got to have *something* in your mind.

'I have,' I said. 'You.'

This is no time for indulging your ridiculous sense of humour.

'On the contrary. This is exactly the sort of time to which my sense of humour is tailored'

Be reasonable!

There should have been a thousand reasons why the wind and I were incompatible. But that was the only one that really bugged *him*.

'Look,' I said. 'For the time being, there's only one way to go. We're in a tunnel, right? When I go down, I offered alternatives, that's the time I begin making choices. And even then it won't be too difficult. I don't want to be any farther up, because it's too damn cold where I am. Ergo I want to go down. And if I remember correctly, the way to navigate to the lower strata of an alveolar system is to follow the current of cold air.'

You don't know anything about navigation in alveolar systems.

'I know enough of the jargon to provide excuses for anything I choose to do. And I know that hot air rises and cold air falls. That's all that's relevant at present.'

It's not as simple as that, he said darkly.

I was slowing down. The water was creeping up my calves. The bitter cold was numbing my feet and sending shooting pains up my legs. The hand which I was using to support myself was suffering too. Except where it was encrusted with lichenous growths, the rock was like sandpaper. It spoke well for the constancy and stability of the system that the water had never come up far enough to erode the surface smooth, but it was hell on my fingertips. The cold was beginning to soak into my insides, but I was well. I'd had to come up rather than going down in order to avoid the initial pursuit. Being linked to the surface lock, the reception area where we'd been imprisoned was above the capital and the main highways. Hence, to go down would be to play into the hands of the enemy. But I'd shaken off the nasties some time back, and I'd covered enough sideways ground to be fairly certain that I wouldn't drop back into the streets of the capital.

The problem was what to do when I did get back down to the inhabited strata. Before the breakout Johnny had been rambling about some vague and ridiculous scheme to steal surface suits and win our way back to the *Hooded Swan*. No doubt he had some even vaguer idea of mustering the *Swan* and its considerable artillery and taking the entire world by force. But the whole thing was a joke. There was no chance whatsoever of reaching the *Swan*. That was one hole the miners would have well and truly stoppered.

Ergo, I had to play a different sort of hand altogether. I had to do whatever I was going to do down here, in the caves. And the obvious immediate aim was to find out what the hell was going on. The endless secrecy was getting on my nerves. At least two people—Charlot and Sampson—knew more than they were letting on, or they wouldn't be here. I was grossly offended by the fact that they so staunchly refused to let me in on their idiot schemes. Although I didn't actually make any sort of firm resolution, I already had it in the back of my mind to do my level best to make a thorough mess of any plans either of them might have.

The first step in working my way back into the pattern of events seemed to necessitate making new contacts in the Rhapsody culture. The miners seemed to have suddenly become the police force, and I had to find a way that let them out. The Hierarchy of the Church I wouldn't approach in an asbestos suit. But even

considering the paucity of opportunity on Rhapsody, that still left a goodly proportion of the population which might be approachable and where I might be able to find friends.

It was not going to be easy, though. I knew virtually nothing about the culture beyond my contempt for its *raison d'être*. My prospects seemed very dubious indeed.

'It would have been a great deal simpler not to get involved in this mess at all,' I conceded.

Too late now, he said.

'In fact,' I went on, 'it would have been even simpler to have stayed at home. The further the contract with Charlot goes, the more trouble I get into. At this rate, the odds against my surviving the two years look somewhat considerable.'

This is your mess, said the wind. You can't blame Charlot for this.

'I can and I do,' I replied, perversely. 'If it wasn't for him, I'd likely be on Penaflo, in a nice, safe job.'

Working for nothing, the rest of your life.

'True, but there'd be a lot of the rest of my life. With Charlot, I'm not so sure.'

This is just wasted effort, said the whisper. Regret is a waste of time. Keep your mind on the issue at hand.

The tunnel curved to the left, and I felt the water speed up abruptly as it flowed around my legs. I knew there had to be an imminent declivity, and I tested the rock carefully with my boot. The water was uncomfortably fast, and I had to stand carefully to avoid being dragged from my feet. I had no wish to try swimming in the stream.

The flashlight showed me the drop, and it didn't seem to slope so steeply as to be unnegotiable. But visibility was only a few metres.

'The principle of Let Well Alone,' I said idly, while I contemplated the prospect, 'is unusually good sense, to say that it came out of New Rome. If Titus Charlot had the sense to follow the principle, we wouldn't be in this mess. Let Well Alone isn't ethics or diplomacy, you know. It's simple self-protection.'

A breach of the principle isn't against the law, said the wind, drawn into the argument against his will. You can't sue him for it.

'Pity.'

I began picking my way down the slope. Very slowly. Very carefully.

The water dwindled from my calves to my ankles again, but it was no less treacherous for that. I hugged the wall as close as I could, and I had to use my left arm for balancing purposes, which meant that when I wanted to use the flash, I had to stop.

In the meantime, my thoughts rambled on.

'If I ever take a Christian name,' I said, 'I think Job would suit me best. Job with the built-in comforter. Very apt. Poetic justice, even. You have no real appreciation for the sadness of my situation. How any parasite of mine could possibly take Charlot's part against me is quite beyond me. It smacks of disloyalty and a total lack of sympathy.'

Are you getting hysterical? he asked.

'Don't be ridiculous. I have never been hysterical in my life. I am merely indulging my twisted sense of humour, in order to keep my mind from direr thoughts, such as the possibility of slipping, and what might happen to me if I do. It is quite deliberate, conscious and controlled, I've lived in this body a lot longer than you have, and I wish you'd let me handle it in the manner to which it is accustomed rather than the manner to which you'd like it to become accustomed. You cannot teach old bodies new tricks. If you're going to live here, you'd better get used to the intellectual climate. W

never have storms, but it isn't a South Sea vacation paradise, for all that. Worry not, old friend. If the hill ever comes to sane, safe ground again, then I shall be off once again in pursuit of the plan which has burst from my head like Athene, in full armour—a stroke of genuine inspiration.'

What plan? he interrupted.

I didn't like being interrupted. It wasn't safe.

'To play by ear, of course,' I told him. 'To take each moment as it comes, and to follow my feelings. To do as I see fit, at each and every juncture, and not to concern myself with how each action might fit into the grandiose plans of fate and fortune. I always have bad luck anyway. *Ah!* I apologise most sincerely to fate and fortune both. I'll never say a bad word about them again.'

I'd found a ledge. Gratefully, I stepped out of the water. The ledge ran along the right-hand wall and was just wide enough to accommodate me. The tunnel still sloped downward, though, and quite steeply. A few feet away, there was a crevice in the rock which wandered away at right angles to the lateral direction in which I was travelling. Had it been an upright passage, I might have followed it, but it slanted at fifty degrees or less from the horizontal, and looked even less comfortable than my present course. So I went on.

The wind seemed relieved that I'd broken off my uneasy monologue, and I suspected that he wanted to start up a more satisfactory (from his point of view) conversation, but couldn't think of anything appropriate to say.

It was not often that he was tongue-tied, and I wasn't sorry to get an extra moment's rest from him. I suppose that some people might consider it a great convenience to be sharing their skull with another mind, on the grounds that two points of view are better than one. They might even consider it to be especially convenient that the alien mind couldn't stay alien, but had to organise itself along lines similar to their own—become human, in fact. It means, after all, that one need never be alone. It means that one never need be completely isolated from one's own kind. It means the everpresence of a friend, which might be necessary in times of dire need—such as when I blacked out at a most inconvenient moment in a hypoplasmic lesion surrounding a star in the Halcyon Drift. It means an extra force with which to oppose the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and illimitable seasick troubles, and an extra chance to end such troubles.

But as well as all that, it is also a bloody nuisance. There are times when one requires total peace not simply as a concession on the part of a companion but as a private slice of one's own existence. And that was what I didn't have. Not any more. And since disadvantages are always more irritating than advantages are soothing, I was distinctly unappreciative of the alien commensalism. (I say commensalism because he claimed to be a *symbiote*, not a parasite.) He understood, and he wasn't bitter about it, or overly impatient. After all, compatibility was very much in his interests. Indeed, it was *his* way of life. My way of life, previously, had consisted of wilful isolation, and even alienation. I was a loner, a confirmed outsider. It was difficult adjusting to the enforced change, but there was no point in resisting it. I couldn't get rid of the whisper. No way. We were together until death us did part. I couldn't afford to hate him, but I couldn't help resenting him. We weren't ever going to be soulmates.

It is, as many philosophers have observed, a hard life.

As the ledge narrowed, I was forced to stand sideways, with my heels to the wall, in order to move along it. The flashlight was now useless and I was forced to *feel* my way along the passage by fluttering my right hand over the surface of the rock face. I dared not lift up my feet but slid them along the ledge. As I progressed, the floor beneath the ledge, along which the stream ran, began to fall away at a much steeper angle. The water became noisy as it rushed down the declivity, perhaps

ultimately to fall into a vertical pit. Once I was certain that to fall off the ledge meant death, I lost interest in the precise geometry of the watercourse.

Suddenly, my right hand encountered empty space, and I stopped dead. There was no question of reassuring subvocal patter now. I was frightened. I drew back my hand and blew on the cold-numbered flesh-stripped fingertips to make sure that they were still adequately sensitive to touch, and then sent them scuttling along the rock.

I discovered the edge, and found that it was not simply a bend, but a hairpin reverse. The rock at my back was a wedge of what seemed to me then to be fragile thinness. Almost reflexively, I pulled myself erect, so that I did not lean on it so heavily. I inched forward, hoping that the ledge would not give out. As I reached the ultimate projection of the rock face, I shut my eyes—I could see nothing, in any case, with the flashlight pressed to the rock behind me—and pushed my foot slowly around the corner, toe down.

In my mind's eye, I could see myself balanced on the end of a chisel-shaped spur of rock projecting into nowhere, with an immeasurable abyss beneath me. The susurrus of running water now contained an ominous gurgle which suggested abysmal depths to my sensitive imagination.

Then my toe found a floor. It might only be a ledge as narrow as the one on which I was now standing, but I dared not contort my leg any further in order to explore its whole extent. The simple fact that a way out *did* exist was enough for me at that moment.

I had to turn round in order to negotiate the corner, and that offered difficulties. I transferred the flashlight from left hand to right, but decided it would be no more convenient there. I couldn't stick it in my belt, where it would get in between me and the wall. It was too big to hold sideways in my mouth, as pirates were once reputed to have carried cutlasses. I came to the conclusion that the only place it would be out of harm's way, and also in no danger of being lost, was dropped down the neck of my shirt at the back. This, of course, meant that I would be denied its light. Not that the light would be particularly useful, but it was a comforting thing to have around.

However, when needs must...

Turning myself face in to the rock wasn't too difficult. The wall was almost plumb vertical, fortunately. Had it leaned towards me, I would very likely have lost my balance and fallen.

Once my body was correctly orientated, I began to curl myself around the chisel-head, with my arms at full stretch on either side of the hairpin, and my feet as close together as I dared put them without endangering my equilibrium. It took me only a few seconds to ooze my body around the corner, but they were precarious seconds, and living them was by no means easy.

When I had recovered myself fully, I began to explore with my toe again, sending my left foot out cautiously to investigate the width of rock available to me.

There was an awful lot of it.

I turned around where I stood, luxuriating in the space which made the manoeuvre comfortable, and then fished the flashlight out of the small of my back—a feat almost as difficult as rounding the corner.

When I switched it on, I saw that although the *wall* turned through an angle of about one-sixty-five degrees, the *floor* only turned through eighty or so. There was another wall some six or seven feet away.

'Bloody hell!' I said with feeling. It had been a lot easier than I'd thought.

Caution never did anyone any harm, said the wind, comfortingly.

'Go to hell,' I said. Then I began to walk along the tunnel, playing the light along the floor in front of me. It wasn't so cold, either, though I was still walking down the airstream. The current was slower

here, though. I didn't know nearly enough about the aerodynamics of alveolar strata to judge exactly what that meant. It was presumably a venous shaft rather than an arterial, but whether the strength of the current was determined by the architecture of this element in the system, or by the connections made with other tunnels, I couldn't say. Probably both.

I could hear the faint rustle of water behind the walls, and that too would have its part to play in maintaining the local temperature clines which determined the precise pattern of the airflow. The water itself was recycled by evaporation and dispersion throughout the infundibular hotshafts which dropped all the way from the summit of the alveolar rock-tissue to the surface of the hotcore.

I began to move quickly again, now that it was easy. There was no sense in dawdling—I was still chilled, and I would have to find warmer air than this in order to thaw out properly.

At first, the tunnel was high and wide, and might have been tailored. But there was no sign of stoneworking. I wondered whether there was some obliging principle of physics which determined that the optimum tube dimensions in alveolar rock were just about right for accommodating people. Or, conversely, there might be some ironic principle of the life sciences which determined that humans should grow to a convenient size for the troglodytic existence, rather than the star-conquering existence which many of them seemed to prefer (or at least aspire to).

In actual fact, it was only the fact that these honeycombs seemed to have been designed with man in mind that enabled worlds like this one to be colonised. A system like this one could take only so much knocking about. Once the architecture was altered beyond a certain point, extreme changes could take place in the air-and-water circulation patterns, with potentially disastrous consequences for cultures whose livelihood depended on things staying the way they were. Some highly civilised worlds of this type had the science and the scientists to determine exactly what they could and couldn't do to their warren. Some could even alter warrens in order to make the air and water do what they wanted. But Rhapsody wasn't a highly civilised world. It was a galactic slum—a religious alienist culture with a high regard for hardship and none for efficiency or safety.

So where are we going? the wind wanted to know. It's all very well to play by ear and make up the plan of action as you go along. But we have to start somewhere. So where?

'Well,' I said, 'we have to eat. To find food we find people. This offers us a choice between the shanty towns which are undoubtedly sprinkled around this big Swiss cheese and the mine-faces and conversion plants at which the world earns its collective living.'

'Now, as we have already observed, the miners have decided that they have a crucial part to play in this silly drama, and that part involves waving guns around. Assuming that the conversion plants, the lifeblood of the culture, are protected from all forms of social irresponsibility, I therefore conclude that if we are going to eke out a temporary existence as a thief and a vagabond, the place to do it is the townships. Fair enough?'

He didn't say anything, so he was obviously satisfied for the time being with my declared intentions. When I was going well, he was always content to leave me to it. He didn't argue for the sake of it, as I was occasionally prone to do. I am a confirmed opponent. Say something, and I will disagree with it. On principle. And while I might not know what the hell I am talking about, I am occasionally disposed to defend it with considerable passion and obstinacy.

We all have our faults.

The corridor funnelled into a capillary, and I was forced to crawl. The passage seemed to be a conoid rather than a cylinder, which meant that on occasion I had to lay myself out snake-fashion and work my way through bottlenecks, whereas at other times I was permitted to employ a full-on shambling in order to progress. The air current became stronger as the air was pressured through the

irised collars of rock, and its coldness became a great inconvenience. No doubt, of course, I caused the air concomitant inconvenience as I acted as a considerable obstacle to its natural flow. I was extremely glad that it was a tailwind. To crawl the other way would have been well-nigh impossible. When I stretched myself through the bottlenecks, I felt like a dart in a blowpipe.

It wasn't a great way to travel.

'Worms must feel like this,' I said, half complaining, half sympathising with the lesser brethren of humankind.

The walls were slightly damp, and I occasionally came across patches of slime and grease that were undoubtedly protoplasmic. Despite the fact that alveolar systems lack the encouragement and assistance of solar radiation, they almost invariably contrive to evolve quite prolific life-systems. Because they are networks and not surfaces, and because a planet-wide stratum might contain hundreds, or even thousands, of unconnected warrens, the lifecosystems tend to be incredibly diverse and it is not unusual to find four or five separate evolutions in the one warren. The prospects of niche diversification are strictly limited, and unless the life-system is highly imaginative, it can rarely manage more than half a dozen different plasmid forms. Owing to the consequent lack of selective pressure, speciation tends to be very cursory, and divergent development tends to take place across boundaries which are solely defined by nutritional stratification. A life-system which might be regarded as 'typical', therefore, would probably consist of one 'plant' superorganism—a thermosynth, not a photosynth—one 'animal herbivore' type and one secondary consumer (often given a little assistance by a secondary thermosynthetic capability, and therefore unclassifiable as plant or animal). Plus, of course, the customary couple of parasites thrown in for the sake of that immortal ecological principle:

Big bugs have little bugs
Upon their backs to bite 'em,
And little bugs have lesser bugs,
And so *ad infinitum*.

Which is probably the only universal ecological rule.

Worms, contributed the wind, somewhat belatedly, have to eat out their own tunnels.

I hoped that this particular passage wouldn't get so narrow that it would take an excavator to get me through. But that was unlikely, bearing in mind the confidence of the air current. At the time, I was extremely thin, having been given no period of free time long enough to allow me to recuperate from my sojourn on Lapthorn's Grave, where I had been on the brink of starvation for two years.

And as it turned out, I was all right. The hole finally ducked into a sharp downslope and emerged into the ceiling of a much wider, taller tunnel. This one was engineered, if you can call beating your way through inconvenient outcrops with a pickaxe 'engineering'.

I had been an hour or more squirming my way through the slimy sheath before I achieved the outlet, but the rock had become noticeably warmer as I progressed, and although I had never contrived to be comfortable, I had begun to worry less about dying of exposure and more about skinning myself alive.

After I dropped from the bottleneck into the new corridor, I took the rest to which I'd been entitled for some time. I curled myself up into a seated foetal position, and switched out the flashlight, which was still heroically shining on, although still weakening inexorably.

There was no light—natural or artificial—in the tunnel. Neither was there a groove or a set of rails for vehicles to run along. This was highly unusual in an alveolar culture, and I presumed that the

religious tenets on which the colony was founded included the assumption that God gave us legs for walking on. The passage was obviously a thoroughfare despite its lack of provision for transport. The evidence of stone-clearing was quite obvious, and nobody clears rock unless they intend putting the cleared passage to regular use. I reflected on the inconsistency of a society's being forced to employ sophisticated heat-powered food-producing conversion machines, with all the careful organization and husbandry which that implied, yet at the same time denying itself even primitive—and cheap—wheeled transport systems. There's no accounting for the way people choose to exist.

The air in the corridor flowed from left to right as I sat with my back to the wall below the hole from which I had emerged. Unless my sense of direction had totally betrayed me, the capital lay to my left, and this was an afferent vessel. The air was a little too cool for my personal taste, and a lot colder than warren dwellers usually preferred, but I put that down to the world's personal eccentricities, and decided that it was not incompatible with the theory that this was a main road connecting the capital to a smaller township. The lack of traffic would also have argued against this hypothesis, except for the fact that there was something like a national emergency and the normal routines would have been completely obliterated.

'I'm hungry,' I complained unenthusiastically. Complaint is an unimaginative seed for conversation, but the wind seemed to have nothing to say, and I was becoming bored with sitting in silence. The alternative—the resumption of my wandering—did not immediately appeal to me, as I was still extremely fatigued.

You should have reminded your impulsive friends that jailbreaks are more conveniently situated after meals, said the wind morosely.

'You make the assumption, of course, that these religious maniacs were going to feed us pagans,' I pointed out.

Only the nastiest of societies fail to feed their guests.

'That's what I mean.'

If you could overcome your distaste for religious communities, I think you'd find that there are much worse people to have to deal with than the Church of the Exclusive Reward. You should know after the years you spent trading on the lunatic fringe.

'The galactic rim.'

Call it what you will.

All this merry chit-chat, of course, wasn't getting us any place. But it was helping to reduce my burden of fatigue. To look at the world with a kindlier eye is to be no less a realist, but serves to make fearsome the possibilities of failure and doom.

I suppose that I could even become amenable to the hardness of my fortune, if it wasn't for the delight which Charlot took in keeping me firmly under his thumb. And also for the lunatic notions which he used as chessboards on which to push his pawns. Like recovering the *Lost Star* treasure from the heart of the Halcyon Drift.

And, in all likelihood, like the present jaunt.

Picking up Splinterdrift on Attalus, and giving them a free ride home....

CHAPTER TWO

I hated Attalus.

It was always foggy on Attalus.

I really don't know how they ever came to build a major spaceport on a world so blatantly useless. Certainly not in order that it should become a home from home for refugees from God's Nine Splinters.

Probably it was because Attalus's star was practically cheek to cheek with Fomalhaut. Because they were visible targets, early starships had a tendency to head for stars that looked bright and beautiful in the dilute skies of Mother Earth.

Colonies thus tended to spring up in such regions, even if said stars were no great shakes from the point of view of utility, and pretty run-of-the-mill by transgalactic standards. The first spacemen, of course, didn't *have* transgalactic standards, but that doesn't wholly explain a blithe disregard for economic convenience.

In any case, Attalus survived by virtue of long establishment and a little extra effort. And, by pure coincidence, it did happen to be rather close to the system where the Church of the Exclusive Rewards established God's Nine Splinters. Even Attalus couldn't be described as convenient, because the Splintermen had deliberately tucked themselves out of the way, but it was near enough to be the jumping-off point for exiles, and the transit station for such ships as ever did go that way.

The Attalians accepted as a matter of course that they were the middlemen between the Splinters and Civilisation. As a trade route, it was virtually useless, but on worlds whose continued success was fairly fragile, everybody has to count the last cent and a half. Every little helps.

I was in a damp mood anyway, when I set the *Swan* down on Attalus field, and my state of mind grew progressively worse as I saw the fog, the port and the hotel, in that order. I'd been commanded out here without a word of explanation, and to make things twice as unbearable, Titus Charlot had come along in person. This was his private mission, and couldn't be trusted to agents and hirelings. Especially not after what had happened with regard to the *Lost Star*.

Charlot hadn't stopped seething yet over that little matter. It didn't show in his general conduct—especially not where Nick delArco and Eve were concerned—but I detected the occasional edge to his voice and glint in his eyes when he addressed himself to me.

Even at his best, he was never the life and soul of anybody's party. With that memory and attendant suspicions still rankling in his brain, he was a real bastard. The others managed to get along with him, with the possible exception of Nick, who—as captain of the *Swan*—felt the heaviness of his presence on board rather more than Eve or Johnny. But I found his standing beside me while I rode the bird to be a considerable annoyance. He didn't care. He had no interest in owning a happy ship. He just wanted a crew that he could manipulate to his own ends, and one that he could be seen to manipulate. A vain man, was Titus Charlot.

I'd warned Eve and Nick and Johnny before we even lifted for Attalus that they'd be better off working for someone else. But no matter how much better off they might be out of it, they were hanging onto the *Hooded Swan*. It made sense, in its way. There wasn't yet another ship in the galaxy that was anything like her, and they were all as close to her, each in his/her own way, as I was.

Nick had built the *Hooded Swan*. He had got the contract to turn an idea and a set of drawings and a mound of computer printout into an entity of matter and energy, a living being with a soul. And then they had offered him another contract—this one to become her captain. How could he have refused? How could he back out?

And in her pretty belly, the *Swan* carried Johnny's first baby. His engine. His drive-unit. Rothgar had taught him how to feed it and fondle it and clean it and attend faithfully to its every need and whim, but now it was all his. He and he alone was pacemaker to the heart of the most beautiful ship that ever flew. He couldn't give it up. He wasn't Rothgar, to absorb the whole experience in one trip and then need no more of it for it to be with him forever. Johnny was only a boy. No experience, no rank. Apart from the *Hooded Swan*, he was a nothing. Wild horses, as they say, couldn't have dragged him away.

Eve's reasons were somewhat more subtle. Difficult to see and difficult to understand. There was something odd between Eve and her brother, despite the fact that she hadn't seen him since she was a child. When I'd brought home news of her brother's death, she'd transferred some part of that relationship to me. It was nothing so crude and vulgar as being in love with me. In a sense, it was as though I were Laphorn's ghost. I was nothing like Michael Laphorn, of course—we could hardly have been more different. But she didn't know that. To her, I was her brother's hero, her brother's partner— all that was left, in fact, of her brother. (In actual fact, she was much closer to being Laphorn's ghost than I was. The facial similarity was no more than one would usually expect between siblings, but I could sense in her a weird echo of Laphorn's *hunger*—his greed for experience and his insatiability.)

And Eve had an extra reason, above and beyond wanting to stick close to me. She too was a pilot. She had her own hood and her own electroplates stowed somewhere aboard the ship. She had ridden the bird—in atmosphere only—on her initial test series. She was enough of a pilot to know that I was a damn sight better one, but she was also enough of a pilot to love this ship, forsaking all other ships. Steering a flying tin can was no way to live once you'd actually felt the *Swan's* wings in your fingers and her heart inside your body.

So we were all stuck with the ship, for one reason or another. My reasons, of course, were simple of all. Titus Charlot had legal title to a two-year lease on my soul. I was in no position to argue. Quite apart from that, the *Hooded Swan* was the best ship in existence. I was the best pilot. We deserved one another.

The four of us who were the crew on the *Swan* were mismatched, though. We had started out on a note of falseness and mistrust, but eventually we were forced into coexistence and mutual tolerance so that wasn't the reason. I'm not quite sure what the real reason was. It could simply be that we were out of one another's contexts—that our personal interactions weren't aligned with our status aboard the ship. Nick delArco, for instance, was a nice guy, but he couldn't command a rowing boat. He was too soft and he knew next to nothing about deep space. He was a counterfeit captain, strings pulled courtesy of Titus Charlot. I had no beef with him whatsoever as an acquaintance or as a shipbuilder, but as an immediate boss, in between me and Charlot, he was an unnecessary embarrassment.

And so, for that matter, was Eve. I didn't want an understudy aboard any ship of mine, especially not one who thought I was the shade of her long-lost brother.

Johnny, I guess, would have been perfectly OK in any other crew. Nobody had anything against Johnny. But he tried too hard. He was always trying to push people the way he thought they ought to go. He reacted too hard. He admired delArco far too much, he was infatuated with Eve, and his picture of me was far too good to be true.

The whole set-up was a mess.

Charlot's intellectual speciality was mixing, blending, sorting, separating and using. He was a perfect New Alexandrian. We were as much his toys as were his computer programmes and his beloved syntheses of alien intellects.

My first thought, when we were ordered to Attalus, was that he had found some new toys to provide him with a temporary diversion. That impression seemed to be confirmed when the first thing he did after landfall, was to search out the current head man among the exiles from God's Nine Splinters.

That man was Rion Mavra. Charlot introduced us to him, but didn't explain what he wanted with Splinterdrift. At that point, he probably hadn't explained to Mavra either. We also met several other examples of the Splinter culture at the same time, including Mavra's wife, Cyclide, and his cousin Cyolus Capra. There was no hint of any warmth in any of the greetings. You'd think that the exiles would be grateful for someone seeking them out and talking to them. After all, they'd been kicked out of their home world onto an under-populated, rather unpleasant world which might tolerate them, but certainly wouldn't make them welcome.

But the exiles remained cold and distant, trying to demonstrate that they were a considerable way above such considerations as loneliness. They seemed pleased to be able to withdraw from our company as soon as the formalities were over, but Charlot made arrangements to talk to them all again in the near future.

Then we went *our* way, to the hotel.

'Well,' said Charlot, as we walked through the fog-bound streets, 'what do you think of them?'

I think the remark was addressed to delArco, but Nick wasn't paying attention, so it was me who answered. 'What are we supposed to think? You haven't told us what's going on yet.'

He laughed gently. We reached the door of the hotel, and went through into the warmth and light. I was in urgent need of the customary shower and change of clothes after three days in the cradle, but Charlot obviously wanted to talk to us before going to his arranged meeting with Mavra and his companions. He ushered us into the lounge, and we seated ourselves around a low table. Nick ordered us some drinks.

'Rion Mavra comes from Rhapsody,' said Charlot.

'And that's where we're going?' asked Nick.

'That's right.' He turned to me. 'Have you ever been to the Splinters?'

'No,' I replied. 'By all accounts they aren't worth a visit. Besides, the principle of Let Well Alone doesn't operate.'

'The principle of Let Well Alone doesn't operate,' said Charlot. 'It merely exists. A ridiculous institution.'

'It's worth taking notice of,' I told him. 'It isn't applied without reason.'

'It is applied purely and simply to help maintain the fiction that the Law of New Rome has some kind of universal validity and jurisdiction. Anywhere which refuses point-blank to pay even lip service to the Law is labelled "Let Well Alone", on the grounds that any citizen of the galaxy is beyond the protection of the Law on such a world. But you, of all people, should know how little protection the Law offers to anyone on any world outside the core. The principle of Let Well Alone is a tourist guide, nothing more.'

'Any world,' I said, 'which refuses to accept even the spirit of the Law of New Rome is *ipso facto* dangerous.'

'The Splinters reject everything which is offered to them or asked of them, by the galaxy. They're an isolationist group. But they're a religious community. Certainly not lawless.'

'It doesn't necessarily follow,' I persisted. 'Not that I really thought that Rhapsody was a hotbed of murder and rape, of course. I just didn't particularly want to go there.'

Charlot knew I didn't have any real quarrel, so he pressed on.

'We will probably have passengers,' he said, 'and time is very much of the essence. We must make

Rhapsody in the least possible time. Luckily, there is no other ship on Attalus capable of making the trip.'

'There's a fast yacht out on the tarpol,' Johnny interrupted.

'No good,' I said. 'Rhapsody's in the hyoplasm of a blue giant. There's not much distortion there but the radiation and the gravity prevent p-shifters from operating. Only ramrods can reach the surface-lock.'

'Surface-lock?'

Charlot took over again. 'Rhapsody has only an internal atmosphere. Its towns are built in seven subterranean labyrinths. There is nothing on the surface at all. It would be as easy to live on Mercury as Johnny was Earthborn, so he understood the allusion.

'As Grainger says,' continued Charlot, 'only ramrods are equipped to make landfall on Rhapsody. The solar hyoplasm has no effect upon the mass-relaxation drive, and they carry enough shielding to withstand the radiation. But ramrods are very slow, and there's only one within twenty light-years of her.'

'Where?' I interposed, already having a sneaking suspicion.

'By now,' he said, 'it's probably on Rhapsody. That's why time is of the essence. The ramrod probably took several days to make a landfall, but it had a considerable start. We must make the trip in a matter of hours.'

'Can we?' asked Nick.

'Easy,' I told him. 'No distortion, no trouble. These close-orbit worlds always look difficult, but there's no real trouble involved. Bright light and a big pull aren't going to bother the *Swan*.'

'We shall have no difficulty getting there,' said Charlot, in a tone which suggested that he didn't expect much difficulty once we were there, either.

'What are we going there *for*?' I asked tiredly.

He settled himself in his chair, preparatory to delivering a lengthy discourse. I sighed. The answer was obviously going to be buried in a lecture. If, that is, he bothered with the answer at all.

'God's Nine Splinters,' he said, 'were colonised by a religious sect known as the Church of the Exclusive Reward. Their faith is fundamentally anti-Monadist, and during the Monadist resurgence some two centuries ago, they decided that the only way to their own unique salvation was via isolation from the morally polluted galaxy. Their faith stresses the necessity of hardship and struggle for existence, if the Exclusive Reward which they seek is to be attained. Hence they chose for the colonies the nine worlds which were associated with two unstable and unfriendly suns. Not one of those worlds is really fit for human habitation. And they're about as isolated from the rest of the galaxy as it is possible to be without going out beyond the rim. The nine worlds are Ecstasy, Modesty, Rhapsody, Felicity, Fidelity, Sanctity, Harmony, Serenity and Vitality.

'The worlds are isolated, even from each other. They have no more than half a dozen ships of their own, and indulge in only so much intercommunication as is necessary to the continued existence of the colonies. Only Serenity and Vitality can really be said to be self-supporting, but most of the others are nearly so, and the bulk of the traffic is triangular, between Sanctity, Ecstasy and Harmony. The precise balance of supply and demand within the Splinter Culture is quite irrelevant, and so are the sordid details of their particular dogmas. What is relevant is that rumours have reached me that the people of Rhapsody have discovered something on their world which I might want. It is no use whatsoever to Rhapsody, or to any of its neighbours. It is potentially capable of making the world—certain people on the world—very rich, so my informant claims, but the world doesn't know whether or not it wants to be rich. And the dogmas of the religion, of course, specifically forbid any of it

adherents to *be* rich. All of which is causing a certain conflict between various members of the Church Hierarchy and their individual and collective greed.'

'What have they found?' asked Nick.

'I don't know,' he replied, sounding somewhat annoyed at the redundant interruption.

'What *could* they have found?' Nick followed up.

'It's difficult to say. Rhapsody, of course, exists by mining and by the conversion of heat energy into electrical power. The people are fed by organic conversion, but their efficiency is obviously limited. They have to be supplied occasionally with raw organics from the middle worlds of the system—that's Vitality and Felicity. The mining, if undertaken properly, might be an economic proposition, but of course the people have no interest in interstellar commerce. They supply only their own needs. I assume that whatever has been found has been found in the mines. I maintain an open mind as to its possible nature. Speculation is quite useless.'

'It sounds like a wild goose chase to me,' I said.

'Perhaps,' he conceded. 'But New Alexandria has chased a good many wild geese in its time, and the few that we have caught have amply rewarded us for our trouble. It is precisely because we have always been willing to try what no one else thought to be worthwhile that we are now the most influential world in the galaxy. Knowledge which is worthless in small quantities becomes immensely valuable in complete form. None of our time has ever been truly wasted.'

'That is a matter of opinion,' I said.

There were a thousand things he could have cited in order to support his argument. So many, in fact, that he didn't even bother. He just ignored me.

'Where does Mavra come in?' asked Eve.

'The political situation in the Splinters as a whole, and Rhapsody in particular, is in a state of perpetual confusion and flux. Today's exiles are tomorrow's heroes. Small heresies may so easily become divine revelations. In matters of belief, fashion is a powerful driving force. No religion is ever static, and when a faith is confronted with a problem like the one which has arisen on Rhapsody, viewpoints are subject to many forces which tend to move them about and spin them around. It seems to me that by taking Rhapsody's exiles back home at this time, I may be able to inject several friends into important positions within the Church Hierarchy. This may be valuable.'

'You expect competition, then?' I asked. 'This ramrod that you mentioned?'

'The ramrod belongs to an organisation known as the Star Cross Combine. By no means as large as influential as the Caradoc Company, who were so unfortunate and so troublesome in the matter of the *Lost Star*, but rich and ambitious nevertheless. I hardly think they will have taken precipitate action because of a rumour, but they might well have directed the captain of the ramrod to invest a few weeks or so in investigation. They might not, of course, and he might not be able to get there in time, even if they did. But that remains to be seen. A few hours invested in making friends can hardly do us any harm, whether Star Cross is involved or not'

'Suppose somebody else has become interested in the rumour?' asked Johnny.

'They'll be too late,' Charlot predicted confidently. 'Rumours reach New Alexandria very quickly. Star Cross's advantage was purely positional. And in any case, no one else is likely to go so far out of their way hunting—as Grainger so aptly put it—wild geese.'

He fell silent, and looked at us expectantly. There were no more questions. We seemed to be finished, for now.

It seemed to be a moderately easy way to pass the time. A great deal easier than hunting up the *Lost Star*, anyhow. Law or no Law, what could possibly happen to me on Rhapsody? Not that it was m

kind of world, of course. I have an irrational distaste for the faithful, no matter which particular breed they belong to. Naturally enough, the feeling tends to be mutual. Even the most easygoing of people tend to find me mildly offensive—to begin with, at least.

I was suspicious of Charlot's story, but not enough to worry me. I assumed as a matter of course that the old man knew more than he was telling us. But if I was to be tied to him for two years, I would rarely going to find circumstances where I could be one hundred percent sure of what was on his mind. The New Alexandrian mind is basically twisted, and Charlot had a few extra twists over and above the call of duty.

All in all, I was pleasantly surprised that this operation seemed to offer little opportunity for disaster.

'When do you want to lift?' I asked him.

'As soon as possible,' he replied. 'You can attend to your various needs while I talk to the people from Rhapsody. It will take them some time to collect together their belongings, but I think we should be ready to go by midnight.'

'It couldn't possibly wait till morning, I suppose?'

'Midnight,' he stated definitely.

'We'll be ready,' promised Captain delArco.

The party broke up. Charlot exited at a fast walk. His hurry was showing. I guess he had a lot of sweet-talking to do. The Rhapsody crowd wouldn't make friends easily. Not even in response to the carrot of a free ride home. But I had no doubt that Charlot could talk his way into their good books given an hour or two in which to do it. By midnight, Rion Mavra would be his bosom buddy.

'Not much of a job,' commented Johnny, as we headed for hot water and soap. He seemed quiet down in the mouth about the dullness of it all. Apparently the harrowing trip through the Halcyon Drift hadn't cured him of his thirst for deep space adventure. He had real courage all right, but no sense of proportion.

'It'll be a cakewalk,' I said unenthusiastically. 'Relax and enjoy it. There's plenty of time yet to go shooting monsters on alien worlds.' That, I supposed, would be his idea of a good time. There's no accounting for taste.

At that time, I didn't exactly visualise my taking an active part in the happenings on Rhapsody. I certainly didn't see myself wandering around in the planet's black depths, alone, shattered, frozen and pursued. I suppose it was Johnny's sense of melodrama which involved me in the first place, but once I was loose, it was all my own work.

And all my own fault.

CHAPTER THREE

I should have been dead tired, but I couldn't go to sleep. It wasn't simply a matter of not daring to go to sleep, even if I was sitting on a highway. I purely and simply couldn't sleep.

After a while, I began to find the darkness oppressive. I once lived, for a while, on a world which was not unlike Rhapsody. The main difference was that it could be reached, even by p-shifter because it was that much farther away from its primary. (Even so, it was never easy sliding the *Fire-Eater* in and along an eclipsed groove.) But the culture could hardly have been more dissimilar. The air was always hot and loaded with odours. The background smell of sweat and the conversion machines was always masked by heavy perfume. Here, on Rhapsody, there was nothing like that. Not that the air smelled bad—this was a much bigger warren, and there were fewer people here—but where there were odours, in the towns and the mine workings, they were politely ignored, as if they did not exist. And it was a matter of politeness—the odours were never so perpetual that they could be blotted out of one's consciousness.

And on that other world, light was a treasure of immense value. The aesthetic existence of that culture was built around the qualities and uses of light. The people thrived on light—soft light, kind light, warming light, soothing light, sad light, angry light, jealous light, callous light. The rarity of light within the caverns enabled the people to find all kinds of beauty in the mere presence of it. The other cultures, saturated by abundant solar radiation, could not hope to discover.

Again, nothing of that sort here. The inhabitants of Rhapsody were apparently content with the darkness. If anything, they had come to abhor light in any quantity. Their capital had been illuminated only by dim lanterns, placed haphazardly rather than in the locations where they would be most useful.

The Rhapsody people had eyes, and used them; there was no doubt about that. But they seemed to be ashamed of their eyesight, and they apparently rejoiced in the hardship of doing without it whenever it was convenient, and often when it was not.

One could, perhaps, imagine that the warrens here might develop an alternative aesthetic life from that of the other world. One might imagine their coming to appreciate the qualities of darkness, rather than of light, finding beauty and inspiration in shadow and obscurity. But that had not happened either. These people seemed to have no art and no concept of beauty.

Even their language had been modified only by loss. They had abandoned all the words describing the quality of light: effulgence, brilliance, sheen, iridescence, radiance, lambent, pellucid, lustrous, rutilant, luminiferous, incandescent, coruscate. Likewise, they found no use for terms describing bodies of light; not merely sun, but also nimbus, corona, aurora, spectrum, beam, halo, *ignis fatuus*, and spangle. They did not trouble to differentiate between a glitter and a gleam, a glow and a glare. They were ignorant of the whole appreciation of brightness in all its forms. They lived by muted yellow lamplight, existing in an environment of dismal gloom. As though they were born and lived and died in veils or blindfolds.

And the corresponding enrichment of their language, which should have adapted their speech to their environment, was simply not there. They knew darkness, and obscurity, and murkiness, and shadow. And that was all. Nothing new to allow them to be in closer harmony with their world. The entire culture seemed to me to be somewhat subhuman.

Time to move, said the whisper, jerking me from my train of thought.

I permitted myself a slight groan as I got to my feet. My arms and legs seemed to have seized up completely in belated protest against the long crawl through the narrow fissure by which I had come to this spot. I flexed my fingers and kicked my feet. My hands were torn and the wounds were filthy.

They seemed to have no feeling in them at all while I held them still, but as I curled the fingers they burned with pain. The little finger of my right hand caught on my belt as I tried to clean some of the dirt from the palm by rubbing it on my equally filthy shirt. The flashlight which I'd lodged there fell from its precarious position, and clattered on the stone floor.

Frenziedly, I dropped to my knees and began searching the floor with my injured hands. I found the switch and flicked it anxiously. The light came on, and for a few moments it seemed abundant and strong. But as my eyes adjusted, I realised that it was very weak indeed, and could not possibly last more than a couple of hours.

It's not all that vital, the wind assured me.

'I'm not used to stumbling around in Stygian darkness. I come from a *normal* world, where people use their eyes.'

I've lived without sight before now, he told me. It's only a matter of using the other senses at your disposal. You have enough of them. With a little help from me, you can get by.

'I'll drive my own body, thank you very much,' I said. 'There'll be no more takeovers.'

Your insistence on my maintaining a wholly passive role in this partnership is quite ridiculous. I can use your body more efficiently than you can. It makes no sense at all to be so determined that you and you alone should exercise control of it.

'It makes sense to me,' I assured him. 'And you can't gain control if I don't want you to, can you?'
No.

Actually, I had my doubts about that. I wasn't sure exactly how far I could trust what the wind said about the limitation of his abilities. After all, he had never once mentioned the fact that he could assume control over my body until the occasion had actually arisen, at which point he had simply gone and done it.

I moved off, walking briskly along the passage. I considered turning off the flash and making my way by feel, which would have been moderately easy. But I didn't like the idea at all.

'I hope we're going the right way,' I said pensively. 'I don't really want to end up back in the capital with all those angry miners.'

Don't you know?

'Do you?'

It didn't occur to me to keep track, he said darkly. You're driving, so I assumed you knew what you were doing.

'I hope I do,' I said serenely. 'My sense of direction hasn't let me down before. Not often, anyhow.'

Not, of course, that I'd ever been called upon to navigate in a place like this before. In total darkness, with no sky but only solid rock, orientating oneself could hardly be easy. However, reflected, the tunnel only went two ways. If I had completely lost my sense of direction, there was still a fifty-fifty chance that I was going the right way.

The passage curved right, and was joined by another coming from the left. I tested the air currents in both corridors. The new one had more or less still air. It swirled around near the entrance, because of the current in the main corridor, but it had no real current of its own. I concluded that it served merely to connect two tunnels which were part of the circuit, and therefore had no part in the circulation itself.

I followed the airstream around the bend, and on into the darkness. I could have taken the connecting passage and gone through it to the other tunnel, which might have been arterial, and therefore warm. But that didn't seem a lot of point in searching out a warm tunnel when my real objective was habitation. Creature comforts could be attended to once I'd re-established contact with the human race.

preferably some fraction of it which wasn't after my blood.

Switch off, directed the wind suddenly.

I complied, and saw the reason for the directive almost immediately. In front of me, but a long way off, there was a faint glimmer of light. I glanced behind me, but there was only limitless darkness that direction.

The light ahead seemed to be extremely feeble, but I knew that it would only be a dim electric bulb and it was probably not as far away as it looked. I hesitated, not over whether to go on or not, but over the matter of the flashlight. If I continued with it on, then I would be just as visible to an observer near the other light-source as that light was to me. It seemed sensible to keep my approach as close a secret as was possible, and therefore I eventually continued in darkness. I moved cautiously, and with a certain amount of trepidation.

When I reached the light, I found that it was a bit of an anticlimax. It was just a light, hanging from the ceiling. There was another some twenty or thirty yards on, and more after that. I presumed that was coming close to a town. The abrupt termination of the 'street-lights' appeared to have no obvious rationale except that the supply of cable had given out. It seemed a little pointless to light a small fraction of a road, especially when the job was done so inefficiently, but it seemed typical of the way things were done on Rhapsody.

From my point of view, though, the transition from darkness into light was an important one. Quiet apart from allowing me to conserve the power in my flashlight, it had a noticeable psychological effect. I no longer felt like a skulker pretending to be a shadow, no longer a worm in Rhapsody's dirt or a rat in Rhapsody's walls. I could see, and I could be seen, and there were no two ways about it. If I went on, then I walked openly, as a man among men.

A particularly disreputable man, by all appearances. In the tentative glow of the yellow bulb, I could see at last how bad I looked. My clothes, from neck to toe, were completely begrimed. They were not simply black, but slick and greasy by virtue of the amount of native protoplasm which I had encountered. My face, I supposed, would be equally filthy. Certainly no one I might encounter was going to take me for an innocent citizen out for a healthy stroll, nor even a worker covered with the dirt of honest toil. It was patently obvious that I had been crawling through places where honest toilers were not wont to crawl.

But I hadn't really any choice. I stuck the flashlight firmly in my belt, and set off regardless, striding confidently and trying to appear perfectly self-possessed. But the road was still absolutely deserted. The dust beneath my feet wasn't the dust of centuries, by any means, but it was obvious that people didn't tramp back and forth along the corridor every day. Apparently the principle of isolationism which was an integral part of the faith of Exclusive Reward applied all down the line. Perhaps the people in the town that I was approaching didn't even know yet about the state of affairs in the capital. If that was so, they probably wouldn't be nearly so disposed to clapping me in irons or shooting me dead the moment they saw me.

That was the nicest thought I'd had in ages.

On the other hand, what I'd seen of Rhapsody's children didn't lead me into thinking I might be welcome. Human or otherwise, most people are willing to *talk* to people who help them. But even Charlot had had a hard time getting through to Mavra's associates. Mavra himself had been forthcoming enough, but he was some kind of politician anyway. Anyone I was liable to meet in the caves would presumably be more like Mavra's hangers-on—Coria and Khemis. And I didn't much like what I'd seen of *them*.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was foggy.

It was always foggy on Attalus.

We had returned to the *Hooded Swan* with all due haste, arriving with a few minutes in hand at midnight. But there wasn't the slightest sign of Charlot or our precious guests. While we were attending to necessity and using a few rare hours of freedom to unbend our ship-clouded minds, Charlot had apparently taken it into his head to change the schedule.

'Damn him!' I said.

'He'll be along,' said delArco. 'It's probably taking them longer than he figured to pack their bags.'

'They can't own much,' I muttered. 'They came away from the Splinters in a spaceship.'

'We could go back to the port and have a drink,' said Johnny.

'At midnight?' I said scornfully. 'This isn't civilisation, you know.'

'Well,' said Nick, 'at least we know that Titus Charlot and his crowd can't be merrily socialising.'

'More probably cleaning out the local bank,' I said humourlessly.

The prospect of a long wait was most unattractive. The crew of any spaceship might be as happy as skylarks zooming their pride and joy between the star-worlds, but when the ship is on *terra firma* they need time to savour real gravity and real air, and time to imbibe a ration of dirtside living. A starman is a creature of two worlds: out there and down here. Each has its mode of existence. Upship personnel tend to develop agoraphilia on a hop, and it takes a certain amount of downstairs routine to work it off. To be rushed around at breakneck speed and then left to hang about in the fog on the edge of the tarp was nobody's idea of a joke.

By one o'clock (local) I was distinctly annoyed. I hadn't had any proper sleep for three days. The drug-induced ship cycle just isn't the same, somehow.

'Where do you suppose they've gone to?' asked Eve.

'We must have been over all the possibilities at least three times during the last hour,' I snarled.

'Give it a rest. Talk about the weather, or something. On second thoughts, make it "or something". I don't like the weather, either.'

'The port officer's not there,' supplied Nick. 'There's no light in the reception building. That's against regulations.'

'So report him,' I suggested. 'Hell, there are only two ships down, and we don't need a baby-sitter.'

'We've had one every other landfall we've made,' he pointed out.

'This is Attalus,' I reminded him. 'There aren't any police here because there aren't any criminals. There's nothing for the criminals to live off. Besides which, nobody knows we're here. The last job was a publicity stunt, remember? It wasn't us the crowds were interested in, it was the *Lost Star*.'

'We needed that police protection, though,' he said pensively.

'Nobody's going to try to assassinate me here,' I assured him. 'And you had nothing to worry about even on Hallsthammer. No one has anything against you.'

The boredom, of course, was solely responsible for the morbid vein of conversation. None of us really thought that anything untoward had happened to Charlot, or was about to happen to us.

'He's coming,' said Johnny suddenly.

'About time,' I said. 'How many maniacs has he got with him?'

'Can't tell. Fog.'

Charlot and his companions went directly to the ship, and we set out to join them. We met halfway across the tarpol.

‘Sorry,’ said Charlot briefly. ‘They all wanted to go home, but they weren’t sure that they ought to. It’s been a long, hard argument’

He really did look somewhat fatigued. The peculiarities of the faithful had apparently been getting on his nerves somewhat.

There were seven people with him.

At first glance, they didn’t look very much out of the ordinary. There wasn’t a smile in sight, but *was* the middle of an alien night. We didn’t look happy either.

We loaded up without exchanging any pleasantries. In the interests of getting off the ground without further hanging about, even I gave them a hand with the baggage. There wasn’t much as I predicted.

As we crammed them into the cabins, Titus Charlot identified them by name. I listened, and even learned how to tell them apart, though I wasn’t particularly interested.

Rion Mavra himself was in no way distinguished. He was of medium height and complexion, with drab features. He looked to me like the perfect picture of a civil servant, although Charlot had described him as a politician. Judging by appearances, I decided that in all probability he was a failed diplomat without a future. At that time, however, I had no idea what kind of qualities it took to be top man in the Splinters, or what shortcomings one could get away with.

Cyolus Capra, I remembered, was some sort of blood relative to the boss. He looked more alive than Mavra—insofar as any of them could have been said to look alive. I charitably put it down to the hour and the situation, but it later transpired that the corpse-like expressions were their natural attributes.

Cyclide, Mavra’s wife, was a small, compact woman who had obviously seen better days and wasn’t trying too hard to convince herself or anybody else that they were still around. She didn’t look pushy enough to be the power behind her husband, or interested enough to have kept pace with him. The Church of the Exclusive Reward apparently had old-fashioned ideas about the place of women in society. Cyclide always seemed to be half a pace behind her husband.

The two other men, Pavel Coria, and something Khemis—whose first name I forget—looked counterfeit. By which I mean that they gave the appearance of being reasonable imitations of humankind without quite having the feel of the real thing. They reminded me vaguely of the way Laphorn used to speak about the ‘faceless hordes’ that populated the worlds of the core. ‘Human vermin’ was another expression which he might have used. And Laphorn, unlike me, was quite an admirer of his own species. I took an instant dislike to these two, and they never did the slightest thing which might tempt me to dispel it as an overly harsh first impression formed under unfortunate circumstances.

The remaining two females did not seem to be attached to Coria and/or Khemis, and neither did they lay claim to any relationship with the Mavra family. One of them was called Camilla, and was very young and very plain. Her existence seemed quite irrelevant, save that she occupied a certain amount of space.

Angelina, on the other hand, was just young enough, and far from plain. She was the only one of the seven who clearly showed symptoms of having been born and bred in a warren. Her skin was dead white, and had an odd, lustrous quality which made it look silvery when illuminated obliquely. Her hair was very pale blonde, and also had a noticeable sheen. Her eyes were pale grey, and her lips bloodless. In addition, she had a fragility of frame and feature which made her ghostliness seem very appropriate and even beautiful. Very few people are actually suited to the appearance of etiolation, but Angelina was one of them. I found Angelina most definitely attractive.

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