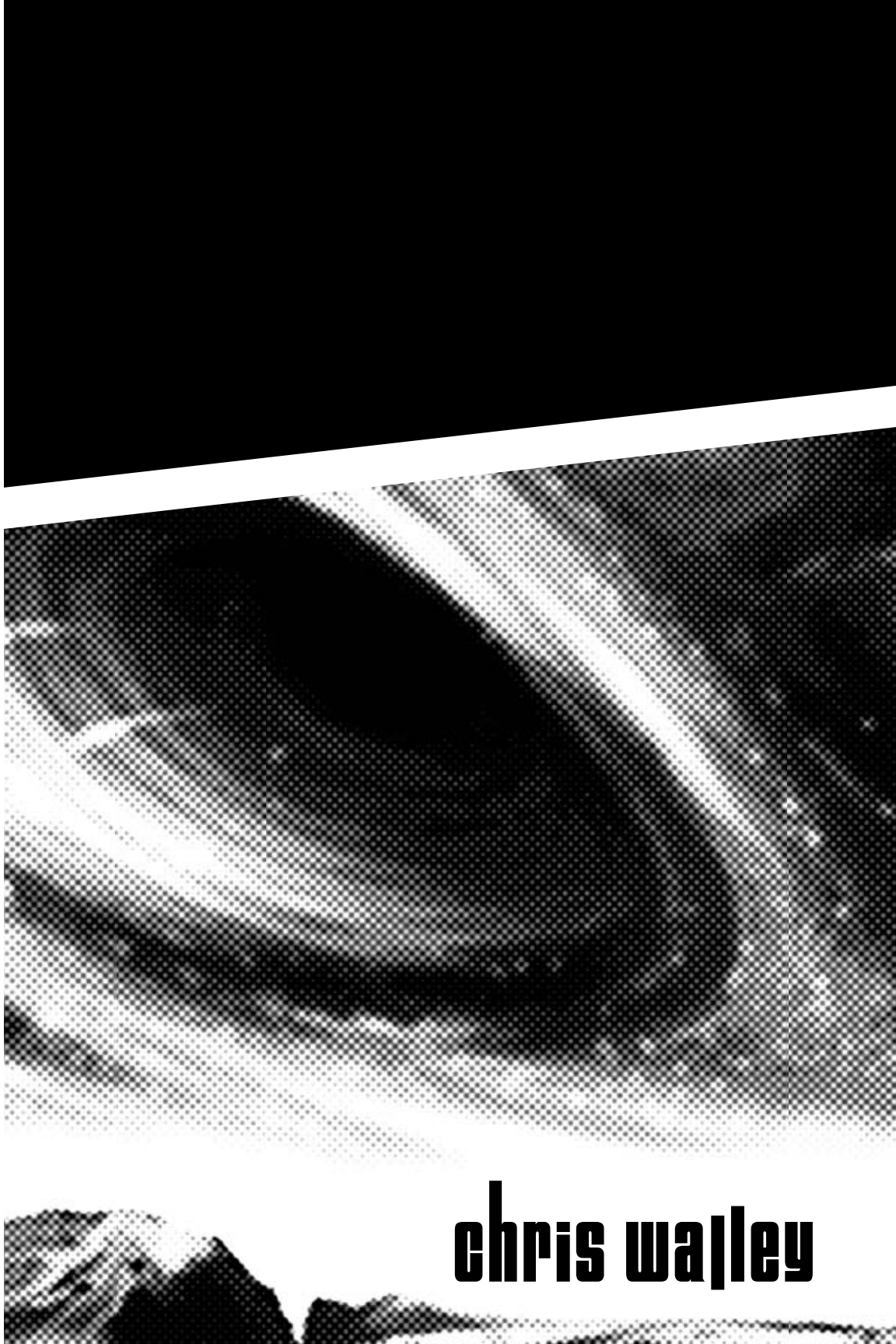


the dark foundations

THE LAMB AMONG THE STARS SERIES □ BOOK 2



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chris wajley

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The Dark Foundations

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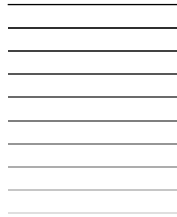
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*To my many friends in the A Rocha Trust
who seek to be the faithful stewards of
the Creator by preserving his creation.
Their faith, vision, and courage are an example.*



*Such music (as 'tis said)
Before was never made,
But when of old the sons of morning sung,
While the Creator great
His constellations set,
And the well-balanced world on hinges hung,
And cast the dark foundations deep,
And bid the welt'ring waves their oozy channel keep.*

JOHN MILTON,
ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY



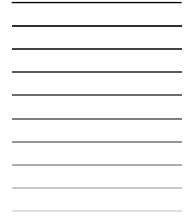
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I would like to thank many people for help on what has been, in every sense, a long book. My wife, Alison, and the “next generation”—John (and Celia) and Mark—were continuous encouragements. As an editor, Linda Washington somehow managed to be simultaneously brave and ruthless *and* tactful and gentle.

The A Rocha Trust (www.arocha.org), to whom this book is dedicated and with whom I have had many dealings, is a Christian organization working to conserve nature. If places such as the Aammiq Wetland do survive into the future, their labors will have been a major factor.



PROLOGUE



In telling of the return of evil to the Assembly of Worlds and how Merral D'Avanos of Farholme fought against it, we have heard how the intruders came to Farholme and how their space vessel was found and destroyed at the battle of Fallambet Lake Five. Yet so far, our focus has only been on Merral and Farholme. The rest of the Assembly and the forces of the Dominion have been on only the very edges of our tale. Now though, as the field of battle opens up and the greatest of all wars looms, the scope of our tale must also broaden.

As we begin that account, we must briefly step back to just over a month before the battle at Fallambet Lake Five. For even as Merral searched for the intruder ship, his remote world was becoming the center of wider interest. At the very heart of each of the two human realms—the Dominion of Lord-Emperor Nezhuala and the Assembly of Worlds—minds and wills were turning rapidly toward Farholme.

With very different intentions.

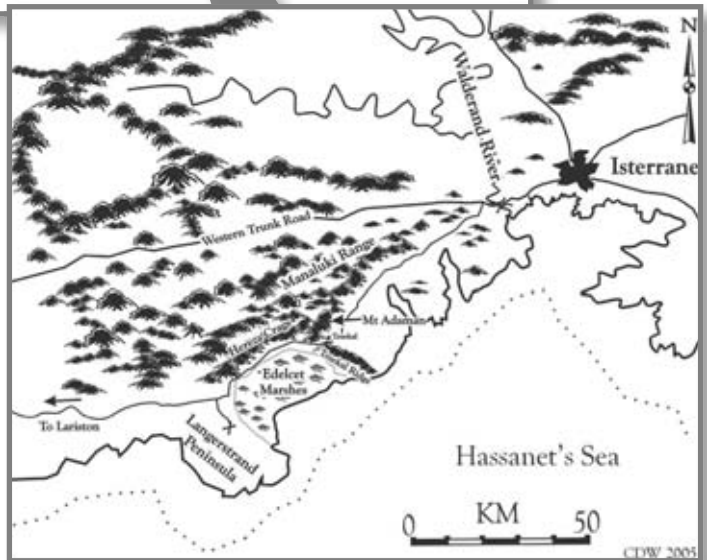
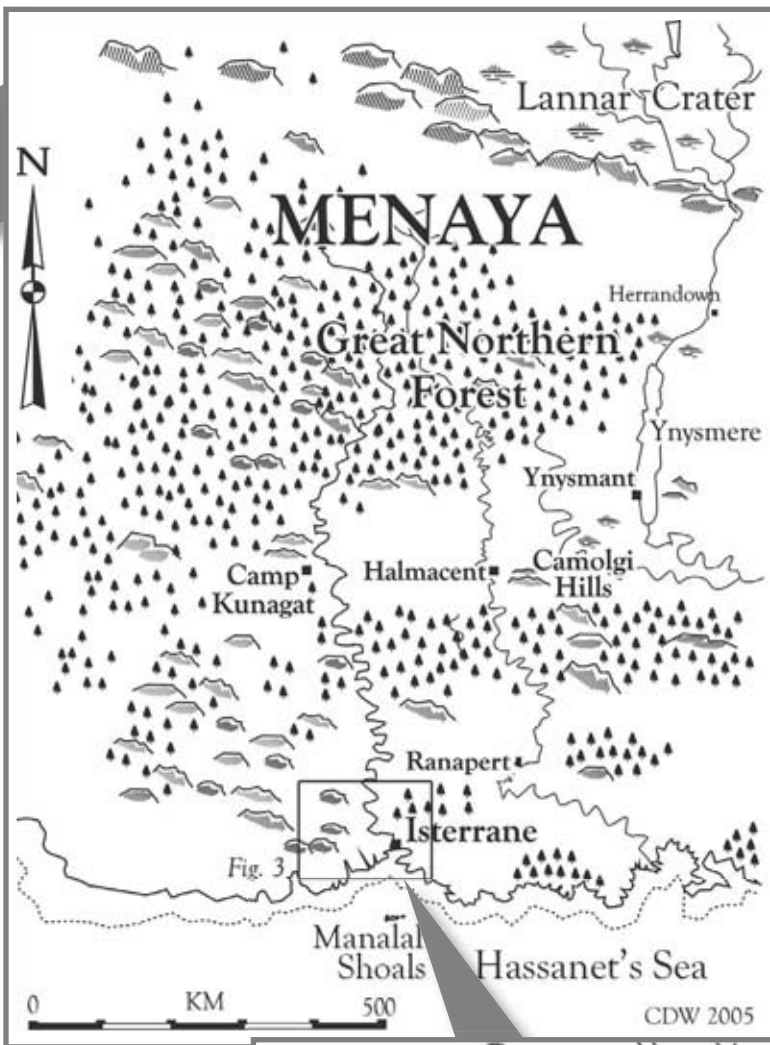
NORTHERN POLAR ICE CAP

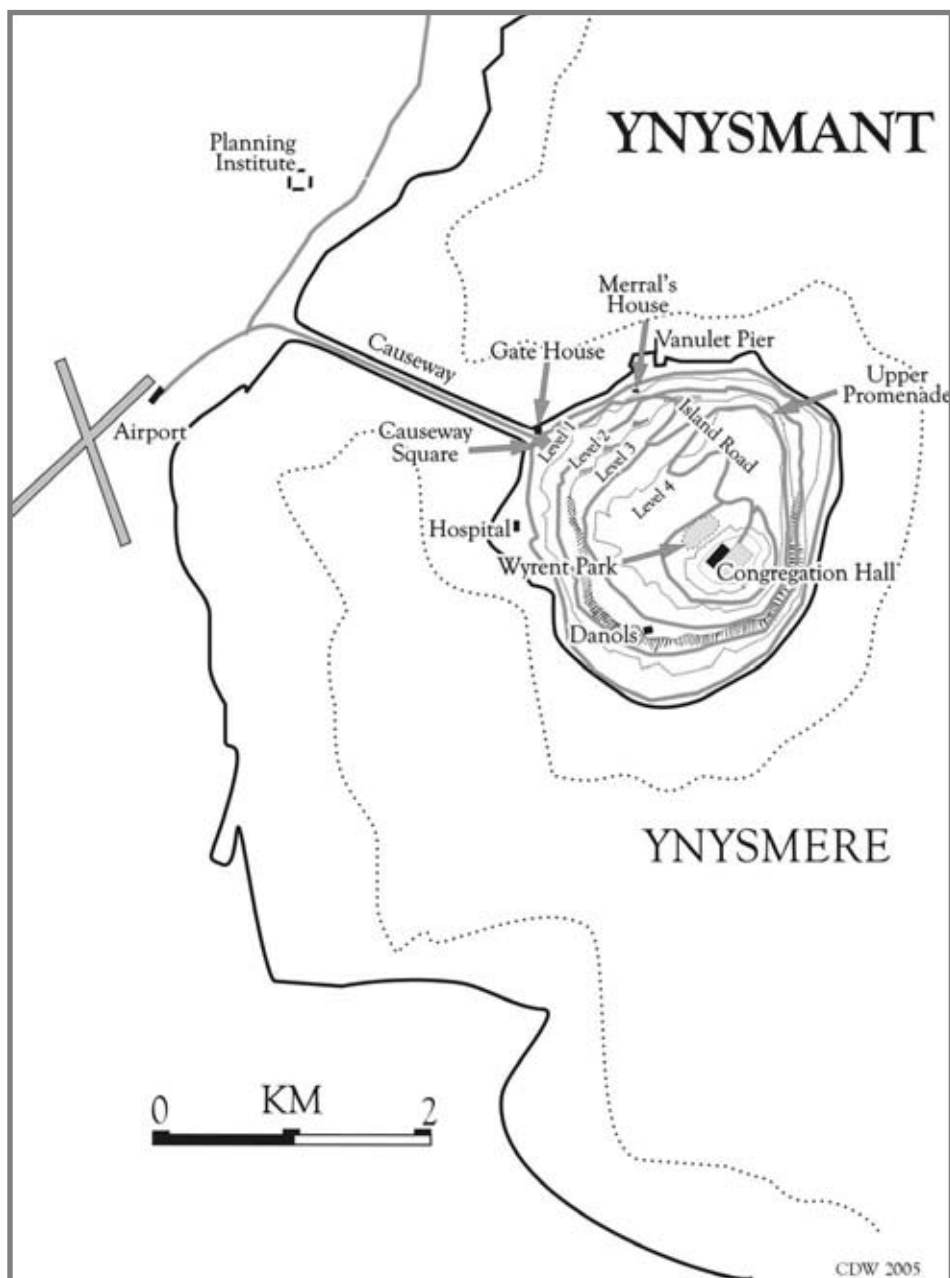
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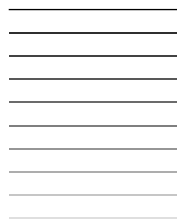


SOUTHERN POLAR ICE CAP

0 500 KM
At equator







Over four hundred light-years beyond Farholme, Sentius Lezaroth, Fleet-Captain of the Tenth Dominion Task Force and Margrave of Cam Nisua, scrutinized the main pilot's screen on his low-orbit lander as it entered the final moments of the descent. There was nothing for him to do—every aspect of its descent from the battleship *Strallak Ravager* through the turbulent atmosphere of Khamajaja had been handled by the planet's control center.

I hate remotely handled landings. I have no control over events. I feel vulnerable. And today, I don't even know where I'm going.

His screen showed the sprawling, dirty city of Khetelak, the planetary capital. Within moments the lander was heading toward a tiny landing pad high on the spire of what seemed to be the tallest building.

"We are landing, Admiral!" he called out, and braced himself.

The touchdown, however, was gentle. As soon as the lander was stable and all the other parameters looked normal, Lezaroth initiated the power-down procedure. *That much they allow me to do.*

He adjusted his uniform and glanced at the only other occupant of the lander, Admiral Kalartha-Har.

Kalartha-Har, a bulky man with a worn, heavy face and thinning silver hair, stared out of a window, drumming his fingers against the seat.

He's nervous. Both of us are. But then, who wouldn't be when you're suddenly called to a meeting with our elusive and mysterious Lord-Emperor Nezhuala—a man I've never met. Few of us have.

"Sir, where are we, *exactly*?"

"We are, Margrave, on the summit of the Tower of Carenas at the citadel of Kal-na-Tanamuz. In short, we are at the heart of the Dominion." The admiral's deep voice seemed studiously neutral.

Lezaroth noted that the admiral addressed him by his title rather than by his rank. *But then, as an unlanded commoner, he's probably more impressed than I am by my membership of a noble house.*

Lezaroth gazed through the cockpit glass. The Final Emblem of the Dominion, the red loop of infinity on the blackness of space, flapped energetically from a flagpole at the far end of the platform. Hundreds of meters below, the sprawl of Khetelak stretched out in the red-hued late-evening sunlight, its deep alleys and towering slums hidden by steam and smoke. To his right, the crimson orb of Sarata was setting in dust clouds over a vast salt sea.

Lezaroth turned to the small mirror above the screen that allowed the pilot a view of the four passenger seats and checked his appearance once more. *The model of a perfect Dominion warrior: a well-developed but not exaggerated musculature, the space-bronzed cheek with its small but striking scar, the broad line of significant medal ribbons, and three tiny golden rosettes on the shoulder to show I am of a high-level noble house.*

A green light flashed.

"We can disembark now, sir."

The admiral unbuckled himself and climbed stiffly out of his seat. "My muscles seem to seize up on these flights," he moaned. "I'm showing my age."

The hatch door opened. Lezaroth was struck by a cold gust of gritty, dry wind that carried a hint of sulfur. *But at least I can stand upright in it and frostbite isn't thirty seconds away.*

At the foot of the ladder, the admiral gestured Lezaroth over to his side.

Aha. He wants to say something and this is the old trick. A cooling ship emits so many other signals that it's hard for any listening device to hear what anyone is saying.

"Some advice, Margrave," the admiral said in quick, low tones. "Remember that this isn't the officers' mess of some ship of the Tenth, a hundred light-years from Sarata. Guard your tongue in the presence of the lord-emperor and pray that he hasn't heard any of your treasonable grumbling."

Lezaroth said nothing. *What you call treasonable grumbling, I call legitimate grievances. But yes, I do pray to the powers that he hasn't heard of them.*

The admiral's tired gray eyes seemed to be full of an urgent warning. "You are talented, have a good battlefield record, and are a margrave of Cam Nisua. But none of these will help you in the slightest before His Highness if he thinks you're disloyal."

"Thank you, sir."

"The lord-emperor merits the greatest respect."

"I know, sir." He paused. "But why are we here?"

"Because he asked to see us. That's all we need to know. Obey, Margrave. It is our life's purpose to serve him."

Well, Admiral, you would say that. Your loyalty to Nezhuala has paid you well. You have a family and a house on Albama.

A green holographic arrow appeared just above the ground.

“We’d better go,” the admiral hissed. “Let me do the introductions. But careful. Especially here. And at sunset.”

“Why sunset?”

“Don’t ask!” There was a nervous shake of the head. “There are rumors.”

They walked forward, following a line of arrows toward an open hatchway.

Suddenly, Lezaroth had a feeling of alarm. *Odd. I have no gifting in extra-physical matters and have no known occult powers; but I feel that something, somewhere ahead of us, is not safe. There is danger here.*

Instinctively, Lezaroth toggled on the neuroswitch in his mind that operated his bio-augment systems. The colored biometric icons flashed on his field of view, showing no metabolic anomalies other than a slightly heightened pulse—nothing to indicate a biological reason for his unease.

He glanced at his comm systems. They were inactive; the Khetelak authorities hadn’t allowed him to link up with the local net.

Upon reaching the hatchway, he toggled off the bio-augments. It was protocol to switch off all such systems in meetings with superior ranks.

His intuition of danger troubled him. *I hate this. I feel trapped. I’m without weapons, armor, comm links, or military backup. It goes against everything I have learned in ten years of warfare. I am vulnerable here.*

The hatchway revealed a steep, dark stairway. As Lezaroth and the admiral followed glowing arrows down the stairs, Lezaroth touched his chest, feeling beneath his uniform the talisman of Zahlman-Hoth, the god of soldiers. *Great Zahlman, protect me. If I must fight today, give strength to my arm and resolve to my will. If I shed blood, may you drink and enjoy it.*

Three flights down, a door slid open to reveal a large, gloomy hall. As he walked through the doorway, Lezaroth felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. It was a sure sign that he was in the presence of some sort of extra-physical phenomena. He looked around urgently, as tense as if he were on the battlefield, scanning for any danger and wishing again that he was armored and had weapons and backup.

The long, stone-floored hall had a high-vaulted ceiling and was full of strange, twisted statues towering twice and even three times a man’s height. It was not a well-lit place and the figures cast odd shadows. In fact, the shadows dominated the room. The air was heavy and still and had an unpleasant odor.

“Fascinating,” the admiral murmured. There was an edgy catch in his voice.

The statues were all totems or idols, but bigger and more impressive than the ones usually in temples. Some Lezaroth recognized. The nearest, an angular, vaguely birdlike figure with claws and jagged bill, was Naxhfulain, the god of plagues. Behind him, a stooping creature with long fangs and spidery fingers was Hamartos, the deity of miscarriage and infant death. But he had never seen so many large ones together.

The shadows caught his eye again. Did they shift or was it just his imagination?

They stood still gazing around. Lezaroth suddenly heard voices coming from somewhere, a whispering so quiet and high in pitch that it was on the very edges of audibility. As he listened, he could hear other elusive sounds: a low murmuring and a faint feverish chattering.

He felt alarmed. *This is not just a museum. There is power and hostility here. A man who strayed into this place might easily not walk out alive.*

Suddenly, the high-pitched whispering grew louder and more excited.

“He is here!” hissed the admiral.

Lezaroth looked to the far end of the hall. Between the lines of idols and their shadows, a slightly built man of medium height walked toward them. He had light brown hair and wore a long, dark jacket and matching trousers. Even at this distance Lezaroth was struck by the steady, authoritative way in which he walked. *Things wait for this man, not he for them.*

As the man came nearer, the shadows seemed to shift around him as he moved, giving the effect of light focusing on him as in a painting.

It has to be an illusion.

The noises—the whispers, murmurs, and chattering—seemed to grow louder.

A few steps away from them, the man stopped. Lezaroth noted a face that was almost entirely unremarkable apart from its extreme pallor and the dark gray, almost black, eyes that seemed to stare at him with an intensity that made him uncomfortable. There was a smooth smile on the anonymous and unblemished face.

I know that face. I have known it since childhood. It walks through my dreams. It had not changed since he first saw it on the posters that hung in every room in the nursery complex. *How old is the lord-emperor really? He has openly wielded power for fifty years. But before that, we know little. Even now, when we easily live for two or more centuries, his immunity to age is remarkable.*

The high, invisible whispering was suddenly cut short.

“Gentlemen, welcome,” said Lord-Emperor Nezhuala. His voice was gentle, resonant, and utterly authoritative.

“My lord,” Admiral Kalartha-Har said, and bowed swiftly and deeply.

“My lord,” repeated Lezaroth the merest moment after him, and bowed in a similar manner.

The lord-emperor lifted his palms upward. His hands were covered by black gloves. “This is the great hall of Kal-na-Tanamuz—the repository of the figures of the powers.”

Lezaroth was struck by the lord-emperor’s conversational, even amiable tone, but warned himself again not to relax. That odd intuition of alarm was still fresh in his mind.

The admiral spoke. “Lord-Emperor, it is an honor to be received by you.”

The lord-emperor made a gesture of welcome. “Admiral, it is nice to see you again. The family well? On Alhama, aren’t they?”

“My lord, they are very well. And yes, it is Alhama.” There was an odd hesitancy in the admiral’s voice. “My lord, may I present to you Margrave Sentius Lezaroth, Fleet-Captain of the Glorious Tenth?” His words seemed hasty.

It is as if he wants to change the subject.

The lord-emperor extended a gloved hand and Lezaroth shook it. It was unresponsive, but he felt a faint sensation of energy.

“Captain, *Margrave* Lezaroth,” Nezhuala began, “I am delighted to meet you. I followed your actions in the war. I know your background too. Cam Nisua is a world long loyal to me and the House of Lezaroth has always served the Freeborn well.” He smiled. “I have read the commendations. You ‘forcefully deployed Krallen,’ ‘skillfully ordered bombardments,’ and ‘personally donned armor and fought.’” The lord-emperor spoke in sharply truncated sentences. “Altogether splendid. The victory that we won at Tellzanur was achieved through your actions.”

Lezaroth bowed. *I could honor the dead here, but I won’t. They are dead and I’m alive.* “Thank you, my lord. It is my life’s purpose to serve you. However many my days may be, they are all at your disposal.”

They were clichés from regimental songs, but he needed something safe to say.

The lord-emperor looked at Lezaroth with that gaze of unnerving intensity.

This is a man with charisma, a man who can inspire others to sacrifice. Men will die for him and he knows it. He did not become the creator of the Dominion and the first lord-emperor for nothing.

There was something about this man that fascinated him. He tried to remember some of his many objections to the lord-emperor and found that they had somehow vanished. *How odd.*

“You are young for a margrave.”

“My father died early. I had elder half-brothers, but they were killed in battle.” *I will not mention that two died in family feuds.*

Nezhuala nodded. “I see. Now please, follow me. Both of you.”

Nezhuala turned smoothly and walked down the hall, with the admiral and Lezaroth following at a diplomatic distance. The mysterious noises seemed to have started up again. As they walked, Lezaroth heard their feet echo oddly. Sounds seemed strange here, as if the air was somehow too thick.

The lord-emperor waved an arm at the figures. “Artists’ representations of course. They look very different when you actually meet them.”

He stopped suddenly and turned to Lezaroth. “Did you know that I talk to some of the powers?” His voice had a candid, almost naive tone that invited confidence.

“I had heard tales, my lord.” *More than tales.* He recollected how, under torture, one renegade from Tellzanur had spat out that Nezhuala was a “witch king in league with demons.” His security officer had killed the man there and then, but no one had bothered to deny the charge.

The lord-emperor’s gaze seemed fixed on a carved form with holes for eyes. “It is my duty, Margrave. I do it for the Dominion. I see myself as the great intermediary—the man who stands between men and the One.”

“My lord, in you we see the infinite.”

Suddenly, Nezhuala tilted his head slightly as if listening to something. He nodded, as if agreeing, and whispered some inaudible words. Then he turned to Lezaroth. “Excuse me. Some of the lesser powers wanted to speak to me.”

At a gap in the line of the totems the lord-emperor turned left and led the way through more shadowy figures into an open space. In the middle of the space was a weird, high-backed chair made, it seemed, out of many twisted, pale bones.

“Take the seat, Margrave.”

Lezaroth, already tense, now found himself in a high state of alarm. But there was nothing to be gained by refusing, so he sat. The chair gave slightly under his weight. He was aware of a strange, unpleasant smell. A glance around showed ominous, dark stains on the floor slabs. Another glance showed that the statues all around were open-mouthed.

The alarm gave way to fear.

The admiral sat down on a stone bench not far away to his right. His hunched posture and pale, troubled face suggested a deep concern.

The lord-emperor stood before Lezaroth. “I need to talk to you, Margrave, about several things. But first . . .” He made an odd fluid movement with his hands.

In an instant, Lezaroth found himself immobilized.

Don’t panic! Analyze! But terror was not far away. *A trick of extra-physical forces.* He tried to move, but his leg, back, and arm muscles were frozen solid.

“Margrave, I do not waste words. I have followed your career very closely. More closely than you think. In fact, I know everything about you.” The

menace in the lord-emperor's words chilled Lezaroth, and his premonitions of danger seemed to be fully justified.

He said nothing, because he didn't know what would come out. He heard the voices again and heard anticipation in their whispers and murmurs. *They are watching.*

"Supporters tell me that you say things about me. I have recordings." Nezhuala twisted his fingers and a hologram appeared just in front of Lezaroth's face. He saw himself in the weapons bay of the *Ravager* speaking loudly.

"Why does His Highness"—there was scorn in the title—"make tactical military decisions? Why does he overrule the advice of his generals? Why are there random promotions and demotions? As if on a whim? Tell me, someone!"

Another clip appeared. Lezaroth saw himself with the chief engineer, in the forward hold this time. *Oh no, not that conversation! Great Zahlman, protect me!*

"I'll tell you why this doesn't work." There was anger in Lezaroth's voice as he pounded his fist on a nonfunctional munitions lifter. "It's because it's worn out. We need a new one. And why aren't we getting one? Because all our resources are used in building this monstrous Blade of Night—a structure that no one other than the lord-emperor and his attendant demons knows what it does. Five hundred kilometers long, the mass of a sizable asteroid, yet no known purpose. Give me patience!"

A third clip. Only last week—in the ship's gym of all places.

"I don't get it. It doesn't make any sense. None at all. The war against the renegades is over—has been for months. 'The final triumph of the Dominion,' he told us. So why don't we have peace? Why haven't the battle fleets been stood down? Why haven't the Krallen factories closed? Why hasn't military conscription ended? Not a sign of any of it! The old fool at Khetelak has put the military machine into top gear. New battle fleets, new long-range ships, and Krallen production at a record high." There was a murmur from someone off camera and Lezaroth continued. "I'll tell you why! He's going to attack the Assembly and he's going to kill us all. They outnumber us twenty to one at least. It's madness!"

The holograms vanished.

"Margrave," the lord-emperor said in a cold voice, "I have more of the same. I have enough information on you for a public court-martial and the slowest of executions."

Lezaroth was as scared as he had ever been. He was more scared than at the disastrous attack at Krull's Crater and even more scared than when the deployment pod engines had failed on the descent at Nadrewai.

"My lord, I beg forgiveness and seek your mercy. I spoke rashly."

The lord-emperor took a step closer. There was a gleaming knife in his hand.

This is it. Lezaroth realized he was sweating.

The oddly twisted silver blade gently touched his throat. It was cold and seemed to be held with such extraordinary steadiness that it didn't even tremble. *He could take my life and not give it another thought.*

"I ought to kill you."

On the edge of audibility he heard the whispers reach a new intensity.

Suddenly from his right came a slight cough.

"Admiral, do you wish to say something?"

"My lord, Your Highness . . . I hardly dare." The admiral's voice was tremulous. "But the margrave is a young man. A bit rash. These statements—oh, *how* I warned him—were just words. He is a fine soldier and—for all his words—very loyal. I ask . . . for mercy."

Thank you, old man! Great Zablman bless and protect you.

The knife at Lezaroth's throat didn't flicker. "A brave comment, Admiral. I am . . . persuaded." Nezhuala drew the knife away.

"So, Margrave, it won't happen again?"

"No, my lord. Never." *And I mean it.*

"Good." There was a flexing of the pale lips into a sort of smile. Nezhuala made another gesture and Lezaroth felt his muscles freed.

"Now, Margrave, just wait here a moment. You may leave the chair. I need to take the admiral next door. When I come back, we must talk."

Lezaroth turned to the admiral. *Thanks*, he mouthed, but there was no response. The admiral was staring at the lord-emperor with a look of intense fear and perplexity.

As the two men left, Lezaroth stood carefully and stretched his muscles. Alone among the watching statues and their shadows, he felt an almost giddy mixture of fear, relief, and gratitude.



A few minutes later Lezaroth was listening to the strange noises when he suddenly realized with a start of alarm that the lord-emperor stood before him. *I never heard him!*

"Margrave," Nezhuala began, "I did not spare you out of mercy. I despise mercy. I spared you, because I think you may be useful. But come, let us walk amid the forms."

Lezaroth followed him in silence.

"Let me explain a military paradox that I face," the lord-emperor said.

“So far, I have been able to personally supervise campaigns. But it seems that soon we will be carrying out battles a long way away.”

So he is planning war against the Assembly!

“That will involve a new type of campaign a long way from my supervision. It may take months for messages to reach me. So I need new commanders. I need men who can act on their own initiative.” Nezhuala’s masklike face split into the thinnest of smiles. “I am looking for talented men who are independent thinkers, but who are also loyal. I don’t want clones or mindless fanatics. And my search for such has found you. Talented, yes; independent, yes. But are you loyal enough to do my will?”

“I am, my lord.” *Now.*

“Perhaps. Let me explain further. You know about what happened with the *Rahllman’s Star*?”

Do I pretend that I don’t know anything? No, a lie is too risky. “My lord, I pieced together more or less what happened. A group of renegades escaped from Tellzanur in the last stages of the fighting. Somehow they stole a freighter and tried to escape. They were pursued by the admiral and, in desperation it seems, headed toward the Assembly. The admiral assumed that they would be forced to stop or be destroyed by the barrier that separates them and us. But somehow they managed to pilot the ship through. The admiral followed, but lost them in the outermost inhabited system of the Assembly. He observed things for some days and then returned. Is that correct?”

“A commendable brevity. And it raised major issues. I agonized over the matter, then talked to some of my counselors.” He gazed at the statues for a moment and shook his head. “It is hard work. They are full of tricks. But they confirmed my own beliefs. War with the Assembly is assured.” He turned to Lezaroth. “Are you still uneasy about a war with them?”

“My lord, my words were hasty. If you think victory is possible, then it is.” As he said it, Lezaroth realized that his doubtful tone undermined his statement.

“I agree, caution *is* needed. They are big, bigger than you thought. We have a mere twenty-five worlds and thirty million people. They have, we now gather, some sixteen hundred worlds and a population of a trillion.”

That big!

“But there is a chance. The limited data the admiral obtained from his brief visit to the Alahir system. His distant scrutiny of the world over four hundred light-years away—Farholme they call it—suggests that these worlds are all rural. Pleasant no doubt, but rather agricultural.” There was a tight smile. “They have rivers, even seas, and forests. Plants and trees produce their oxygen.”

As he shook his head, Lezaroth glimpsed a strange, passionate light in his eyes. “Ah, the Assembly. It never changes. Wonderful on reforming worlds, but truly pathetic on the things that matter. Like industry. They have

nothing, Margrave, like our industrial plants or our oxygen factories. Gates, gravity modification—oh, they do that, but little else. They are frightened of technology. They always were. That was the cause of the war.”

He means the War of Separation, of course. Funny to think of that twelve-thousand-year-old event as the war. We have had a thousand other wars since.

“And no weapons. None.” The lord-emperor’s gaze seemed suddenly appraising. “Military comments? You did well at college, I gather.”

Think! I must try and impress. The danger to me may just have been postponed. “Well, my lord, it is only the scale of the task that makes it daunting. The basic principles of combat apply. Strike fast, strike hard, and strike strategically. Go for the nerve centers before they realize what is happening.”

“Good. Anything else?”

This is a test. “My lord, one big question is whether or not they know we exist. Once they start arming, we will have little chance of success.”

“Good. And?”

Lezaroth thought hard. “We need more information. Much more. To strike strategically.”

“Excellent. I agree. I am glad I spared you.”

Nezhuala jabbed a finger toward a vast, mottled, snakelike form with red eyes and a gaping jaw. “That is Zamatouk. They worship him in the mines. Yes, as soon as I learned that the barrier was down, I immediately ordered the making of machines to build new ships. I created mechanized and robotized manufacturing systems to make more Krallen. These are now working. My goal is to have forces large enough to make just the sudden massive attack you suggest. Within half a standard year we will have that fleet ready. A fleet that will punch its way across the Assembly in well under a hundred days.” Nezhuala paused and, when he spoke again, his words rang with emotion. “And take Earth.”

“And take Earth!” Lezaroth echoed, unable to restrain his words. *No one has ever waged war on this scale! Or at this speed!*

There was a long silence. Was it his imagination, or had the whispering intensified?

“Yes,” Nezhuala said quietly, and turned his dark eyes on him.

Lezaroth felt awed by the audacity of the lord-emperor’s vision. There was something compelling in it. To take on enemies of such a size, at such a distance, and strike at their heart. *It takes warfare into a new dimension. All our wars hitherto have been petty local skirmishes. This is the great war.*

“But, Margrave, we lack the information we need. You can see the agonizing paradox. On the one hand, because we cannot win a long war with the Assembly, we must, as you say, strike soon and strike hard. Against such a foe, we will have but one chance. On the other hand, because we do not know the Assembly, we cannot risk striking at them. So what do we do?”

“A hard decision, my lord.”

“Exactly.” Nezhuala’s lips twisted into something like a smile. “I, like you, Margrave, am cautious. It seemed an irresolvable dilemma. But now something has happened to give us a chance. We have a window of opportunity.”

“We have, my lord?”

But there was no answer. The lord-emperor seemed to be listening to another voice again. Then he looked up at Lezaroth and seemed to scrutinize him. “Margrave, you are augmented?”

“The usual for frontline soldiers, my lord. Various leg, arm, and back muscles are enhanced. My eyes have been laser-collimated to the optical limits. I have supplemented anti-infectants. My nervous system has all the latest War Dep upgrades. And I have the usual neuroswitched communication and bionic systems.”

“It’s exciting.” There was enthusiasm in Nezhuala’s voice. “We are beginning to evolve beyond our mortality. Slowly—but steadily—we Freeborn are becoming more than flesh and blood. Progress, Captain. We are a long way down a road that the Assembly never took. And now the end is in sight. The long shadow of death is starting to retreat for our people. Ah, the Assembly. They resist change. Always did.” Then he frowned. “Where were we? Ah yes. A window of opportunity.”

He paused before a statue that looked like a great centipede with a human head and tilted his head as if to see it better. “Yes. A week ago I received a most interesting piece of news. Trying to find information, I went to the lowest depths of the Blade. My great project does have its uses, Margrave. There I talked with my counselors.” He stared around the hall. “No one here. But amid all the many and useless words, they told me something interesting. It seems the crew of *Rahllman’s Star* have blown up the Gate at Farholme. No more than thirty days ago.”

“My lord, how can they know?”

“There is a steersman on board. They can still communicate at a very basic level with him. Do you see the significance?”

“I think so, my lord. Is it true that the Assembly still do not have Nether-Realm travel?”

There was a solemn nod. “No, just Gates. That much the admiral confirmed. It suits their cautious, rather static style.”

“Then, my lord, in that case Farholme is now isolated from the Assembly.”

“Indeed. Vulnerable.”

“Do we have any idea why the crew did that?”

“No. The best guess is that they had been discovered. They wanted to keep themselves secret.” He gazed at a statue for a moment before continuing. “So, we are planning to seize the world as soon as we can. There is a

data-bank system there called the Library. The admiral found that much of their information traffic is to, or from, it. Can you imagine, Margrave, what the data repository of an open society would be like?”

“It stretches my mind, my lord.”

They were near new statues now. A white ghostly form with an open mouth and slitlike eyes seemed to watch them.

“Indeed. You would have information on everything. Details of every person on every world. The location of every Gate. The operational facts on every ship. Twelve thousand years of history. Unencrypted.”

“My lord, if I may speak, possessing this seems vital before the main attack.”

“Exactly. So my will is this: we continue to prepare the fleet to attack the Assembly. But, in the meantime, we are going to send emissaries to Farholme. That mission will be diplomatic.”

Diplomatic?

“I see your surprise.”

“My lord, I had assumed . . . a military component.”

“No.” The smile was cruel. “Patience. We will go delicately. In Assembly culture, they think self-sacrifice is the highest virtue. If they felt they were protecting the Assembly, they would all die happily and take the Library with them. So we will go for diplomacy first. We will offer them a treaty.”

“But will they accept?”

“Perhaps. We may modify our image a little.” The lord-emperor gave a sudden strangled laugh. “Oh, Margrave, I like the idea of winning such a world to us. Of corrupting a part of the Assembly.”

Lezaroth was aware again of the inky eyes staring at him. *I am being assessed.*

“Margrave, do you find that attractive?”

“Yes, I do, my lord.”

“Good. Very good. So we will start with diplomacy. We will send a diplomatic vessel with two ambassadors. All being well, they will be allowed to set up a base on Farholme and be given access to this Library. We will seek to entice this world into an oath of loyalty. And if enticing doesn’t work? Then we will take what we want by force. We will seize the world. And that is where I need a military leader.”

Things are becoming clearer.

“There will be a military vessel along with the diplomatic ship. It will stay in the Nether-Realms. If diplomacy fails, it will immediately emerge and use all the power it has to ensure a full surrender.”

“A skillful plan, my lord. May I ask, what vessel did you have in mind?”

“A full-suppression complex.”

“Excellent. That ought to be convincing.”

“Indeed. I intend sending the *Triumph of Sarata*.”

“That’s the first of the new Z class. Faster, bigger than anything else. Three-quarters of a million tons.” *That would be a ship to have charge of!*

“I will be sending it fully armed,” the lord-emperor continued. “And with one hundred and fifty thousand Krallen.”

“Impressive.” *That’d be adequate to subdue a world with weapons; for a world without, it’s ridiculous overkill.*

“Do I detect that you think it is excessive, Margrave?”

“No, my lord. But I’m sure the task could be managed with fewer resources.”

“Really?” The smooth voice suddenly had an unnerving chillness. “Let me warn you, Margrave. You need to respect this enemy. It is easy to mock the Assembly with its petty concerns and rustic habits. But history tells us never to underestimate them. They are dangerous.”

Lezaroth tried to stop himself from shivering. “Thank you for the reminder, my lord. The texts tell us that underestimating the power of the Assembly was the mistake Jannafy made at Centauri.”

The lord-emperor seemed to start. As he stepped forward, his smooth face loomed across Lezaroth’s entire field of view.

He is going to strike me!

But he didn’t. Instead, he hissed, “Margrave, I know better—far better—than the textbooks do about what happened in the War of Separation.” The tone was one of barely restrained fury. “Listen! Jannafy’s chief mistake was this: he misjudged his underlings. They were entrusted with making the seven ships ready to launch in time. They failed. Jannafy’s main mistake was to trust fools. I have resolved not to repeat that.”

“My lord, I apologize. I will revise my history.” *And not speak lightly of Jannafy ever again.*

“And learn another lesson. Jannafy did indeed underestimate the Assembly, but not their power. He overlooked the way they can corrupt. I have talked of us enticing them. But be warned, my margrave, that the reverse can happen. More determined minds than yours have weakened under the impact of the Assembly and their values. The wills of many failed at Centauri because they had been weakened by the lies of the Assembly. I will not let *that* happen again. Be wary of them, Margrave. Very wary. No one is safe.”

“My lord, I am listening.”

There was silence. As Nezhuala stepped back, Lezaroth felt a sense of the immediate danger passing.

Now the lord-emperor spoke again. “So the man of my choosing will command the finest of ships. The pride of the fleet. He will have two tasks: the first, to bring back a copy of all the data in this Library. The second, to find *Rahllman’s Star*. I want it back.” There was a ring of determination in

the voice. "I want to make sure its technology cannot fall into the hands of the renegades. Or the Assembly. And it has something precious on it, something I want back."

What does it have on it?

"Now, Margrave, I am a fair man. I punish failure and I reward success. He who delivers what I desire will be rewarded. He may, of course, take the *Triumph of Sarata* on with the main battle fleet to the Assembly and Earth. Or he may choose to retire. Either way, I will give him the title of Military Governor of Farholme. And as such, he may do as he likes with the world and its population."

The blank face stared at Lezaroth, the pale bloodless lips twisting into a wry smile. "Do you know that your title, margrave, is a historical curiosity? Are you aware of its origin?"

"No, my lord."

"A margrave was a military governor of a frontier province. In one of the ancient European states on Earth. Wouldn't it be appropriate—historically fitting—if you were to be such a man? A margrave in name *and* reality? I think you will find many pleasures there."

I would indeed.

Suddenly the lord-emperor paused as if listening to something. "Ah, the time draws near. But, Margrave, consider what I offer. Might and prestige with the command of the best ship in the fleet. And, if you succeed, the possibility of almost unlimited power and a world of pleasure. And above all, a key role in the greatest military venture of our time. Or any time." He waved a gloved finger for emphasis. "Not bad for a man who could be executed."

There was a pause. "So do you choose to take my offer? to serve me without any dissent? to do my will? to give me the unshakable honor I require? to love my friends and hate my enemies? Are you ready? Consider the matter."

There is a price. There is always a price. But what options have I? This opportunity may never return; the alternative may be death. I must seize it.

"My lord is generous indeed. I choose to take that offer."

"Then we shall test it."

What does that mean?

"Follow me."

The lord-emperor turned and walked down the hall. Lezaroth followed, suddenly aware that the high wordless whispering had begun again, only now there was a new note of expectancy. *It is as if the statues are talking to each other, as though they are waiting for something.*

At the far end of the room the lord-emperor motioned him through a door. As Lezaroth stepped forward a chill breeze whipped at his face, and a red waning daylight enveloped him.

He blinked and gasped.

He was on a balcony—one without railings, with an edge barely two paces away that extended above a drop of some two hundred meters. Below, a steep, strangely curved surface seemed to flow into a great disklike central platform below. On the platform, red in the light of the fiery setting sun, robed people, perhaps twenty in number, stood around a plinth.

Of course, the evening sacrifice!

Lezaroth heard the door hiss closed behind them. He looked along the balcony expecting to see only the lord-emperor, but instead saw the admiral standing between them.

There was something strange about the admiral. It took Lezaroth a second to realize that he was extraordinarily rigid. The admiral's blanched face held a look of utter terror and his gray eyes moved to meet Lezaroth's. "Help me!" they seemed to plead.

What do I do? Lezaroth looked to the lord-emperor.

Apparently heedless of the admiral, Nezhuala gazed over the scene. He sighed, as if with contentment, and as though the admiral were absent, addressed Lezaroth. "Do you know, Margrave," he said, "I like to think of this as the heart of our world."

"Indeed, my lord," was all Lezaroth could say.

"Yes, I think of this as the center, not just of this city but of this world." The lord-emperor was almost affable. "My people can be sure that, as the day ends, a sacrifice is being offered here to the powers for them."

"I see, my lord."

The lord-emperor gestured at the scene with open hands. "Here we ask the powers for their blessing on our endeavors." His smile was cold. "Do you know who is being honored today?"

"No, my lord."

"The Master Exaltzoc—the bringer of plague and disfigurement."

Far below, the robed figures, their faces indistinguishable, turned toward them. As they began a low urgent chanting, Lezaroth saw the glint of their knives. He turned to the lord-emperor, seeing the sharp, dark eyes boring into his.

"You have spotted that something is missing?" Nezhuala asked.

Lezaroth swung round to the scene below. His blood froze. *There is no sacrifice.*

"I'm afraid, Admiral, *you* are the sacrifice," Nezhuala said in a mild, apologetic tone.

I should have realized this. Lezaroth felt a mixture of horror and relief. *There was danger, but not for me.*

The lord-emperor turned, tilted his head slightly, and seemed to look at the admiral like a hawk evaluating a potential prey. When he spoke again, his tone was very different. It seethed with anger. "Admiral—*former* Admiral—I

was appalled at your mistakes at Tellzanur. First, you let a freighter be stolen. Then you let it escape the system. And not just any freighter, but the *Rahlman's Star*. The freighter with my own grandfather's body on board: the Great Prince Zhalatoc, a man many levels above you. We had hopes. We thought we might restore him to the post-mortal state. We were negotiating with the powers." His face twisted into an expression of aggrieved fury as he leaned closer to the immobile admiral.

"Then, far too late, you headed off in pursuit. To find that, contrary to all our experience, they could enter Assembly space. So you followed them and watched what happened. Then, imagining that you had achieved something, you came back. Can you imagine the damage that might have been done if they had gone and given themselves up to the accursed Assembly?" The lord-emperor's face was colorless with fury and Lezaroth saw spittle on his lips.

Am I next? Great Zahlman-Hoth, god of soldiers, spare me now. Bring me safe though this peril and I will sacrifice to you whatever you desire.

Below, on the great lower platform, there was something oddly expectant about the priests' stance. Their uplifted blades were tinged with red sunlight.

"No, Admiral, you have failed." There was fury in the words. "So, in a second or two, you will be on your way to the priests. They are waiting for you. I will use my limited extra-physical powers to ensure that you stay conscious. As long as possible."

Nezhuala's hands moved in a strange position. The admiral swayed. Little beads of sweat appeared on his face.

As the lord-emperor turned to Lezaroth, his conversational tone of voice returned. "Margrave, this man is my enemy. Throw him off the edge."

The test! In the space of a few moments, a great argument raged in Lezaroth's mind. At first, he resisted. *I cannot do this. I cannot repay a man who has spoken out to serve me. I cannot harm a superior officer. I must take a stand.* Then, a countering question came back: *Why not? The lord-emperor has commanded it and he is master of all.* Lezaroth searched for any reason at all that he could use to justify refusing the order. But he found nothing there: no higher morality, no ultimate belief, no superior principle. Somehow, he felt he ought to take a stand, but he found nothing that he could stand on.

He was about to agree to the demand when he was struck by three successive thoughts that came like hammer blows: *Do this and you cross a point of no return. Do this and you are Nezhuala's slave. Do this and you are beyond redemption.*

He returned the lord-emperor's gaze, his throat tight. "Whatever you wish, my lord."

He stepped toward the admiral, took a shaking elbow with one hand and with the other found the small of the man's rigid but quivering back.

“Oh, Admiral,” the lord-emperor said, with a smile like a knife blade. “I won’t forget your family.”

Somehow—he had not intended it—Lezaroth found himself staring again at the admiral and seeing the desperate plea in the wide, panic-stricken eyes. He looked away and pushed.

A moment later, he looked back to see the admiral falling. He struck the curving wall with a heavy thud. Then, as rigid as a lump of wood, the heavy form slid smoothly down the concave surface toward the altar platform.

I feel dirty.

He was aware of the lord-emperor’s terrible eyes watching him.

“Margrave, you pass the test. But only just. You delayed.”

“My lord, I apologize for my delay.”

Nezhuala turned to the scene below and sighed. “Do you know that I really don’t like doing it this way? Using criminals is a cheap way of fulfilling our obligations to the powers. That’s why we use ordinary people. They really prefer children. Even if they come from the underclass.”

Lezaroth followed the lord-emperor’s gaze and saw the great red ball of the setting sun was now just beginning to dip below a fiercely jagged horizon.

“Now, if you will excuse me for a moment, Margrave, I really ought to participate in the ceremonies. But there is more we have to discuss.”

As Lezaroth bowed his head, the lord-emperor raised his right hand high. Far below there was a bustle of activity among the priests. A new chant began.

Out of the corner of his eye, Lezaroth saw Nezhuala drop his hand. The chant became urgent and savage.

The knives descended.

After a minute or so the lord-emperor said in his confiding tone, “Do you know, Margrave that there are variations on the sacrificial ritual? As to which bits they cut, in what order, and how they display them?”

“I had heard stories, my lord, but I have never studied the details. I’m a professional soldier. Culture isn’t my strong point.”

“I understand. But it’s a fascinating subject.” The lord-emperor shook his head. “Poor admiral.”

There was silence and when the lord-emperor spoke again, it was in a sharper tone. “So, you have decided to serve me? Fully? Without questioning?”

“I have.” *It’s too late now to change my mind.*

“Then come here and bow before me.”

Careful, mindful of the fitful, gusting wind and the fatal drop just a pace away, Lezaroth bowed before Nezhuala.

He glimpsed the lord-emperor taking his glove off and soon felt a cold hand on his forehead.

“Do you willingly renew your oath of allegiance to me?”

“I do.”

Lezaroth felt an almost electric tingling in his forehead.

“Say it.”

“I, Margrave Sentius Lezaroth, hereby resolve to serve and worship His Highness, the Lord-Emperor Nezhuala, Ruler of the Freeborn and Master of All in the Realms of the Dominion, with all that I am, and all that I have, until my death.”

The lord-emperor murmured something in a strange language whose words seemed to coil and twist in the mind.

“Very good, Margrave,” he said, withdrawing his hand. “You are now mine. Stand up.”

Lezaroth stood.

“Now, let me give you more instructions.” Nezhuala’s voice was urgent and factual now. “I appoint you to the rank and pay of fleet-commander. You will leave in eight days’ time. Because of the urgency, you and the ambassadors will travel very deep and fast in the Nether-Realms.”

“My lord, isn’t that dangerous?” There were horror stories of ships that went too deep.

There was a look of rebuke. “Oh, my margrave, don’t dissent now. . . . But I am negotiating with the powers. You will have a cargo that will stop the ship from being molested.”

“A cargo, my lord?”

“All being well, a baziliarch will go with you.”

A terrible vision of vast yellow, iridescent eyes, blackness, wings, and claws filled Lezaroth’s mind.

“On *my* ship? One of the seven?”

“Don’t be alarmed, Margrave. It will be dormant for the trip. You’ll be given an intermediary. Baziliarchs can be tricky, but they’re wonderful weapons. As I found out on Tellzanur. They have that ability to tear information out of minds, which you may find useful. And nothing is going to tangle with a convoy with a baziliarch. Even in the deepest Nether-Realms.”

“My lord . . . I bow to your wisdom. And as for crew, may I choose my own?”

“Yes, with one exception. Your second-in-command will be Lucretor Hanax.”

Blank your expression. Hide your dismay. “My lord, is that . . . ?”

“Is that *wise* you were going to say?”

Hanax is pushy and overconfident, and we hate each other. But how do I say that?

“Well, my lord, he has risen rather rapidly through the ranks. I had thought . . . that a period of consolidation might be appropriate. It is tradition.”

“My margrave, I know your background. You are of an old family and

he comes from nowhere. I know the objections to Hanax—that he rises too fast and he hates the noble families. I know everything. But his record is excellent.”

“If it is your will, my lord . . .”

“But it *is* my will.” There was an irresistible force in the voice. “Work with him. The powers have told me that he will play a great role.”

That may be, but on my ship, he will know his place.

“Very well, my lord.”

The chant changed as the last sliver of Sarata dipped below the horizon. Below in the congealing gloom, Lezaroth could see that the priests were leaving. Something soft, wet, and red—no, several things—were arranged on the plinth.

Apparently catching his gaze, Nezhuala pointed down. “Notice how swiftly they leave, Margrave. They summon The Master Exaltzoc, but they do not stay for his appearing.” Then, as if listening to his private voices, he shook his head and fell silent.

It came to Lezaroth that he needed to clarify his orders or he might end up like the admiral. “My lord, how much force may I use?”

Nezhuala smiled. “As much as is needed. But I would prefer some captives. The powers grow hungry at the base of the Blade and some fresh flesh would be very well received. Men and women and, especially, children from the Assembly would be welcome. And we need tissue samples at least of the best specimens. We may strip their genes of the best code and add it to ours. As for force: once you get me the Library data intact, the *Rabllman’s Star*, and the DNA, you can kill them all as far as I am concerned.” Nezhuala smiled again. “Set an example. But spare the world itself. It would be a shame to wreck it. It looked rather . . . nice. . . . I might stop and inspect it on my way to Earth.”

“Whatever you will, my lord.”

“A few more things, Fleet-Commander.” Suddenly, for the first time, the lord-emperor seemed to be slightly ill at ease. “What do you know of the tale—the myth—of the great adversary?”

I need to be careful here. “I heard of it from the captives at Tellzanur. It is the belief that the rise of the Dominion will be threatened by a man who will come close to defeating it.”

“Or?”

“Well, of course they saw him as actually defeating it. We treated it with scorn.”

“Quite so.” The lord-emperor was silent for some time, apparently gripped by thoughts. “But it is a far older belief,” he said at last. “The powers have mentioned it to me. They know of it. It is the idea that, in the last battles, there will be a single warrior who will stand in our way. Of course, we succeed; we cannot fail. But this being opposes us. Or so the myth says.” A

slight spasm seemed to run through the lord-emperor's body. "They mention a name in connection with this great adversary." His voice sounded strained. "Can you guess whose name it is?"

"In the accounts of the War of Separation, the blame for our loss is attributed to one man—Lucas Ringell."

"Yes!" The word came out like a hiss. "It is a matter of history that, without him, the outcome of the War of Separation would have been very different."

"He killed Jannafy."

The lord-emperor stared at the ground. "Ah well, I remember that. But yes, it is Ringell's name that is whispered among the powers. There is babble of him 'returning soon,' but what that means is unclear to me. And, I think, to them." The lord-emperor looked up. "My guess—no more than that—is that they speak of another warrior. One who will be like Lucas Ringell and who will stand in the way of the final triumph of we who are the Freeborn."

A new gust of wind whipped across the balcony. Lezaroth tried not to shiver. In the night sky, stars were appearing.

"I mention the matter, my margrave, for one reason: I want you to watch out for this man. He may be on Earth. But he may be on Farholme. And if he is there, I want him found."

Lezaroth heard anger in Nezhuala's voice now, and perhaps also fear.

"I want him brought to me. Or at least destroyed. Whatever the cost. If you lose a thousand Krallen to kill him, then do it."

Could the lord-emperor be afraid of a myth?

"My lord, if he is there, I will take him or slay him."

The lord-emperor seemed to stare at the embers of the sunset. Through the dusty and contaminated atmosphere Lezaroth could make out the distant gleams of the domes on the slopes above Khetelak that gave the nobles and their families some protection from both the city's pollution and the planet's wildly fluctuating temperatures.

Suddenly, Lezaroth felt again the prickling of the hairs on the back of his neck. He glanced down to the shadowy platform below and had to struggle to restrain a gasp. There around the plinth something prowled, something more solid than smoke and less solid than flesh, something indescribable, but with four legs and a head that bent to snuffle and lick.

"It's all due to topology, my margrave."

Topology—the science of surfaces. But how?

"That being below us is, of course, The Master Exaltzoc. I am told that such sacrifices—rightly done—make a temporary and local adjustment in the topology of the boundary surface between the Nether-Realms and normal space. For a brief moment, the powers can appear in our world. Do you understand?"

“Yes. Of course, my lord.” Lezaroth knew his voice sounded numb and mechanical. *I have glimpsed such things in the gray shadows of the deep Nether-Realms. I have seen steersmen and caught sight of a baziliarch. But never, however briefly, have I seen a power walking around freely on our worlds.*

“Ah, Margrave, they long to be liberated. To move unfettered through the worlds of men. That is their great wish. The powers will give anything to the one who aids them in this.”

“I’m sure, my lord.” Lezaroth knew that what the lord-emperor was saying must be of the greatest significance. But somehow the sight of a power prowling around a few hundred meters away was so astonishing, his words barely registered.

As the figure slowly faded away, the lord-emperor said, “Come, it is time for you to leave. You have preparations to make. Follow me.”

The door at the back of the balcony opened.

“Stay close to me, Margrave, through the hall. After sunset . . . with the blood . . .”

They walked back through the hall. It seemed darker now, as if the shadows had solidified, and the whisperings and murmurings seemed clearer and more audible. *This is my life from now on—protected from the powers by the lord-emperor.*

But as they left the hall and climbed the stairs another truth came to him. *Admiral Kalartha-Har is dead and I am alive. And isn’t that, after all, all that counts?*

As they emerged onto the topmost platform, Lezaroth saw that the stars were out.

“Stay,” the lord-emperor said. “Look up.”

Lezaroth followed his outstretched hand to where, above the dirty air, a tiny line of silver light cut the darkness.

The Blade of Night.

“You were wrong on that, my margrave,” Nezhuala said. “The Blade of Night is of greatest value. And it will be even more so. You have landed at the access station?”

“Twice, my lord. Once on exercise, once when delivering the condemned.” *And the entire crew breathed a sigh of relief when we blasted off. It’s a haunted monstrosity. Enough extra-physical phenomena to drive the sanest man mad.*

The lord-emperor continued to gaze upward. “It is a remarkable structure. I have journeyed down to the lower levels,” he said, in a voice that was so strangely detached that it sounded like it belonged to someone else. “The very lowest depths. There are things that you would not believe.”

Then suddenly he seemed to shake himself free of whatever extraordinary vision possessed him. Lezaroth found it hard to read his expression in

the darkness, but felt certain of a strange, burning urgency in his eyes. *This man is driven by what happens there. I had assumed that these meetings with the powers were incidental to his life, but they are central.*

“These are extraordinary times, Margrave. We are on the verge of great changes. I cannot explain now about the true uniting of the realms that we seek, but it is coming. Very soon. And I am glad that you are willing to serve me.”

The lord-emperor walked to the lander hatchway and stood by as Lezaroth opened it. “Tell them at the *Ravager* that I have detained the admiral on business.”

Lezaroth climbed on board. “Yes, my lord.”

“A question. Did you enjoy pushing the admiral to his doom?”

“You ordered it, my lord.”

“Ah, Margrave, I need more.” A glove was raised in reprimand. “I don’t like my men to be too cool. I like hatred. Indeed I expect it. The admiral was my enemy: to destroy such people should give you pleasure.” The voice was sterner now. “As you face the Assembly, you must learn to hate them. Do not go coolly to attack them. You must enjoy their defeat; you must delight in their fear and pain. Hate energizes!”

“My lord, I appreciate your candor. I will follow your advice.”

“Oh, Margrave. Seven days from today is the Feast of Zahlman-Hoth, the god of all who fight. It would be appropriate for you to join me here again to invoke the great Zahlman’s blessing on your venture. Of course, he needs an offering. So, I am having the admiral’s wife and children brought to Khetelak. I would like you to meet them at the port and escort them here. It will be good practice.”

“Whatever you will, my lord. It is my life’s purpose to serve you.”

“Thank you.” Nezhuala paused. “Smile, my margrave. It’s an order: smile.”

The door closed and Lezaroth sat back in his seat. Suddenly, he broke out in uncontrollable shivering. *What have I done? What have I become?*

Then Lezaroth caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and gasped in horror.

He *was* smiling.