



Millennium
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About Cole:

Everett B. Cole was an American writer of science fiction short stories and a professional soldier. He worked as a signal maintenance and property officer at Fort Douglas, Utah. His first science fiction story, "Philosophical Corps" was published in the magazine *Astounding* in 1951. His fix-up of that story and two others, *The Philosophical Corps*, was published by Gnome Press in 1962. A second novel, *The Best Made Plans*, was serialized in *Astounding* in 1959, but never published in book form. Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks for Cole:

- *Final Weapon* (1955)
- *The Best Made Plans* (1959)
- *Alarm Clock* (1960)
- *The Players* (1955)
- *The Weakling* (1961)
- *Indirection* (1956)

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Liewen Konar smiled wryly as he put a battered object on the bench. "Well, here's another piece recovered. Not worth much, I'd say, but here it is."

Obviously, it had once been a precisely fabricated piece of equipment. But its identity was almost lost. A hole was torn in the side of the metal box. Knobs were broken away from their shafts. The engraved legends were scored and worn to illegibility, and the meter was merely a black void in the panel. Whatever had been mounted at the top had been broken away, to leave ragged shards. Inside the gaping hole in the case, tiny, blackened components hung at odd angles.

Klion Meinora looked at the wreckage and shook his head.

"I know it's supposed to be what's left of a medium range communicator," he said, "but I'd never believe it." He poked a finger inside the hole in the case, pushing a few components aside. Beyond them, a corroded wheel hung loosely in what had once been precision bearings.

"Where's the power unit?"

Konar shook his head. "No trace. Not much left of the viewsphere, either."

"Well." Meinora shook his head resignedly. "It's salvage. But we got it back." He stood back to look at the communicator. "Someone's been keeping the outside clean, I see."

Konar nodded. "It was a religious relic," he said. "Found it in an abbey." He reached into the bag he had placed on the floor.

"And here's a mental amplifier-communicator, personnel, heavy duty. Slightly used and somewhat out of adjustment, but complete and repairable." He withdrew a golden circlet, held it up for a moment, and carefully laid it on the bench beside the wrecked communicator. Its metal was dented, but untarnished.

"Don't want to get rough with it," he explained. "Something might be loose inside."

He reached again into the bag. "And a body shield, protector type, model GS/NO-10C. Again, somewhat used, but repairable. Even has its nomenclature label."

"Good enough." Meinora held a hand out and accepted the heavy belt. He turned it about in his hands, examining the workmanship. Finally, he looked closely at the long, narrow case mounted on the leather.

"See they counted this unit fairly well. Must have been using it."

"Yes, sir. It's operative. The Earl wore it all the time. Guess he kept up his reputation as a fighter that way. Be pretty hard to nick anyone with a sword if he had one of these running. And almost any clumsy

leatherhead could slash the other guy up if he didn't have to worry about self-protection."

"I know." Meinora nodded quickly. "Seen it done. Anything more turned up?"

"One more thing. This hand weapon came from the same abbey I got the communicator from. I'd say it was pretty hopeless, too." Konar picked a flame-scarred frame from his bag, then reached in again, to scoop up a few odd bits of metal.

"It was in pieces when we picked it up," he explained. "They kept it clean, but they couldn't get the flame pits out and reassembly was a little beyond them."

"Beyond us too, by now." Meinora looked curiously at the object. "Looks as though a couple of the boys shot it out."

"Guess they did, sir. Not once, but several times." Konar shrugged. "Malendes tells me he picked up several like this." He cocked his head to one side.

"Say, chief, how many of these things were kicking around on this unlucky planet?"

Meinora grimaced. "As far as we can determine, there were ninety-two operative sets originally issued. Each of the original native operatives was equipped with a mentacom and a body shield. Each of the eight operating teams had a communicator and three hand weapons, and the headquarters group had a flier, three communicators, a field detector set, and six hand weapons. Makes quite an equipment list."

"Any tools or maintenance equipment?"

Meinora shook his head. "Just operator manuals. And those will have deteriorated long ago. An inspection team was supposed to visit once a cycle for about fifty cycles, then once each five cycles after that. They would have taken care of maintenance. This operation was set up quite a while ago, you know. Operatives get a lot more training now—and we don't use so many of them."

"So, something went wrong." Konar looked at the equipment on the bench. "How?" he asked. "How could it have happened?"

"Oh, we've got the sequence of events pretty well figured out by now." Meinora got to his feet. "Of course, it's a virtually impossible situation—something no one would believe could happen. But it did." He looked thoughtfully at the ruined communicator.

"You know the history of the original operation on this planet?"

"Yes, sir. I looked it over. Planet was checked out by Exploration. They found a couple of civilizations in stasis and another that was about to go

that way. Left alone, the natives'd have reverted to a primitive hunter stage—if they didn't go clear back to the caves. And when they did come up again, they'd have been savage terrors."

"Right. So a corps of native operatives was set up by Philosophical, to upset the stasis and hold a core of knowledge till the barbaric period following the collapse of one of the old empires was over. One civilization on one continent was chosen, because it was felt that its impact on the rest of the planet would be adequate to insure progress, and that any more extensive operation would tend to mold the planetary culture."

Konar nodded. "The old, standard procedure. It usually worked better than this, though. What happened this time?"

"The Merokian Confederation happened."

"But their penetration was nowhere near here."

"No, it wasn't. But they did attack Sector Nine. And they did destroy the headquarters. You remember that?"

"Yes, sir. I read about it in school. We lost a lot of people on that one." Konar frowned. "Long before my time in the Corps, of course, but I studied up on it. They used some sort of screen that scrambled the detectors, didn't they?"

"Something like that. Might have been coupled with someone's inattention, too. But that's unimportant now. The important thing is that the sector records were destroyed during the attack."

"Sure. But how about the permanent files that were forwarded to Aldebaran depository?"

Meinora smiled grimly. "Something else that couldn't happen. We're still looking for traces of that courier ship. I suppose they ran afoul of a Merokian task force, but there's nothing to go on. They just disappeared." He picked up the mental communicator, examining the signs of aging.

"One by one," he continued, "the case files and property records of Sector Nine are being reconstructed. Every guardsman even remotely associated with the Sector before the attack is being interviewed, and a lot of them are working on the reconstruction. It's been a long job, but we're nearly done now. This is one of the last planets to be located and rechecked, and it's been over a period since the last visit they've had from any of our teams. On this planet, that's some fifty-odd generations. Evidently the original operatives didn't demolish their equipment, and fifty some generations of descendants have messed things up pretty thoroughly."

Konar looked at the bench. Besides the equipment he had just brought in, there were other items, all in varying stages of disrepair and ruin.

"Yes, sir," he agreed. "If this is a sample, and if the social conditions I've seen since I joined the team are typical, they have. Now what?"

"We've been picking up equipment. Piece by piece, we've been accounting for every one of those items issued. Some of 'em were lost. Some of 'em probably wore out and were discarded, or were burned—like this, only more so." Meinora pointed at the wrecked communicator.

"Local legends tell us about violent explosions, so we know a few actually discharged. And we've tracked down the place where the flier cracked up and bit out a hole the size of a barony. Those items are gone without trace." He sighed.

"That introduces an uncertainty factor, of course, but the equipment in the hands of natives, and the stuff just lying around in deserted areas has to be tracked down. This planet will develop a technology some day, and we don't want anything about to raise questions and doubts when it does. The folklore running around now is bad enough. When we get the equipment back, we've got to clean up the social mess left by the descendants of those original operatives."

"Nice job."

"Very nice. We'll be busy for a long time." Meinora picked up a small tape reel. "Just got this," he explained. "That's why I was waiting for you here. It's an account of a mentacom and shield that got away. Probably stolen about twenty years ago, planetary. We're assigned to track it down and pick it up."

He turned to speak to a technician, who was working at another bench.

"You can have this stuff now. Bring in some more pretty soon."

Flor, the beater, was bone weary. The shadows were lengthening, hiding the details in the thickets, and all the hot day, he had been thrusting his way through thicket after thicket, in obedience to the instructions of the foresters. He had struck trees with his short club and had grunted and squealed, to startle the *khada* into flight. A few of the ugly beasts had come out, charging into the open, to be run down and speared by the nobles.

And Flor had tired of this hunt, as he had tired of many other hunts in the past. Hunting the savage *khada*, he thought resentfully, might be an amusing sport for the nobles. But to a serf, it was hard, lung-bursting

work at best. At worst, it meant agonizing death beneath trampling hoofs and rending teeth.

To be sure, there would be meat at the hunting lodge tonight, in plenty, and after the hunt dinner, he and the other serfs might take bits of the flesh home to their families. But that would be after the chores in the scullery were over. It would be many hours before Flor would be able to stumble homeward.

He relaxed, to enjoy the short respite he had gained by evading the forester. Sitting with his back to a small tree, he closed his eyes and folded his thick arms over his head. Of course, he would soon be found, and he would have to go back to the hunt. But this forester was a dull, soft fellow. He could be made to believe Flor's excuse that he had become lost for a time, and had been searching the woods for the other beaters.

The underbrush rustled and Flor heard the sound of disturbed leaves and heavy footfalls. A hunting charger was approaching, bearing one of the hunters. Quickly, Flor rose to his feet, sidling farther back into the thicket. Possibly, he might remain unseen. He peered out through the leaves.

The mounted man was old and evidently tired from the long day's hunt. He swayed a little in his saddle, then recovered and looked about him, fumbling at his side for his horn. His mount raised its head and beat a forefoot against the ground. The heavy foot made a deep, thumping noise and leaves rustled and rose in a small cloud.

Flor sighed and started forward reluctantly. It was the Earl, himself. It might be possible to hide from another, but Flor knew better than to try to conceal his presence from the old nobleman. The Earl could detect any person in his vicinity, merely by their thoughts, as Flor well knew from past experience. He also knew how severe the punishment would be if he failed to present himself immediately. He pushed a branch aside with a loud rustle.

Startled by the noise, a *husa*, which had been hiding beneath a nearby bush, raced into the open. The small animal dashed madly toward the Earl, slid wildly almost under the charger's feet, and put on a fresh burst of speed, to disappear into the underbrush. The huge beast flinched away, then reared wildly, dashing his rider's head against a tree limb.

The elderly man slipped in his saddle, reached shakily for his belt, missed, and lost his seat, to crash heavily to the ground.

Flor rushed from his thicket. With the shock of the fall, the Earl's coronet had become dislodged from his head and lay a short distance from the inert form. Flor picked it up, turning it in his hands and looking at it.

Curiously, he examined the golden circlet, noting the tiny bosses inset in the band. Many times, he had watched from a dark corner at the hunting lodge, neglecting his scullery duties, while the Earl showed the powers of this coronet to his elder son. Sometimes, he had been caught by the very powers the circlet gave to the old nobleman, and he winced as he remembered the strong arm of the kitchen master, and the skill with which he wielded a strap. But on other occasions, the Earl had been so engrossed in explaining the device as to neglect the presence of the eavesdropper.

He had told of the ability given him to read the thoughts of others, and even to strongly influence their actions. And Flor had gone back to his labors, to dream of what he would do if he, rather than the Earl, were the possessor of the powerful talisman.

And now, he had it in his hands.

A daring idea occurred to him, and he looked around furtively. He was alone with the Earl. The old man was breathing stertorously, his mouth wide open. His face was darkening, and the heavy jowls were becoming purple. Obviously, he was capable of little violence.

In sudden decision, Flor knelt beside the body. His hand, holding the short club above the Earl's throat, trembled uncontrollably. He wanted to act—had to act now—but his fear made him nauseated and weak. For a moment, his head seemed to expand and to lighten as he realized the enormity of his intent. This was one of the great nobles of the land, not some mere animal.

The heavily lidded eyes beneath him fluttered, started to open.

With a sob of effort, Flor dashed his club downward, as though striking a *husa*. The Earl shivered convulsively, choked raspily, and was suddenly limp and still. The labored breathing stopped and his eyes opened reluctantly, to fix Flor with a blank stare.

The serf leaped back, then hovered over the body, club poised to strike again. But the old man was really dead. Flor shook his head. Men, he thought in sudden contempt, died easily. It was not so with the *husa*, or the *khada*, who struggled madly for life, often attacking their killer and wounding him during their last efforts.

Flor consigned this bit of philosophy to his memory for future use and set to work removing the heavy belt worn by the Earl. This, he knew,

was another potent talisman, which could guard its wearer from physical harm when its bosses were pushed.

The murderer smiled sardonically. It was well for him that the old nobleman had failed to press those bosses, otherwise this opportunity probably would never have been presented. He stood up, holding the belt in his hand. Such a thing as this, he told himself, could make him a great man.

He examined the belt, noting the long metal case, with its engraving and its bosses. At last, he grunted and fastened it about his own waist. He pressed the bosses, then threw himself against a tree.

Something slowed his fall, and he seemed to be falling on a soft mat. He caught his balance and rested against the tree, nodding in satisfaction. Later, he could experiment further, but now he had other things to do.

He examined the coronet again, remembering that there was something about its bosses, too. He looked closely at them, then pressed. One boss slid a little under his finger and he felt a faint, unfamiliar sense of awareness.

He put the coronet on his head and shuddered a little as the awareness increased to an almost painful intensity. The forest was somehow more clear to him than it had ever been. He seemed to understand many things which he had heard or experienced, but which had been vague before. And memory crowded upon him. He stood still, looking around.

At the edge of his mind was vague, uneasy wonder, obviously not his own thought. There was a dim caricature of himself standing over the body of the Earl. And there was a feeling of the need to do something without understanding of what was to be done, or why.

He could remember clearly now, the Earl's explanations of the action of the coronet. One incident stood out—a time when the old man, having overindulged in the local wine, had demonstrated his ability to divine the thoughts of others. Flor twitched a little in painful recollection. The kitchen master had been especially enthusiastic in his use of the strap that night.

The Earl's mount was eyeing Flor, who realized without knowing just how, that the vague images and rudimentary thoughts were a reflection of the beast's mind. He looked over at the thicket into which the little animal which had started the charger, was hiding. It was still there, and he could feel a sense of fearful wonder, a desire to be gone, coupled with a fear of being discovered.

Again, he looked about the woods. In a way, the *husa* and he were akin. It would be bad if he were caught here, too. To be sure, he would be hard to capture, with his new protection, but many men would hunt him. And some of them would be other Earls, or possibly some of the great abbots, who had their own coronets and belts, and possibly other things of great power. These, he knew, might be too much for him. He slunk into the thicket, looked down the hill, and decided on a course which would avoid the paths of the foresters.

As he walked, he plotted methods of using his new-found powers. He considered idea after idea—then discarded them and sought further. With his new awareness, he could see flaws in plans which would have seemed perfect to him only a few short hours before.

First, he realized he would have to learn to control his new powers. He would have to learn the ways of the nobility, their manners and their customs. And he would have to find a disguise which would allow him to move about the land. Serfs were too likely to be questioned by the first passer-by who noticed them. Serfs belonged on the land—part of it!

He hid in the bushes at the side of a path as a group of free swordsmen went by. As he watched them, a plan came to him. He examined it carefully, finally deciding it would do.

The man-at-arms sauntered through the forest, swaying a little as he walked. He sang in a gravelly voice, pausing now and then to remember a new verse.

Flor watched him as he approached, allowing the man's thoughts to enter his own consciousness. They were none too complicated. The man was a free swordsman, his sword unemployed at the moment. He still had sufficient money to enjoy the forest houses for a time, then he would seek service with the Earl of Konewar, who was rumored to be planning a campaign.

The man swayed closer, finally noticing Flor. He paused in mid stride, eyeing the escaped serf up and down.

"Now, here's something strange indeed," he mused. He looked closely at Flor's face.

"Tell me, my fellow, tell me this: How is it you wear the belt and coronet of a great noble, and yet have no other garment than the shift of a serf?"

As Flor looked at him insolently, he drew his sword.

"Come," he demanded impatiently, "I must have answer, else I take you to a provost. Possibly his way of finding your secret would be to your liking, eh?"

Flor drew a deep breath and waited. Here was the final test of his new device. He had experimented, finding that even the charge of a *khada* was harmless to him. Now, he would find if a sword could be rendered harmless. At the approach of the man, he had pressed the boss on his belt. The man seemed suddenly a little uncertain, so Flor spoke.

"Why, who are you," he demanded haughtily, "to question the doings of your betters? Away with you, before I spit you with your own sword."

The man shook his head, smiling sarcastically. "Hah!" he said, approaching Flor. "I know that accent. It stinks of the scullery. Tell me, Serf, where did you steal that——"

He broke off, climaxing his question with an abrupt swing of the sword. Then, he fell back in surprise. Flor had thrust a hand out to ward off the blow, and the sword had been thrown back violently. The rebound tore it from its amazed owner's hand, and it thudded to the ground. The man-at-arms looked at it stupidly.

Flor sprang aside, scooping up the weapon before the man could recover.

"Now," he cried, "stand quite still. I shall have business with you."

The expression on the man's face told of something more than mere surprise which held him quiet. Here was proof of the powers of the coronet. Flor looked savagely at his captive.

"Take off your cap."

Reluctantly, the man's hand came up. He removed his steel cap, holding it in his hand as he faced his captor.

"That is fine." Flor pressed his advantage. "Now, your garments. Off with them!"

The swordsman was nearly his size. Both of them had the heavy build of their mountain stock, and the garments of the free swordsman would do for Flor's purpose, even though they might not fit him perfectly. Who expected one of these roving soldiers of fortune to be dressed in the height of style? They were fighters, not models to show off the tailor's art.

Flor watched as his prisoner started to disrobe, then pulled off his own single garment, carefully guiding it through the belt at his waist, so as not to disturb the talisman's powers.

He threw the long shirt at the man before him.

"Here," he ordered. "Put this on."

He sensed a feeling of deep resentment—of hopeless rebellion. He repeated his demand, more emphatically.

"Put it on, I say!"

As the man stood before him, dressed in the rough shift of a serf, Flor smiled grimly.

"And now," he said, "none will worry too much about a mere serf, or look too closely into his fate. Here."

He slashed out with the sword, awkwardly, but effectively.

"I shall have to find a new name," he told himself as he dressed in the garments of his victim. "No free swordsman would have a name like Flor. They all have two names."

He thought of the names he had heard used by the guards of the Earl. Flor, he thought, could be part of a name. But one of the swordsmen would make it Floran, or possibly Florel. They would be hunters, or slayers of elk—not simply elk. He looked at the steel cap in his hands. An iron hat—*deri kuna*.

"So," he told himself, "I shall be Florel Derikuna."

He inspected his new garments, being sure they hid the belt, and yet left the bosses available to easy reach. At last, he put on the iron cap. It covered the coronet, effectively hiding it.

Taking up the sword, he replaced it in its scabbard and swaggered through the forest, imitating the man-at-arms' song.

At one stroke, he had improved his status infinitely. Now, he could roam the land unquestioned, so long as he had money. He smiled to himself. There was money in his srip, and there would be but slight problems involved in getting more. Tonight, he would sleep in a forest house, instead of huddling in a thicket.

As the days passed, to grow into weeks and then, months, Florel wandered over the land. Sometimes, he took service with a captain, who would engage in a campaign. Sometimes, he took service with one of the lesser nobility. A few times, he ran with the bands of the forest and road, to rob travelers. But he was cautious to avoid the great Earls, realizing the danger of detection.

Always, he kept his direction to the east, knowing that he would have to reach the sea and cross to the eastern land before he could feel completely safe. His store of money and of goods grew, and he hoarded it against the time when he would use it.

Sometimes, he posed as a merchant, traveling the land with the caravans. But always, he followed his path eastward.

Florel Derikuna looked back at the line of pack animals. It had been a long trip, and a hard one. He smiled grimly to himself as he remembered the last robber attack. For a time, he had thought the caravan guard was going to be overwhelmed. He might have had to join with the robbers, as he had done before. And that would have delayed his plans. He looked ahead again, toward the hill, crowned with its great, stone castle.

This, then, was the land of the east—the farthest march of the land of the east. It had taken him a long, cautious time to get here. And he had spent his days in fear of a searching party from Budorn, even when he had reached the seacoast itself. But here, he would be safe. None from this land had ever been even to the mountainous backbone of his own land, he was sure. And certainly, there would be no travelers who had guided their steps from here to faraway Budorn and back.

None here knew Budorn, excepting him. Flor, the serf—now Florel Derikuna, swordsman at large—was in a new land. And he would take a new, more useful identity. He looked at the stone buildings of the town and its castle.

They were not unlike the castles and towns of his native land, he thought. There were differences, of course, but only in the small things. And he had gotten used to those by now. He had even managed to learn the peculiar language of the country. He smiled again. That coronet he always wore beneath his steel cap had served him well. It had more powers than he had dreamed of when he had first held it in his hands in those distant woods.

Here in Dweros, he thought, he could complete his change. Here, he could take service with the Duke as a young man of noble blood, once afflicted with a restless urge for travel, but now ready to establish himself. By now, he had learned to act. It had not been for nothing that he had carefully studied the ways of the nobility.

The caravan clattered through the gate beneath the castle, twisted through the streets just beyond the wall, and stopped in the market place. Derikuna urged his mount ahead and confronted the merchant.

"Here is my destination," he said. "So, we'll settle up, and I'll be on my way."

The merchant looked at him with a certain amount of relief. The man, he knew, was a tough fighter. His efforts had been largely the cause of the failure of bandits to capture the caravan only a few days before. But there was something about him that repelled. He was a man to be feared, not liked. Somehow, the merchant felt he was well rid of this guard,

despite his demonstrated ability. He reached into his clothing and produced two bags.

"We hate to lose you, Derikuna," he dissembled. "Here is your normal wage." He held out one bag. "And this second purse is a present, in memory of your gallant defense of the caravan."

Derikuna smiled sardonically. "Thank you," he said, "and good trading." He reined away.

He had caught the semi-fearful thoughts. Well, that was nothing unusual. Everybody became fearful of the iron hat sooner or later. Here, they would learn to respect him, too. Though their respect would be for a different name. Nor would they be able to deny him aught. They might not like him. That, he had no interest in. They'd do his will. And they'd never forget him.

He rode to an inn, where he ordered food and lodging. His meal over, he saw to his beasts, then had a servant take his baggage to his room.

Shortly after daybreak, he awoke. He blinked at the light, stirred restlessly, and got out of bed. Rubbing his eyes, he walked to the other side of the room.

For a few minutes, he looked at the trough in the floor and the water bucket standing near it. At last, he shrugged and started splashing water over himself. This morning, he spent more time than usual, being sure that no vestige of beard was left on his face, and that he was perfectly clean. He completed his bath by dashing perfumed water over his entire body.

He opened his traveling chest, picking out clothing he had worn but few times, and those in private. At last, he examined his reflection in a mirror, and nodded in satisfaction.

"Truly," he told himself, "a fine example of western nobility."

He picked out a few expensive ornaments from his chest, then locked it again and left the inn.

He guided his mount through the narrow streets to the castle gate, where he confronted a sleepy, heavily-armed sentry.

"Send word to the castle steward," he ordered, throwing his riding cloak back, "that Florel, younger son of the Earl of Konewar, would pay his respects to your master, the Duke of Dwerostel."

The man eyed him for a moment, then straightened and grounded his pike with a crash.

"It shall be done, sir." He turned and struck a gong.

A guard officer came through the tunnel under the wall. For a moment, he looked doubtful, then he spoke respectfully and ushered Derikuna through the inner court to a small apartment, where he turned him over to a steward.

"You wish audience with His Excellency?"

"I do, My Man. I wish to pay him my respects, and those of my father, the Earl of Konewar." Derikuna looked haughtily at the man.

Like the guard officer, the steward seemed doubtful. For a few seconds, he seemed about to demur. Then, he bowed respectfully.

"Very well, sir." With a final, curious glance at the coronet which shone in Florel's hair, the steward clapped his hands. A page hurried into the room and bowed.

"Your orders, sir?"

"We have a noble guest. Bring refreshment, at once." The steward waved to a table. "If Your Honor will wait here?"

Florel inclined his head, strode to a chair, and sat down. He looked amusedly after the disappearing steward. The coronet of the old Earl, he thought, was a truly potent talisman. Even the disdainful stewards of castles bowed to its force. And, thought the impostor, so would his master—when the time came.

The page reappeared with a flagon of wine and some cakes. Florel was sampling them when the steward returned. The man bowed respectfully, waited for Florel to finish his wine, and led the way through a corridor to a heavy pair of doors, which he swung open.

"Florel, Son of Konewar," he announced ceremoniously.

The Duke flipped a bone to one of his dogs, shoved his plate aside, and looked up. Florel walked forward a few paces, stopped, and bowed low.

"Your Excellency."

As he straightened, he realized that he was the object of an intense scrutiny. At last, the Duke nodded.

"We had no notice of your coming."

Florel smiled. "I have been traveling alone, Excellency, and incognito. For some years, I have been wandering, to satisfy my desire to see the world." He glanced down at his clothing.

"I arrived in your town last evening, and delayed only to make myself presentable before appearing to pay my respects."

"Very good. Punctuality in meeting social obligations is a mark of good breeding." The Duke eyed Florel's costume.

"Tell me, young man, do all your nobility affect the insignia you wear?"

Florel's hand rose to his coronet. "Only members of the older families, Excellency."

"I see." The nobleman nodded thoughtfully. "We have heard rumors of your fashions in dress, though no member of any of the great families of your realm has ever come so far before. We are somewhat isolated here." He looked sharply at the younger man.

"Rumor also has it that this is more than mere insignia you wear. I have heard it said that your ornaments give more than mortal powers to their wearer. Is this true?"

Florel hesitated for an instant, then recognized the desired response. Of course this eastern noble would not welcome the thought that there were others who had greater powers than he. And he would certainly resent any suggestions that a young visitor to his court had such powers.

"Oh, that," he said easily. "Legends, really. The truth is that the wearing of the coronet and belt is restricted to members of the older, more honorable families. And even these must prove their ability at arms and statecraft before being invested with the insignia. Too, knowledge of long lineage and gentle birth makes a man more bold—possibly even more skillful than the average." He smiled ingratiatingly.

"You, yourself, recognize your own superiority in all ways over your retainers, your vassals, and your townspeople. And so are we above the common man. This insignia is but the outward symbol of that superiority."

The Duke nodded, satisfied. He waved a hand.

"Sit down, young man. You must remain at our court for a time. We are hungry for news of the distant lands."

Florel congratulated himself. Well embellished gossip, he had found, was a popular form of entertainment in camp and court alike, and his store of gossip was large and carefully gathered. Here at Dweros, far from the center of the kingdom, his store of tales would last for a long time—probably as long as he needed.

During the days and nights that followed, he exerted himself to gain the favor of the Duke and his household. Much of his time, he spent entertaining others with his tales. But he kept his own ears and eyes open. He became a constant visitor at the castle, finally being offered the use of one of the small apartments, which he graciously accepted. And, of course, he was invited to join the hunts.

Hunting, he discovered, could be a pleasant pastime—so long as it was another who was doing the hard work of beating. And his own experience as a beater proved valuable. He was familiar with the ways and the haunts of animals. What had once been a matter of survival became a road to acclaim. He was known before long as a skillful, daring hunter.

At length, he decided the time was right to talk to the Duke of more serious things. The duchy was at the very border of the kingdom. To the north lay territory occupied only by barbaric tribes, who frequently descended on the northern baronies, to rob travelers of their goods, or to loot villages. Having secured their loot, the tribesmen retreated to their mountains before a fighting force could come up with them.

Florel came upon the Duke while he was considering the news of one of these raids.

"Your Excellency, these border raids could be halted. A strong hand is all that is needed, at the right place. A determined knight, established on the Menstal, could command the river crossing and the pass, thus preventing either entry or exit."

"To be sure." The Duke sighed wearily. "But the mountains of Menstal are inhospitable. Knights have occupied the heights, protecting the border for a time, to be sure, but the land has always escheated to the duchy. A small watchtower is kept manned even now, but it's a hungry land, and one which would drain even a baron's funds. I have no knight who wants it."

Florel smiled. He had plans concerning the Menstal, and the great river, the Nalen, which raced between high cliffs.

"The merchants, who use the Nalen for their shipments, would welcome protection from the robber bands, I think, as would the travelers of the roads."

"And?" The Duke looked at him thoughtfully.

"Possibly a small tax?" Florel smiled deprecatingly. "Sufficient to maintain a garrison?"

"And who would collect the tax?"

"That, Excellency, I could arrange. I have funds, adequate to garrison the tower of the Menstal, and even to make it livable for a considerable force of men. And I believe I could maintain and increase a garrison there that would serve to hold the barbarians at bay."

"Let me think this over." The Duke sat back, toying with his cup. "It is true," he mused, "that Menstal is the key to the border. And the small garrison there has proved expensive and ineffective." He tapped the cup

on the table, then set it down and looked about the apartment. Finally, he looked up at Florel.

"You have our permission to try your scheme," he decided. "We will invest you with the barony of Menstal."

Konar paused at the castle gate. It had been pure chance, he knew, that they had noticed this bit of equipment. The east coast earldom was known, of course, but somehow, searchers had failed to discover that the Earl held any equipment. Konar shrugged. He probably hadn't inherited it, but had gotten it by chance, and his possession of the mentacom and shield weren't commonly known.

"Well," he told himself, "we know about it now. I'll make a routine pickup, and he won't have it any more."

A pair of weary sentries stood just inside the heavy doors. One shifted his weight, to lean partially on his pike, partially against the stonework. Idly, he looked out at the road which led through the village, staring directly through the place where Konar stood.

Konar smiled to himself. "Good thing I've got my body shield modulated for full refraction," he told himself. "He'd be a little startled if he should see me."

The sentry yawned and relaxed still more, sliding down a little, till he sat on a slightly protruding stone. His companion looked over at him.

"Old Marnio sees you like that," he muttered warningly, "makes lashes."

The other yawned again. "No matter. He'll be drowsing inside, where it's warm. Be a long time before he comes out to relieve."

Konar nodded amusedly. The castle guard, he gathered, was a little less than perfectly alert. This would be simple. He touched the controls of his body shield to raise himself a few inches above the cobblestones, and floated between the two sentries, going slowly to avoid making a breeze.

Once inside, he decided to waste no more time. Of course, he would have to wait inside the Earl's sleeping room till the man slept, but there was no point in waiting out here. He passed rapidly through the outer ward, ignoring the serfs and retainers who walked between the dwellings nestled against the wall.

The inner gate had been closed for the night, so he lifted and went over the wall.

He looked around, deciding that the Earl's living quarters would be in the wooden building at the head of the inner courtyard. As he

approached, he frowned. The windows were tightly closed against the night air. He would have to enter through the doors, and a young squire blocked that way. The lad was talking to a girl.

There was nothing to do but wait, so Konar poised himself a few feet from them. They'd go inside eventually, and he would float in after them. Then, he could wait until the Earl was asleep.

After that, it would be a simple, practiced routine. The small hand weapon he carried would render the obsolete body shield ineffective, if necessary, and a light charge would assure that the man wouldn't awaken. It would be the work of a few minutes to remove the equipment the man had, to substitute the purely ornamental insignia, and to sweep out of the room, closing the window after him. Konar hoped it would stay closed. The Earl might be annoyed if it flew open, to expose him to the dreaded night air.

In the morning, the Earl would waken, innocent of any knowledge of his visitor. He would assume his talismans had simply lost their powers due to some occult reason, as many others had during recent times.

Idly, Konar listened to the conversation of the two before him.

The squire was telling the girl of his prowess in the hunt. Tomorrow, he announced, he would accompany the Earl's honored guest from the eastern land.

"And I'm the one that can show him the best coverts," he boasted. "His Grace did well to assign me to the Duke."

The girl lifted her chin disdainfully. "Since you're such a great hunter," she told him, "perchance you could find my brooch, which I lost in yonder garden." She turned to point at the flower-bordered patch of berry bushes at the other end of the court. In so doing, she faced directly toward Konar.

She was a pretty girl, he thought. His respect for the young squire's judgment grew. Any man would admire the slender, well featured face which was framed within a soft cloud of dark, well combed hair. She looked quite different from the usual girls one saw in this country. Possibly, she was of eastern descent, Konar thought.

The girl's eyes widened and her mouth flew open, making her face grotesquely gaunt. Abruptly, she was most unpretty. For a few heartbeats, she stood rigidly, staring at Konar. Then she put her hands to her face, her fingers making a ruffled mess of her hair. Her eyes, fixed and with staring pupils, peered between her fingers. And she screamed.

Konar felt suddenly faint, as though the girl's horror was somehow communicated to him. The scream reverberated through his brain, rising in an intolerable crescendo, blotting out other sensory perception. He fought to regain control of his fading senses, but the castle court blurred and he felt himself slipping into unconsciousness. He started sliding down an endless, dark chute, ending in impenetrable blackness.

Suddenly, the black dissolved into a flash of unbearably brilliant light, and Konar's eyes closed tightly.

He was alertly conscious again, but his head ached, and he felt reluctant, even unable, to open his eyes. Even closed, they ached from the brilliant spots which snapped into being before them. He shuddered, bringing his head down to his breast, gripping it with shaking hands, and breathing with uneven effort.

This was like nothing he had ever met before. He would have to get back to the others—find out what had happened to him—get help.

He concentrated on his eyelids, forcing them open. A crowd was gathering, to look accusingly at the squire, who supported the fainting girl in his arms. Her eyes fluttered weakly, and she struggled to regain her feet.

"That awful thing! It's right over there!" She pointed at Konar.

Again, the unbearable ululation swept through his mind. Convulsively, he swept his hand to his shield controls, fighting to remain conscious just long enough to set his course up and away.

Before he was able to move and think with anything approaching normality, he was far above the earth. He looked at the tiny castle far below, noticing that from his altitude, it looked like some child's toy, set on a sand hill, with bits of moss strewn about to make a realistic picture. He shivered. His head still ached dully, and he could still hear echoes of the horrified screaming.

"I don't know what it was," he told himself, "but I hope I never run into anything like that again."

He located the hill which concealed the flier, and dropped rapidly toward it.

As he entered, the pilot noticed him.

"Well, that was a quick mission," he commented. "How'd you——" He looked at Konar's pain-lined face. "Hey, what's the matter, youngster? You look like the last end of a bad week."

Konar tried to smile, but it didn't work very well.

"I ran into something, Barskor," he said. "Didn't complete my mission. I don't know what happened, but I hope it never happens again."

Barskor looked at him curiously, then turned. "Chief," he called, "something's gone wrong. Konar's been hurt."

Meinora listened to Konar's story, then shook his head unhappily.

"You ran into a transvisor, I'm afraid. We didn't think there were any on this planet." He paused. "There were definitely none discovered to the west, and we looked for them. But now, we're close to the east coast, and you said that girl looked eastern. The eastern continent may be loaded with 'em."

Konar looked curious. "A transvisor? I never heard of them."

"They're rather rare. You only find them under special conditions, and those conditions, we thought, are absent here. But when you find one, you can be sure there are more. It runs in families. You see, they're beings with a completely wild talent. They can be any age, any species, or of any intelligence, but they're nearly always female. Visibility refraction just doesn't work right for their senses, and they can cause trouble." He looked closely at Konar.

"You were lucky to get away. A really terrified transvisor could kill you, just as surely as a heavy caliber blaster."

Konar shivered. "I believe it. But why are they called 'transvisors'?"

"The name's somewhat descriptive, even if it is incomplete. As I said, visibility refraction doesn't work right in their case. Somehow, they pick up visual sensation right through a screen, regardless of its adjustment. But things seen through a screen are distorted, and look abnormal to them. Unless they're used to it, they get frightened when they see a person with a refracted body shield. That's when the trouble starts."

Konar nodded in understanding. "You mean, they transmit their fear?"

"They do. And they'll shock excite a mentacom, completely distorting its wave pattern. If they remain conscious and scared, their fear is deadly to its object." Meinora drew a deep breath.

"As I said, you were lucky. The girl fainted and let you get away." He shrugged and turned to Barskor.

"We'll have to change our mode of operation," he added. "We'll pick up the Earl's mentacom and belt at the hunt tomorrow. Find him alone, knock him out with a paralyzer, and give him parahypnosis afterward. It's not so good, but it's effective. But be sure you are alone, and don't try to use visual refraction under any circumstance. Be better to be seen, if it comes to that. There might be another transvisor around." He kicked gently at the seat beside him.

"This was just a secondary job, done in passing," he said, "but it's a good thing we found this out when we did. It'll change our whole primary plan. Now, we'll have to slog it out the hard way. On no account can anyone refract. It might be suicide. We'll have to talk to travelers. We want to know what abnormal or unusual developments have taken place in what country in the last twenty years. Then, we'll have to check them out. We've got a lot of work to do." He looked around. "Ciernar."

"Yes, sir?" The communications operator looked up.

"Send in a report on this to Group. Make it 'operational.'"

Konar tilted his head a little. "Say, chief, you said the transvisor's fear was amplified by my mentacom. What if I wasn't wearing one?"

"You wouldn't feel a thing," Meinora smiled. "But don't get any ideas. Without amplification, you couldn't control your shield properly. You'd have protection, but your refraction control's entirely mental, and levitation direction depends on mental, not physical control, remember?"

"But how about you? You don't use amplification. Neither do several of the other team chiefs."

Meinora shrugged. "No," he admitted, "we don't need it, except in abnormal circumstances. But we don't go around scaring transvisors. They can't kill us, but they can make us pretty sick. You see we're a little sensitive in some ways." He shook his head. "No, the only advantage I've got is that I can spot a transvisor by her mental pattern—if I get close enough. There's a little side radiation that can be detected, though it won't pass an amplifier. When you've felt it once, you'll never forget it. Makes you uncomfortable." He smiled wryly.

"And you can believe me," he added, "when I do get close to a transvisor, I'm very, very careful not to frighten her."

Winter passed, and spring, and summer came. Nal Gerda, Officer of the Guard, stood on the small wharf below the old watchtower. He looked across the narrows, examined the cliff opposite him, then looked upward at the luminous sky. There were a few small clouds, whose fleecy whiteness accentuated the clear blue about them. Brilliant sunshine bathed the wharf and tower, driving away the night mists.

It would not be long before the new guard came down the cliff. Gerda stretched and drew a deep breath, savoring the summer morning air. Now, it was pleasant, a happy contrast to the sullen skies and biting winter winds he had faced a few short months ago.

For a time, he looked at the green atop the cliffs, then he transferred his attention upriver, toward the bend where the Nalen came out of the

pass to blow between the iron cliffs of Menstal. The water flowed swiftly in the narrows, throwing off white glints as its ripples caught the sunlight, then deepening to a dark blue where it came into the shadow of the cliffs.

A sudden call sounded from the lookout far above, and the officer wheeled about, looking to the great chain which stretched from tower to cliff, to block river traffic. It was in proper position, and Gerda looked back at the bend.

As he watched, a long, low barge drifted into sight, picking up speed as it came into the rapid current. Polemen balanced themselves alertly in the bow, their long sticks poised to deflect their course from any threatening rocks.

Gerda threw off the almost poetical admiration of beauty that had possessed him a moment before and faced the guard house, from whence came a scuffle of feet and the clank of arms, to tell of the guard's readiness.

"Turn out the Guard." Gerda drew himself up into a commanding pose.

A group of men-at-arms marched stiffly out, followed by a pair of serfs. The leader saluted Gerda with upraised hand.

"The Guard is ready, My Captain," he proclaimed. "May the tax be rich."

Gerda returned the salute. "It will be," he stated positively. "These merchants have learned by now that to insult Portal Menstal with poor offerings is unwise in the extreme. And, mark me, they'll not forget!"

The barge approached and swung in toward the wharf in obedience to Gerda's imperious gesture. One of the polemen jumped ashore, securing a line to a bollard.

The steersman climbed to the dock, to halt a pace in front of Gerda. He folded his hands and bowed his head submissively.

"Does Your Honor desire to inspect the cargo?"

"Of course." Gerda's haughty glance appraised the man from toe to crown. "Quickly now. I've little time to waste." He glanced back at his clerk, who had a tablet ready.

"Your name, Merchant?"

"Teron, of Krongert, may it please you, sir. I have been to——"

Gerda waved an impatient hand. "Save me your speech, Higgler," he said curtly. "What's your cargo value?"

"Six thousand tela, Your Honor. We have——"

"Unload it. I'll look at it." Gerda waved the man to silence.

As the bales of goods were placed on the wharf, Gerda examined them critically. A few, he ordered set aside after a quick check and a few questions. Others, he ordered opened and spread out. At last, satisfied with his estimate of the cargo's valuation, he turned.

"Your choice, Merchant?"

"I would pay, Your Honor," said the man, "to the tenth part of my cargo." He extended a leather bag.

"Don't haggle with me," snapped Gerda. "The tax is a fifth of your cargo, as you should well know." His hand sought his sword hilt.

The merchant's face fell a little, and he produced a second bag, which he held out to the officer. "I must apologize," he said. "I am new to this land."

"See that you learn its customs quickly, then." Gerda handed the bags to his clerk.

"Check these, Lor," he ordered. "I make it a thousand, six hundred tela." "

An expression of dismay crossed the merchant's face.

"Your Honor," he wailed, "my cargo is of but six thousand valuation. I swear it."

Gerda stepped forward swiftly. His hand raised, to swing in a violent, back-handed arc, his heavy rings furrowing the merchant's face. The man staggered back, involuntarily raising a hand to his injured cheek.

As a couple of the men-at-arms raised their pikes to the ready, the merchant righted himself, folded his hands again, and bowed in obeisance. Blood trickled down his chin, a drop spattering on his clothing. He ignored it.

"You would dispute my judgment?" Gerda drew his hand up for a second blow. "Here is no market place for your sharp bargaining. For your insolence, another five hundred tela will be exacted. Make speed!"

The merchant shook his head dazedly, but offered no word of protest. Silently, he dug into his possessions, to produce a third bag. For a moment, he weighed it in his hand, then reached into it, to remove a few loose coins. Without raising his head, he extended the bag to the officer of the guard.

Gerda turned. Lor had gone into the guard house, to count the other two bags. The officer raised his voice.

"Lor, get back out here. I've more for you to count."

He tossed the bag to the clerk, then stood, glaring at the unfortunate trader. At last, he kicked the nearest bale.

"Well," he growled, "get this stuff off the wharf. What are you waiting for?"

He watched the barge crew load, then turned. Lor came from the guard house.

"All is in order, My Captain."

"Very well." Gerda looked at him approvingly. Then, he swung to the merchant, fixing him with a stern glare.

"We shall make note of your name, Merchant. See thou that you make honest and accurate valuation in the future. Another time, we shall not be so lenient. The dungeon of Menstal is no pleasant place."

He watched till the last of the bargeload was stowed, then nodded curtly.

"You may shove off," he said. He turned his head toward the tower.

"Down chain," he ordered loudly.

The windlass creaked protestingly and the heavy chain dropped slowly into the river. The barge steered to the center of the channel, gathering speed as it passed over the lowered chain.

When the barge had cleared, serfs inside the tower strained at the windlass in obedience to the commands of their overseer, and the chain rose jerkily, to regain its former position across the stream.

Gerda watched for a moment, then strode toward the guard house. He went inside, to look at the bags of coin on the counting table.

"Cattle," he growled, "to think they could cheat the Baron Bel Menstal of his just tax."

He stepped back out for a moment, to watch the merchant barge enter the rapids beyond the chain. Then, he swung about and re-entered the tower.

Inside, he sat down at his counting table. He opened the bags, spilling their contents out on the boards, and checked their count.

There were forty-eight over.

He turned to his clerk.

"What was your count, Lor?"

"Two thousand, one hundred, sir, and forty-eight."

"Very good." Gerda smiled a little. "For once in his thieving life, the merchant was anxious to give full weight."

Lor spread his hands. "He'll get it back, and more, at Orieano, sir."

"Oh, to be sure." Gerda shrugged indifferently as he scooped the coins back into the bags. He chose three small scraps of wood, scrawled tally marks on them, and went over to a heavy chest.

Taking a key from his belt, he unlocked the chest and raised its lid. He looked at the bags lying within, then tossed the new ones on top of them. As he locked the chest again, he saw Lor go to his account board, to enter the new collection.

The Officer of the Guard straightened, stretched for a moment, then glanced critically in at the windlass room. The serfs had secured the windlass and racked their poles. Now, they were sitting, hunched against the wall, staring vacantly, in the manner of serfs. The guardroom, its commander noted, was properly clean. He shrugged and walked out again to the wharf. Once more, he looked at the iron cliffs opposite him, then glanced downriver. The merchant barge had disappeared.

Beyond Menstal, the cliffs closed in still farther, to become more rugged and to form a narrow gorge. Between them, the Nalen took a tortuous course, turbulently fighting its way over the rocks. Eventually, it would drop into the lowlands, to become a broad, placid river, lowing quietly under the sunshine to water the fields of Orolies. But during its passage through the mountains, it would remain a dark, brawling torrent.

The merchant barge swept through the rapids just beyond Menstal, her polemen deftly preventing disaster against the rocks. At last, as the gorge became a little wider, the steersman guided his course toward a small beach beneath the cliffs. With his free hand, he thoughtfully rubbed his injured cheek.

As the boat's keel grated against gravel, he shook his head and stepped forward. For a moment, he fumbled under a thwart, then he brought out a small case.

"Konar," he called, "fix this thing up for me, will you?" He opened the case and laid it on the thwart.

One of the polemen laid his stick down and came aft.

"Pretty nasty clip, wasn't it, sir?"

Meinora grinned. "Guy's got a heavy hand, all right," he admitted. "Made me dizzy for a second. Almost got mad at him."

Konar raised an eyebrow. "I felt it," he said. "Good thing Ciernar and I backed you up a little. Wouldn't help us much to knock out the baron's river detachment right now, would it?" He reached into the case.

"Looks as though the merchants weren't exaggerating, if you ask me," he added. He approached Meinora, a small swab in his hand.

"Hold still, sir," he instructed. "This'll sting for a few seconds." He dabbed at the cut cheek, then reached back into the case for an instrument.

"Ouch!" Meinora winced. "Did you have to use that stuff full strength? After all, I can wait a couple of hours for it to heal." He shook his head as his companion turned back toward him, then dashed involuntary tears from his eyes and blinked a few times to clear his vision.

"No," he added, "the merchants aren't exaggerating a bit on this one. Bel Menstal's a pretty rough customer, and he keeps rough boys. Now, we'll see whether he's the guy we've been looking for, the guy with our equipment."

Konar focused the small instrument on his superior's face, passing it along the line of the jagged cut. "You didn't explain that part."

"Simple enough." Meinora grinned wolfishly. "Those coins were a Vadriskendar alloy. Now that they're out of their force field, they'll start to sublimate. In a couple of hours or so, they'll be gone, and someone will be asking a lot of questions. Set up the detectors. If the baron is the boy we think he is, we should be getting a fairly strong reading shortly after that guard's relieved."

From somewhere atop the cliff, a bell tolled. The hoarse voice of the lookout drifted down to the wharf.

"Relieve the guard."

Nal Gerda looked up. A line of men were coming down the steep path, stepping cautiously as they wound about the sharp turns. Gerda nodded and walked back into the guard room.

"Draw up your guard," he ordered.

He beckoned to two of the serfs.

"Take the chest," he directed, "and stay close in front of me."

Herding the bearers before him, he went out to the wharf. His guard was drawn up in their proper station, facing upstream, so that they could view both the steps from the cliff and the river. No traffic was in sight in the long gorge.

The new guard came slowly down the trail, formed at the foot of the steps, and marched to the tower portal. Their commander dressed their ranks, motioned to his clerk, and came forward, saluting as he approached Gerda.

"Anything unusual?"

"Nothing," Gerda told him. "Seven barges, this watch. Traders are gathering for the fair at Orieano."

"I know," the other agreed. "We'll have rich collections for the rest of the summer, what with fairs all down the valley. You'll be going to the Orieano Fair?"

"Got my permission yesterday. I'm to ride with the Baron. Have to give the merchants back part of their money, you know."

"Yes, I suppose so." The other grinned, then sobered. "I'll relieve you, sir."

"Very good." Gerda saluted, then turned.

"March off the old guard," he ordered.

The men started up the steps. Gerda followed the serfs with the money chest, bringing up to the rear.

Slowly, they toiled their way up the trail, halting at the halfway point for a brief rest. At last, they were at the top of the cliff. Before them, the castle gate opened. Within the tunnelloike passage through the wall, two sentries grounded their pikes.

Gerda nodded to his clerk, accepted the account tablet, and followed his serfs, who still bore the money chest, into the castle.

Inside the main counting room, his bearers set the chest on a large table. The castle steward came toward them.

"And how were collections?"

"Reasonably good, sir. Seven barges came through during the night, with good cargoes." Gerda held out the tablet.

The steward looked at it, checking off the entries. "Meron, of Vandor—Yes, he would have about that. And Borowa? A thousand?" He nodded thoughtfully. "That seems about right for him." He tapped the tablet a few times, squinting at the last name on the list. "But who is this Teron? I never heard of him. Must have had a rich cargo, too."

Gerda laughed shortly. "He's a new one to me. He tried to get away with a tenth, then protested the valuation. I fined him an extra five hundred."

"Oho!" The steward smiled thinly. "What then?"

Gerda shook his head. "Oh, he was suddenly so anxious to pay the right amount, he gave me forty-eight teloa overweight. I'll know him next time I see him, I'm sure. I marked him well for receipt."

He inspected his knuckles reflectively, then took the key from his belt and opened the chest.

"You'll want to verify my count, of course?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, to be sure. Have to be certain, you know. And there's your share of the fine and overpayment to be taken care of." The steward reached into the chest, removing bags which clinked as they were

dropped to the table. He stopped, to look into the chest with a puzzled expression on his face.

"And what are these?" He reached in, to withdraw three obviously empty bags. He looked curiously at the thongs which tied their mouths, then shook them and looked questioningly at Gerda.

"Why, I ... I don't know." Gerda looked incredulously at the bags. "Certainly, I had no extra money bags."

"I should think not." The steward frowned, then beckoned behind him. Two heavily armed guards approached.

"We'll have to examine into this."

As the guards came close to Gerda, the steward looked closely at the bags on the table, then picked one up, opening it.

"Borowa," he muttered after looking inside and comparing the tally chip with the count tablet. He weighed the bag in his hand. "Yes, it seems to be about right. Certainly not overweight." He picked up another, then still another. At last, he looked up.

"Of course, I shall have to count all of these carefully," he remarked grimly, "but I see no coin from this Teron you have listed." He stared coldly at Gerda. "And the tower lookout confirms that you had seven barges. That was a considerable amount. What did you do with that money?"

"Why, I counted it. It was all there." Gerda shook his head unbelievably. "My count agreed with that of my clerk, and I dropped tallies in and closed the bags again." He looked uneasily at the two guards who flanked him. "Surely, you don't think I'd be so foolish as to tamper with the Baron's taxes? Think, man! I know the Baron's ways!"

"I'm not sure just what I think—yet." The steward shook his head. He picked up one of the empty bags, opened it, and gave it a shake. The small tally chip fell out and he picked it up, comparing it with the list on the tablet. Frowning thoughtfully, he opened the other two bags. More small blocks of wood fell out. He looked at the bags, then tossed them aside and looked coldly at the guard officer.

"It's witchcraft," cried Gerda. "I had nothing——"

"We'll see." The steward motioned at the two guards. "Search this man."

Dazedly, Gerda stood still, submitting as one of the guards went through his clothing while the other stood ready to deal with any resistance. The searcher made a thorough examination of Gerda's clothing, muttered to himself, and went over his search again. A pile of personal

objects lay on the table when he had finished. At last, he looked at the prisoner, then faced his chief.

"He has nothing on him, sir, not even a tela." "

"So I see." The steward frowned, then looked at Gerda.

"You may reclaim your possessions now, captain. Is there any chance that your clerk might have opened the money chest?"

Gerda shook his head. "I don't see how he could, sir, unless he had a duplicate key, and that's hardly possible. I kept the chest locked at all times, and the key never left my person."

"And there is no chance that any of your men could have hidden anything on the way here?"

Again, Gerda shook his head. "None," he said positively. "I was behind them all the way, and would have seen if any had made any unusual motion."

"Very well." The steward clapped his hands sharply.

There was a clatter of arms, followed by the scuffle of feet. Across the room, a door opened and a detachment of the castle guard filed in. Their leader stepped forward, saluting the steward.

"There is a river watch outside," he was told. "Disarm them, take them to a cell, and search them thoroughly. A considerable amount of coin has been stolen. Report to me when you have finished."

"Yes, sir." The group filed out.

The steward turned to Gerda again.

"This matter must be examined carefully," he declared. "You may have been the victim of witchcraft, of course, though I doubt it, never having witnessed such a thing. Or one of your men may have worked out a cunning method of theft, an occurrence which I have witnessed many times. Or, there's the other possibility." He stroked his chin. "After all, you were the rearmost man, and the one none other would observe."

Gerda looked at him fearfully.

"This may become a matter for the Baron's personal attention," continued the steward. He looked sharply at Gerda. "How long have you been in the Baron's service?"

"Why, you know that, sir. Ten years, ever since I——"

"Yes, yes, I remember. And you know how hopeless it is to try to deceive the Baron?"

"Yes, sir." Gerda swallowed painfully.

"But you still insist you had nothing to do with the disappearance of this money?"

Gerda spread his hands. "I can't understand it, sir. But I had nothing to do with it myself. As I told you, we collected it, listed it, counted it, and I put it in the chest and locked it up." He shook his head again. "It's witchcraft, sir."

The steward leaned back, a slight smile playing about his lips.

"Witchcraft is good enough for serfs," he said smoothly, "but you and I are intelligent men. We have had collection money disappear before, many times. Almost always, there has been the cry, 'It's witchcraft!' And always there has been a more simple, worldly explanation." He snapped his fingers and a page hurried forward.

"A cup of wine," ordered the steward. "This questioning is thirsty work." He faced back to Gerda.

"Always," he repeated, "some explanation has been forthcoming. Usually, I have discovered the errant one—with the help of my guards, of course. And the criminal has been duly punished. But there have been some few occasions when the malefactor was so clever as to force the Baron's intervention." He paused, leaning forward a little.

"And do you know what happened then?"

Gerda's throat was becoming dry. His mouth opened, but he closed it again.

The page returned, bearing a large cup and a flagon of wine. Carefully, he filled the cup, then set it before the steward, who lifted it to his lips, drank, and set it down with a satisfied sigh.

"Thank you, boy. Here is one thing we can produce well in these mountains." He wiped his lips and turned his gaze to Gerda again. He shook his head slowly.

"The Baron can detect guilt or innocence in a moment. For a short time, he questioned the persons brought before him. He soon determined the guilty ones, and wrung confessions from their wretched lips. We then took them away, and turned them over to the torturers." He raised the cup again.

"You know," he added, "I'm told that some of them lasted as long as ten full days." He shook his head. "I could never understand how the executioners can put up with such noise for so long. But then, I suppose one gets used to most anything."

He looked toward the door. "Strange," he murmured, "I wonder what's keeping Maro so long." He clapped his hands sharply once more, and waited.

The page dashed to a door and disappeared within. At last, he came back, holding the door for the leader of the castle guard detachment, who came forward to salute his superior.

"Have you found anything yet?"

"Nothing, sir. We have stripped them, but they have no unusual things about them. And we have questioned them. None will admit to seeing or doing anything other than normal duties."

The steward sighed. "Very well. Secure them, then. I'll call for them later." He stood.

"Come, Nal Gerda," he ordered, "unless you have something further to tell me of this, we must have an audience with the Baron."

Florel, Baron Bel Menstal, sat at his ease. Before him was a dish of good cakes, beside him, a cup and flagon of good wine. He looked contentedly around the apartment.

For fourteen years now, he had been lord of this castle. And for fourteen years, he had busied himself building his forces and increasing his power and influence in the duchy. He had made himself feared and respected.

During the past several years, his word had been of great weight in the Duke's councils. He was now one of the great barons of the realm. He smiled to himself.

As he had risen in importance, Oriano, the soft holder of the rich fields to the west, had fallen. The man was getting old—even older than the Duke himself, and he was tired. And his daughter was the sole heir to that barony.

Again, Menstal smiled to himself as he thought of the daughter of Oriano. Next month, at the fair, he would press suit for the hand of the heiress, and a few months after that he would have control of the rich farm lands and the trading city.

The girl would probably protest, but that would do her little good. He knew what fear could do. And he could rouse such fear as to render even strong men but helpless masses of flesh. The beautiful damsel of Oriano would be a simple task. None other would dare dispute his claim, and the Duke would come to support him.

And the Duke himself? Ah, well, perhaps it would be as well to allow him to finish his life in peaceful possession of his broad fields. But certainly, the son of Dwerostel would have no word in the control of the duchy. An accident could be easily arranged, and Flor, one-time woods

beater and scullery boy of Budorn, would become the great Duke he had long planned to be. No, it wouldn't take too many more years.

He filled himself a cup, and looked complacently into its clear depths. The tap on the door broke his reverie, and he looked up, annoyed.

He stared impatiently at his castle steward as the man entered and made obeisance.

"What now, Weron?" He set the cup down. "Must I be bothered with all your petty problems?"

"This, Excellency, is an unusual problem. A sizable tribute payment has disappeared without trace. The empty bags were left, and the culprit has——"

"Enough!" The Baron waved a hand impatiently, then adjusted his golden coronet to a more comfortable angle. For an instant, his fingers played with the ornamental bosses.

"Yes, yes, I see," he snapped. "You can spare me your mumbled details. This man is the officer of the guard?"

"Yes, Excellency." The steward motioned Gerda forward.

Bel Menstal looked sternly at his officer. "Where did you hide your loot?" he demanded.

Gerda looked incredulously at his master. He had stolen nothing. As far as he knew, he had done nothing wrong. But he seemed to be condemned in advance. Something was insistently pressing on his brain, demanding a confession. He had nothing to confess, but the demanding pressure remained. He struggled against it, and it grew.

Admit it. How did you do it? Where is the money?

The pressure became a tearing force. Gerda swayed weakly.

"I don't know what happened," he insisted. "I told——"

The words stopped as the force became almost unbearably intense. A sudden, sharp pain tore at Gerda's throat, and blinding light seemed to strike back of his eyes. Through the glare, he dimly saw the Baron raise a hand threateningly.

"You claim to have no idea at all how the money was taken, or which of your men may have been the thief? This is not a sensible attitude."

You know something. You must know something. Tell it!

Gerda shook his head miserably, entirely unable to speak. Somehow, nothing was clear. He remembered that something had gone wrong. Somehow, he had failed his duty. But how? The room was hazy. Snatches of his last tour of duty rose to his consciousness, then were abruptly blotted out—gone. The faces of his clerk and of the men-at-arms came out of the haze for an instant. Then, they, too, were gone.

The room seemed to spin and an irresistible force bore him to the floor. As he slowly was pressed downward, he wondered who he was—why he was here—what had happened. Then, the floor came at him with blinding speed and he ceased to wonder. The haze about him scintillated and became impenetrable darkness.

The Baron looked down at the crumpled form.

"Take this man away, Weron," he ordered. "He knew nothing." He stroked his hair. "When he recovers, assign him to some unimportant duty in the castle. Something, of course, that will demand little thought or spirit."

"And the others, Excellency?"

"Oh, bring them in, one at a time. One of them managed to make a complete fool of his officer, of course. But I'll find him."

Bel Menstal waved his hand in dismissal, then leaned back in his chair, watching as his steward directed a pair of men-at-arms. They carried the limp form from the room.

"There. That'll pick up any power radiation from the castle." Konar straightened, looking at the small panel.

"Good enough." Meinora leaned over, checking the dials. "See you've set it for average power."

"Yes, sir. It'll give a flicker indication for low levels and it'll fail to trip for unaided thought. Not too much chance of an overload, either."

"That's right. You're learning." Meinora nodded casually. "Well, let's keep watch on it." He sat down. "Audio alarm on?"

Konar glanced at the panel again. "I remembered it this time." He grinned, then looked curiously at his superior's cut cheek. The wound was healing nicely. In an hour or so, there would be no visible trace of the injury.

"Say, Chief," he asked, "how'd you happen to get slapped?"

"I asked for it." Meinora smiled thoughtfully.

"Yes, sir. I know that. But what was the purpose?"

"This continent has never been thoroughly checked, so we're sampling the culture. We know a lot about them now, but there's a lot we still have to know. For example, how do they react to various stimuli? And how much stimulus is necessary to produce a given action? Of course, we can't check every individual, but we can pick up a sample from each community we contact and extrapolate from them." Meinora spread his hands.

"So, I presented a minor irritation to that officer, and he reacted—fast. He didn't just slap me for effect. He was infuriated at the insult to his authority. Not only that, but his men expected him to react in just that manner. I noted that, too. He'd have lost face if he'd acted in any other way. And the men-at-arms were disappointed when we gave them no further excuse for violence. We really lost face with them. There, we have an indication that violence is the expected thing in this particular castle, which is a community of the duchy. Right?"

"Yes." Konar nodded thoughtfully. "They're not only violent themselves, but they expect violence from others. I see what you mean. You'll sample the other baronies?"

"Certainly. As many as we contact. They can tell us quite a bit. We——"

A buzzer interrupted him. Meinora snapped a switch and sat forward alertly.

A needle quivered, rose from its rest, and swung abruptly across the meter scale. With an audible ping, it slapped against the stop beyond the maximum reading.

Meinora looked sharply at the detector set, then turned a selector switch. The needle moved reluctantly away from the pin, but remained above the red line at center scale. Meinora grimaced, twisted the selector again, and adjusted another knob, till the needle came to rest at center.

He examined the dial readings, frowned incredulously, then turned.

"Look at it," he invited. "It's a wonder he hasn't burned that amplifier out. It's a heavy duty job, I know. But——"

Konar leaned over his chief's shoulder.

"What an overload! We've found it, all right. But what's going on?"

"Let's find out." Meinora flipped a switch. The two men tensed against the resultant shock and were silent for a time. At last, Konar reached out to snap the switch off.

"Just raw, crushing force," he said wonderingly. "A ferocious demand, with no regard for facts, no consideration of mental characteristics, no thought of consequence." He shook his head slowly. "Never experienced anything just like that before."

"With the power he's using," Meinora remarked, "it's a wonder he doesn't upset every mind in his castle." He snapped the detector off.

"Including his own." Konar nodded and looked at the dial settings. "One thing's sure. This boy never had any instruction." He stepped back. "Well, we know he has it. What's the procedure?"

Meinora was frowning thoughtfully. He stroked his injured cheek, then shook his head.

"We certainly let that guard officer in for something," he mused. "Have to pick him up and give him therapy, I think." He looked at Konar. "Oh, procedure?"

"Yes, sir. Do we catch him alone and proceed as we did with the last one? That worked with no trouble."

"No, I don't think it'd work out so well in this case. If I caught it right, this one's almost never by himself outside his apartment. Likes to impress his personality on people." Meinora looked at the detector set, then around at the younger man beside him.

"You know, I got some interesting side thoughts just now. Maybe we can do two jobs in one this time. It'll take a little longer, but it might save time in the long run."

The communications operator came over. "Not another of those?" he asked with a grin.

Meinora nodded. "I'm just dreaming up a nice, dirty trick," he admitted. "Tried something like it once before, on a smaller scale. It worked." He stood up, stretching.

"The fair's going to be on at Orieano in a little while, right?"

"Yes. Be a pretty big affair, too, I think. Why?"

"And the Duke'll be there, of course, along with most of his court and a good share of his fighting men?"

"Why, yes, sir. They tell me he's always been there. Don't suppose he'll skip it this time."

"So, it's perfect. We'll get this set of equipment in public, and with apparent legitimacy. And in the process, we'll set up social strains that'll result in this area reorienting itself." Meinora looked around with a grin.

"Look, call Barskor. Tell him to pick us up with the flier. We'll go down to the hills south of Orieano. Tell you about it on the way."

The last of the river guards was carried out, head dangling limply from the arms of one of the bearers. Bel Menstal sat back in his chair, frowning. Abruptly, he turned on his steward.

"None of them knew a thing," he snarled. "None of them. There's something funny going on here."

The steward's face was drawn. Dizzying forces had assailed him, and he had almost collapsed several times during the questioning. He tried to gather his hazy thoughts. Too many kept coming too fast.

"Yes, Excellency," he agreed. "Maybe it *is* witchcraft."

Bel Menstal's face darkened. "Nonsense," he growled, rising part way out of his chair. "Witchcraft be damned! There's some explanation to this, and I'm going to find out what it is."

"Yes, Excellency."

The Baron looked up, then stared contemptuously at his man.

"Yes, Excellency," he mimicked in a singsong voice. "Always 'Yes, Excellency.' Haven't you an idea of your own?"

"Yes, Excellency, I——"

"Inept fool! There's an explanation to this, I tell you. And peasant superstition has no part in it. You should have found it. But no! You came, dragging a whole detachment of guards in for me to question. Me, the Baron! I have to do all the work—all the thinking. I tell you, I want men about me who can think and act."

He got out of his chair and circled the table, striding close to the steward.

"I'll give you one more chance, Weron. Go out and find what happened to that money. I don't care how you do it, and I'm not going to be bothered with your petty details. But find out where that money has gone. Is that simple enough for you to understand?"

"Yes, Excellency." Weron backed toward the door. "I'll——"

Reckless fury shook Florel. Suddenly, he felt an irresistible craving for direct, violent action. He picked a dagger from his belt.

"You're not only a fool," he shouted, "but a spineless one, as well. I think I'll have to get another steward. A good one." He raised the dagger, then paused.

"Here, weakling. You'd like to use this, wouldn't you? But you lack the will. That's why you're a mere lackey." Abruptly, he threw the weapon at Weron.

"Try it, fool. Try it, and see how a real man protects himself."

He stalked toward the steward.

The man cringed away, then, pressed by his master, suddenly sobbed with rage. He raised the dagger. Bel Menstal, protected by his body shield, brushed the stroke aside.

"Ha!" He snatched the weapon. "You would try it?"

Weron threw his arms before him, trying to ward off the blows, then slumped as the blade sank into his flesh.

Bel Menstal struck the sagging body a few more times with the dagger, then threw the weapon on top of the inert form.

"Ho, Guards," he shouted, flinging the door open.

He went back to his chair and watched as the guards came in. In obedience to his gesture, they carried the one-time steward from the room. The door closed, and Bel Menstal was alone. Slowly, the stimulation of the encounter faded, and he shook his head.

It had been pleasant for a few minutes, he thought, but he had solved nothing.

Could it be that searchers from his native land had at last found him? He frowned. No, they wouldn't use some devious method, even supposing they could find some way of corrupting his household. They would simply expose him and accuse him before the Duke. They'd storm his castle if necessary, to take him by force. This was something else. He would have to think. He put his elbows on the table, cupping his face in his hands.

The great market square at Orieano was crowded. Colorful tents hid most of the cobblestones, and the rest of the pavement was obscured from view by the droves of people. Merchants and their assistants hovered about, each endeavoring to outdo the rest in enticing the swarming crowd into his tent. Jugglers and mountebanks competed for attention, outdoing even themselves in their efforts to gain the ears, the eyes, and the coins of the mob of bargain hunters.

At one side of the square, the cattle mart was drawing many, who listened to the noise of the beasts and the shouts of the vendors. Some paused to bargain. Others simply strode about, still looking for the things they had come to seek out. Here and there, a cutpurse slunk through the crowd, seeking his own type of bargain—an unwary victim.

The Duke of Dwerostel rode into the market, conscious of a buzz which rose to a loud hum. The bellowing of beasts, the cries of vendors, the scuffling of many feet, all blended into one great sound—the voice of the fair.

The Duke listened contentedly. Here, he thought, was activity. Here, his chamberlain would find the things he had been ordered to get that the comfort of the castle might be furthered. And here was a certainty of tolls and taxes, which would enrich the duchy.

He continued at the head of his retinue, through the center of the square. Time enough to take close note of the market later. Now, he wished to get to the castle of Orieano, where he would take refreshment after his trip.

He looked up at the heights above the town. Pennants were flying from the stone battlements. And he could see the tiny figures of the

guard. His presence in the town had certainly been noted. He rode to the other side of the square, and led his company up the steep, winding road to the castle's town gate.

The sentries grounded their pikes and stood rigidly as the ducal escort rode through the gate, the pennons on their lances flying with the breeze of their passage. The ducal party swept through the outer ward, through the inner wall, and came to a halt before the keep.

The Baron of Oriano waited before his keep. He came forward, bowing low before his liege, then steadied a stirrup as the Duke dismounted. He waved toward the dining hall.

"Your Excellency will grace us with his presence at meat?"

The Duke gestured to a page, who took the charger's reins to guide the beast away.

"It would be pleasing to us," he said.

He nodded graciously and followed his vassal into the hall. He nodded in approval at the long tables, waited until the clanging of the welcoming salute subsided, and went to the elevated table set for his use and that of his Baron.

He sat down, looking over the company. A glint of gold caught his eye, and he looked curiously at two men who sat a little way down the table.

These two were elegantly turned out, their long cloaks thrown back to expose richly embroidered cloth. The Duke examined them closely. Obviously, here was one of the great western nobles, with an almost equally noble companion. The golden circlet proclaimed the identity of one, and the proud bearing and rich dress of both confirmed their station. Somehow, the Duke thought, these two presented a far more imposing appearance than his vassal, the Baron Bel Menstal, despite that Baron's overwhelming personality.

He thought of his hard fighting border protector. Of course, he had far to come, and the way through the mountains could be difficult. But it was a little strange he was not yet here.

The Duke remembered some of the resentful gazes he had noted during his passage through the fair. He must have words, he decided, with Bel Menstal. Possibly the man was a little too eager to collect his road and river taxes. Possibly this hard man of his was too hard, too grasping. Of course, he held a valuable bastion against the tribes of the Ajerical, but——

He shrugged away his thoughts and devoted his attention to the dishes before him.

As the Duke took up his food, the waiting company commenced reaching for dishes. Konar turned toward Meinora with a slight smile.

"Got 'em well trained, hasn't he?"

"That he has. Another note for our cultural information."

"When do you want me to talk to him?"

"After he's finished his main courses and got a few cups of wine in him. Our boy'll be delayed for a while, you know. We've plenty of time to let Orieano fill the Duke in before Bel Menstal arrives."

Klion Meinora turned his attention to the trencher before him for a moment, then looked toward his companion again.

"Notice the girl sitting by the Baron?"

"You mean Orieano's daughter?"

"Precisely. Don't give her any cause for fear. Don't even make a sudden move in her presence."

"You mean——?"

"I do. She could become Lady Death, if she got frightened."

Konar looked toward the elevated table. The girl looked harmless enough. She was slender, attractive, even delicate looking. But he remembered a horror-distorted face, a mind-shattering scream, and a blinding flash of light. He shuddered a little and turned his attention to his food.

Florel Bel Menstal strode into the hall, looking toward the table head. The Duke, he noted, was still at table, though he had finished his meal. Now, he was engaged in earnest conversation with Orieano.

This, Bel Menstal thought, must be checked. Haughtily ignoring the rest of the company, he paced to the head of the table, where he made perfunctory obeisance.

"Your Excellency," he greeted. He straightened. "I offer my apologies for my late appearance. My men had to clear a slide from the way." He turned toward Orieano.

"You would do well to instruct your serfs in the art of road building. Their work seems slack."

He faced the Duke again. The overlord set his cup down.

"Bel Menstal," he said gravely, "two nobles of your former land have come to me to present serious accusations." He rose. "You will accompany me to the chambers."

Bel Menstal hesitated. His men were outside the castle, of course. It was against etiquette to bring them inside, especially when the Duke was

present. But there were plenty of them. Possibly he should fight his way out of here now. Once in his hilltop castle, he would be impregnable. And his raiding parties could keep the barony in supplies. Or possibly it would be better to——

He forced his panic down. After all, what could these two do? There could be little evidence they could offer. Well over twenty years had passed. He had adopted the ways of the land. Now, he was one of the Duke's powerful arms. And what could they give to offset that?

Here was no cause for fear. He could bluff his way out of this accusation, discredit the searchers, and make his position permanently secure. Possibly it was even better this way. He looked scornfully at the two men who moved toward him.

They were dressed in the ornate court dress of the Western Empire, he saw. Unquestionably, these were genuine men of the west. But he was now of the east. And here, he had established himself, and would soon establish himself more firmly, while they were mere foreigners. When it came to it, the Duke would hardly dare be too critical of him. Confidently, he pushed his way past the nearer of the two westerners, to follow the Duke to the audience chamber.

As the Duke faced about, one of the newcomers stepped forward.

"There is the man, Excellency," he said positively. "Here is no man of noble birth. This man is a serf—a mere scullery boy—who murdered his noble master to steal his insignia. We have searched for many years, for his crime was so monstrous that no effort could be too great to bring him to justice." He faced Bel Menstal.

"Flor, serf of Budorn," he said sternly, "your time of reckoning has come. Hand over the stolen insignia."

The Duke intervened.

"Aren't we going a little fast?" he asked mildly. "He claims to be a younger son of the Earl of Konewar. Let him speak in his defense."

The stranger nodded. "That we learned, Excellency," he admitted. "And that is what led us to him, for it is one of the great holes in his story. We know of Konewar. True, he had two sons, but the younger was killed several years ago." He paused.

"There is a further bit of evidence I might offer," he added. "And I feel sure that some study by your chamberlain will bear me out." He pointed at the coronet worn by Florel.

"That insignia of rank which this man profanes is never given to other than the rightful heir to a great estate. And then, not until he succeeds to his title. No younger member of any of our noble families has ever been

allowed the coronet or the belt. Even many large landholders, such as I, do not have them. Those are reserved for the heads of the great houses, and there are few of them in existence. Certainly, no western Earl would desert his holdings to journey to far lands and to take service with another, not even one so highly placed as yourself."

The Duke looked sharply at him, then turned his gaze on his vassal. "These words have the ring of truth," he said. "Can you answer them? Have you perchance traded upon our unfamiliarity with your home country to misrepresent your station?"

Flor looked around the room. Possibly there was still time to——Or possibly he could still face these men down. Only one of them wore a coronet. He drew himself up arrogantly.

"These are cunning deceivers," he stated positively. "When I left Kone-war, my father himself——"

Meinora raised a hand threateningly. "Your father was never in Kone-war, Serf," he said sternly. "Your father still tends his master's fields in the hills of Budoris."

Flor snatched his sword from its sheath. This was the unprotected one. He could be struck with the sword, and perhaps in the confusion, an escape would be possible.

"That is the last insult," he snarled. "I challenge you to combat, to test whether you can support your lies."

"Nobles," was the reply, "do not fight with serfs. You should know that. The great ones, like him," Meinora pointed at Konar, who stood close to the Duke, "have no contact with such as you. But I am here. And when a serf becomes insolent, we have ways of punishing him."

Konar smiled a little, pointing a small object as Meinora slipped his own sword out.

Flor lunged furiously, and Meinora stepped aside. The man had determination and fierce courage. But he had never bothered to really learn the use of his weapon. No need, of course. He had never been compelled to put up a defense. Not till now. The hand weapon held by Konar would destroy his invulnerability.

Meinora struck suddenly at Flor's hand with the flat of his blade, then engaged the man's sword with his own, and twisted. The weapon clattered to the floor and Flor stooped to recover it.

The team chief laughed shortly, bringing the flat of his blade down in a resounding smack and Flor straightened, involuntarily bringing a hand to his outraged rear. Again, the blade descended, bringing a spurt of dust from his clothing. Flor twisted, trying to escape, but his assailant

followed, swinging blow after full armed blow with the flat of his sword. He worked with cool skill.

It seemed to Flor that the punishing steel came from all directions, to strike him at will. Blows fell on his back, his legs, even his face, and he cringed away, trying desperately to escape the stinging pain. Under the smarting blows, he remembered previous whippings, administered by a strong-armed kitchen master, and he seemed to smell the stench of the scullery once more. Suddenly, he sank to his knees in surrender.

"Please, Master. No more, please." He raised his hands, palms together, and looked up pleadingly.

The Duke looked down in horrified disgust.

"And this, I accepted. This, I made a Baron of my realm." He transferred his gaze to Konar. Suddenly, he looked feeble and humbly supplicant.

Flor sniffled audibly.

"I know you have come a long way," the Duke said, "but I would ask of you a favor. I would deal with this miscreant. Your injury is old. It has been partially healed by time, and it does not involve honor so deeply as does my own." He shook his head.

"I have abandoned the dignity of my station, and the injury is fresh and must continue unless I act to repair it."

Konar nodded graciously. "Your Excellency's request is just," he said. "We but came to reclaim the lost insignia of Budorn." He stepped forward, taking the circlet from Flor's head. Two guards seized the prisoner, and Konar tore the belt from the man's waist.

"This insigne must be remounted," he said. "The belt has been dishonored for too long." He broke the fastenings holding the body shield to the leather, and threw the heavy strap back at Flor.

"We are deeply indebted to you, Excellency," he added, turning to the Duke. "If it is your will, we shall remain only for the execution, then return to our own land."

The Duke sighed. "It is well." He nodded at the guards. "Remove him," he ordered. "An execution will be held at daybreak."

"Very good, Konar. You handled that beautifully."

"Thanks, Chief. What's next?"

"Just keep the Duke busy with bright conversation. Buck up his spirits a bit. The old boy's had a nasty shock, and unfortunately, he's due for another one. Too bad, but it's for the best. I'll take it from here."

Diners looked up curiously as the two guards led Flor through the hall to the outer door. A few rose and followed as the three men went past the sentries at the portal, and came out into the sunshine of the inner ward. Across the cobblestones was the narrow entrance to the dungeon.

Flor looked around despairingly. His charger stood, waiting for the rider, who would never again—Or would he?

He remembered that he was still carrying the heavy belt that had been so contemptuously flung at him. When the strap had been thrown, he had flung a hand up to protect his already aching face. He had caught and held the belt, and no one had thought to take it from him.

He suddenly swerved his thick shoulders, swinging the heavy strap at the eyes of one of his guards. With a cry of pain, the man covered his face, and Flor spun, to swing the strap at the other guard. Before the two men could recover, he dashed to the side of his mount, swung into the saddle, and urged the beast into motion.

The wall was low on this side, but Flor remembered it towered high above the dry moat. And across that moat were the woods, where his men waited. He urged the beast to full speed, forcing the animal to the top of the wall and over.

For an almost endless instant, time seemed to stop. The barren moat and green weeds floated beneath him, and the only reminder of his rapid drop was the air, which whistled past his ears. Suddenly, motion was restored again, and they lit with a jarring crash, just at the lip of the moat.

With a cry of agony, the charger pitched forward, pawing at the stones that had smashed his chest, and throwing his rider over his head. Flor managed to land uninjured. He picked himself up and ran to the edge of the forest before he stopped to look back.

Heads were appearing atop the wall. At the edge of the moat, the charger struggled vainly, then dropped from sight. Flor waved defiantly at the growing crowd which stared from the high wall.

"The Duke hangs nobody," he shouted, "unless he can catch and hold him." He turned, to make his way through the trees.

"In fact," he added to himself, "I may yet return to hang the Duke."

He went to the meadow where his escort was encamped.

"We have been betrayed," he shouted. "The Duke plots with the merchants to destroy Bel Menstal and hang his men. Break camp! We must gather the forces of the barony."

Baron Bel Orieano looked worried.

"The Duke has sent couriers," he said, "to gather the fighting men of the duchy. But it will be a long, hard struggle. The serf has gained the hills of Menstal. He has raised his men, and has dared to attack. Some say he has enlisted those very hill tribes, from whose depredations he swore to defend the duchy, and even has them serving under his banner." He looked at Meinora and Konar.

"The roads of the duchy are no longer safe. Raiding parties appear at every wooded stretch. Nor can we even be certain that the couriers have gotten through to Dweros." He shook his head.

"I, of course, am loyal to the Duke. But my forces are few. My barony has been a peaceful community, having little need for arms."

Meinora smiled encouragingly. "Yet there are fighters here," he said, "and in plenty."

The Baron looked at him curiously. "Where? I have no knowledge of such."

Konar leaned forward. "If you can help us get the Duke's approval, we can raise an army which ten Bel Menstals would fail to withstand."

"The Duke's approval?"

"Certainly." Konar waved his hand. "Look over your walls, Excellency. You have burghers. There are armorers, merchants, with their caravan guards, artisans, even peasants. Here, today, are gathered more able-bodied men than Bel Menstal could raise, were he to search out and impress all the hill tribes."

"But, to arm these Commoners? And would they fight?"

"To be sure. Given reason, they will fight like madmen."

Meinora leaned forward, speaking rapidly. "For long years, they have suffered from the road and river taxes of Bel Menstal, as well as from the insults and blows of his officers. Many of them have been imprisoned, and held for ruinous ransom. Others have been tortured and killed. Under the serf, they would suffer additional taxes, until they were driven from the land, or themselves reduced to serfdom and even slavery." He waved at the town.

"Caravans would be halted and stripped of both goods and coin. All this, he has done before, but on no such scale as he would were restraining hands removed." Meinora spread his hands.

"The Duke has only to promise, under his solemn oath, to rid the land of robbers, to allow the merchants and artisans to police the land, and to form those guilds and associations which they have long petitioned for their own protection. For these things, they will fight."

The Baron leaned back in his chair. He had heard some of these arguments before, but had ignored them, thinking that they were mere special pleading from interested merchants. Now, they were being presented by men of his own station.

And the situation was urgent. Drastic measures were necessary. Under the gaze of the two, he felt a change of thought. The whole thing was possible, of course, and it might be that trade, uninterrupted by robber depredation, would provide greater taxes than before.

Finally, he rose to his feet. "Come," he said, "we will seek audience with the Duke and put this matter before him."

"Well, that's part of the job." Klion Meinora twisted in his seat and craned his neck to look at the green fields spread out beneath the flier.

"It worked out almost exactly as you explained it, Chief." Konar looked curiously at his instructor. "But I missed a couple of steps somewhere."

"It followed from the culture pattern." Meinora raised an eyebrow. "You saw the reaction of the Duke when he realized that Flor was actually a serf?"

"Sure. He was so horrified, he was sick."

"But did you think of the reaction of the townsmen and peasants?"

"You mean they'd feel the same way?"

"Sure. Most of them did. These people have been ingrained with a firm belief in their mode of living. They regard it as right and proper. And the murder and robbery of a noble by a serf is just as serious in the eyes of serfs and freemen as it is to the nobles. No serf in his right mind would even think of raising a hand against a noble, not even in self-defense. Catch?"

Konar leaned back. "Oh, brother," he murmured. "I can just see what happened when Flor's real status finally penetrated the minds of his own men."

"You're probably right, too. And with no body shield to supplement his rather awkward swordsmanship, Flor was fresh meat for the first real fighting man that stood up to him." Meinora shook his head.

"His was a hopelessly twisted mentality, and there was no possibility of salvage."

"I know. They have a few of his type in the wards at Aldebaran." Konar shrugged hopelessly. "Therapists just fold their hands when they see 'em."

"They do that. People like Flor are just pure ferocity. Oh, sometimes, they're cunning, even talented. But there's no higher mentality to develop—not a trace of empathy. And you can't work with something that's completely missing. Good thing they are quite rare."

"I should say so," agreed Konar. "A very good thing." He looked out over the fields. "His influence lasted for a while, too."

"It did. He'd conditioned his people to a certain extent. Just as I expected, it took some time to persuade that gang to stop their depredations, and it had to be done the hard way. But the merchants were willing, and that's what it took." Meinora brushed a hand over his hair. He knew how the rest of this story went——

"It'll take 'em some time to get used to their new charters, but the roots of the guilds are formed. And they did some fighting and learned their powers. It'll take a lot to make 'em go back to the old routine. The Duke'll never try it, and his successors won't be able to. Anyone who tries to conquer that bunch of wild-cats'll have a tough job, and he'll get really hurt. It'll spread, too. Merchants and artisans in the next duchy'll get the idea. And then the next, and the next. Freedom's a contagious thing."

Klion Meinora studied the terrain, then turned back.

"It's going to be a tough planet for a long time," he said thoughtfully. "A tough, brawling planet. They'll fight for everything they get, and sometimes for just the love of fighting. The people who come from here will be something to deal with. But they'll knock their own rough edges off. No, they won't be savages."

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