

Very early the next morning, Dal left for the Temple. Again, he went on foot, in order to prepare himself for the trials that might await him. Before he had succeeded in that, he was accosted by a priest in a brown robe, who invited him to follow him. They both went around the edifice and went into it by a little door that opened into an alley. At that moment, another priest was passing the end of the alley; he continued his route along the avenue, and went into the Temple in his turn, but by the main entrance, under the arcades.

Behind his guide, Dal went down a staircase that led to a subterranean corridor. In the middle of the corridor there was an opening in the wall. Dal was then shown into a room of vast proportions, which was a laboratory. He was left there—but he did not have to wait long. Brother Alban appeared, with his hood pushed back. He was smiling humorlessly.

“Peace be with you, Sire,” he said bowing. “I wasn’t sure that I’d see you today.”

Dal looked at him. “I spent some time yesterday with the biophysicists from the University...” he began.

“I know. Did they have more success than me in convincing you?”

“I’m reserving my judgment.”

“Prudence is always honorable.”

“What about you?” said Dal, a trifle brusquely. “What more have you to show me?”

Brother Alban raised a hand. “Have a little patience,” he said. “First, know that we’re conducting our own enquiry here into yesterday’s events.” He darted a glance toward the door of which Dal had just made use, and lowered his voice. “We know that the wolf is in the sheepfold,” he said. “The hybrid that killed the guard certainly belongs to someone in the High Priest’s entourage. If you’re ready to attempt the experiment, it has to be now. I fear that sabotage might lead to its postponement or—who can tell?—its suppression.”

Dal had the strange impression that his will had nothing to do with the reply he made. “I’m ready.”

“Good. Follow me.”

They went into another room. Dal stopped on the threshold, petrified. The room was almost entirely filled by an enormous machine that was vaguely reminiscent of a starship fitted with a gondola.

“The necroship,” said Brother Alban.

There was a cigar-shaped spinde that reflected a metallic gleam. Cables extended from the spindle supporting a sort of primitive boat. Nothing else was visible.

“Are you making fun of me?” Dal asked, suddenly becoming aggressive. “What is this ridiculous assemblage?”

Brother Alban beckoned him to come closer. “This ridiculous assemblage,” he said, “is the fruit of a century of stubborn effort, undertaken by generations of numerous and skillful crews. It’s necessary that the voyager not be placed behind any material object, including an operator. As for the superior part of the...vehicle, it contains the drive-units.”

“The drive-unit?” Dal repeated, weakly.

“It’s not a matter of a voyage through space or time,” Brother Alban said, “but it is a matter of a voyage. To say *voyage* implies propulsion, of whatever sort—and yet the necroship will remain here, even when it is displaced.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve already sent it to where it needs to go, but without a passenger, by means of a...sort of automatic pilot. It was duplicated. Its replica drew away from it, went through the walls and disappeared. On its return journey it reappeared, and the two necroships fused into a single one.”

Dal did not reply. He waited for more.

“We’ve also sent it forth with a passenger on board—a little hybrid.”

Again, Dal thought about the hybrids in the laboratory. “And?”

“Between the moment of duplication and that of fusion, the subject was nothing but a cadaver. It came back to life thereafter, without our having attempted any kind of reanimation.”

“Was the subject duplicated too?”

“We’re not sure, because it was very difficult to observe it at that moment, but it’s highly probable. On the other hand, we have to confess that we’re entirely ignorant of the nature of that double, and...the place—I have no other term—where it goes.”

Dal studied the necroship. The whole adventure was pure folly. Had it not been for Kalla’s death, he would have brought all the necrosophs before a tribunal for fraud. One would then have seen, in the course of the trial, whether there was anything serious in their claims. In his present situation, however, he had to enter into their mysteries. He now understood how a clever crook can easily succeed in duping a man blinded by grief.

“Let’s get on with it,” he said, bad-temperedly. “Do I climb into that barbaric fishing-boat?”

Brother Alban raised his arms to the heavens. “Not so fast! For you, I want a gradual approach, taking all possible precautions.”

“What else is there?”

The necrosoph led him to a part of the room where there was a table laden with papers.

“You might still take me for a trickster, but what I’m telling you is true. These are the cards of sleep.”

Dal leaned over, frowning. Alban put his hand on the cards.

"One of us made these first designs—for the necroship might perhaps be used as an oneiroscaph, a syncopeplane, a psychobathys..."

"What is this jargon?"

"It's not ours—it's the biophysicists'. We prefer term like 'gondola of dreams,' 'explorer of unconsciousness' and 'chariot of the seven agonies'."

"That's no less obscure."

"It's just words. The important thing is to know whether a region exists in which dreams unfold—a region common to all humanity, and animals too, and perhaps even to plants. We call it 'the World of the Objective Unconscious'."

"What verbiage! How does this concern me?"

"You'll begin with a short voyage to this unknown land. You can see for yourself that our cards are covered with white patches. If all goes well, you'll advance some way into the unconscious, and you'll bring information back to us regarding your swoon—but you won't get past the oceans of Coma. The Agonies will be part of your true expedition. They lead to forbidden territories—the wild savannahs of death."

"But why do I need all this apparatus to explore dreams? It would be enough for me to go to sleep!"

"Wrong. You would only have the memory of your own dreams. A sleeper is blind to the dreams of other sleepers—except in rare cases of the interpenetration of dreams, linked to telepathy. Aboard the necroship, you'll be displaced into the midst of the dreams of millions of beings, with their characters, their events and their scenery. As for the inferior degrees of consciousness, the necessity of such a vessel for exploring them, and bringing back memories of them, has not been demonstrated."

"I've already told you that I don't like the term consciousness—but that hardly matters. Show me how to operate your machine."

They approached the gondola, which was floating, sustained by its cables, a meter above the ground. Dal looked up. "How is that enormous mass suspended in mid-air? An antigravity device?"

"No. The ship is in an unstable state, between being and non-being. Its weight merely equilibrates the centrifugal force of the Earth's rotation. It remains motionless wherever it is put. In a very deep valley it would fall; on the summit of a mountain, it would escape Earth's gravity. At this level, it's like a body immersed in water—a body that has the same density as water. You've seen toy submarines?"

"Yes."

"We think that—in a purely analogical sense—it moves in a comparable manner through those regions in which it has to travel." He leaned forward, over the edge of the boat. "Do you see this dashboard?"

"I see it."

"It has several circular plates. Each of them has a hollow imprint of a hand with five splayed fingers. You only have to place your own hand in these imprints, one after another. Don't touch the last on one the right—that's the one for definitive travel."

"What are these two levers under the plates?"

"The one on the left controls the drives, the one on the right the horizontal and vertical tiller."

"What about coming back?"

"You apply the back of your other hand to the same imprint in which, on departure, you placed the palm of the first—but you have to keep it there."

"Good. Let's not lose any more time."

"One more detail. Do you see the bottom of the gondola?"

"Yes—a sort of platform, like the ones on which coffins are displayed."

"You couldn't have put it better. That's for the body."

"The body?"

"The sailor's body. In the course of the voyage, your double will be at the controls, but your body will be lying here. For the first trip it will simply lose...the awareness of things. After the second departure, it will become a temporary corpse. I have to tell you that even the preliminary voyage isn't free of danger. Everyone knows how courageous you are—reckless, even—but the adventures you've undergone have nothing in common with the one you're undertaking now. It's necessary that it be of your own free will, knowing in advance that you might not reap any benefit. On the contrary—you're risking your life, and, at the very least, your reason."

"Enough talk. Can I get in?"

"Go."

While they were talking, a group of necrosophs in black robes had entered the room and formed a semicircle around them. He leapt over the side of the gondola, which bumped into the floor, dragging the enormous cylinder down.

"I told you it all weighs practically nothing," said Brother Alban. "At present, it weighs as much as you."

Dal sat down, disconcerted. He looked around, and placed the palm of his left hand in the imprint borne on the first plate.

Everything around him became blurred, and vanished.

Dal was sitting on a chair in a kitchen. It was the seat of the gondola, but, at the same time, it was a chair in a kitchen. It was the house in Galankar where he had lived as a child. He was very small, and was eating pumpkin soup. The table was confused with the dashboard. *Don't put your hand in the last plate on the right.* Fortunately, that was difficult to do, because he had to put his left hand into it, by virtue of the position of the thumb.

Facing him was a window. It was open, but what was visible through it was not what should have been visible. No valley, no herd of megatheria—an immense grey plain and, in the sky, a fleet of gigantic galleys with their triple rows of oars.

Dal shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. He swallowed a spoonful of pumpkin soup. He had always loved it. The apocalyptic armada could not make him forget it.

*I'm in one of my own dreams*, he said to himself. *This isn't a good way of utilizing that marvelous machine.* He raised his head. Superimposed on the ceiling was the outline of the spindle. He seized the left-hand lever and pulled it gently toward him. He felt himself moving forwards. Splitting the wall and shattering the window, a single bound took him into the heart of the armada of triremes, which were fraying before his eyes as if they were made of smoke.

He was floating over the grey plain now. A pink sun was just disappearing behind an incredibly close horizon. Beneath him, he saw a monument in the form of an anvil, surrounded by a crowd of tiny individuals. Manipulating the vertical tiller to his right he descended.

In the twilight, fires lit in a circle fought against the last rays of sunlight. One of the tiny individuals was standing motionless in the center of the terrace that crowned the monument. He saw the necroship and shielded his face with his folded arms. At the same time, the others assaulted it with interminable ladders. They soon invaded the terrace and formed a circle around the man. Dal saw that the man was pierced with arrows, and that blood was running from his wounds, forming a pool on the ground. Momentarily, he wanted to go all the way down to rescue him—but the man was dreaming. What would be the consequences of such an initiative? Dal abandoned the idea.

He started talking to himself, lisping like a baby. *That's a funny plate, over there, on the right...but the big people have forbidden anyone to touch it. The big people think nothing of spoiling your games.* Twisting his body, Dal advanced his left hand.

He leapt 20 years forward and snatched back his hand as if he had burned it. He had become a Knight-Navigator again, in charge of a redoubtable machine. He activated the drive and was instantly at the far end of the plain. There, the ground was dotted with mounds, as if an enormous mole had been digging tunnels there. He descended further, skimming the surface, and stopped in a sort of bubble in which a woman in rags was scolding a man with a low brow. Whose dream was he in? The man's or the woman's? The dream of someone else, perhaps, who was dreaming both of them? But where was that other? He saw him: a bearded individual who was putting his head through the wall of the bubble in order to watch, and who waved a fist at him.

Dal had the impression that he had committed an indiscretion, and moved off again over the ground, straight ahead. He re-emerged on the flank of a mountain, in a furnace.

He was in a forest that was on fire, but the flames did not burn him. It did not appear to be the same for a man who was rolling in the embers as he tried to escape them. Dal heard his silent cries—those cries that one utters in dreams. The man saw him and, in spite of his apparent suffering, grabbed handfuls of firebrands, which he hurled at the necroship. This time, the hull of the gondola began to redden, and Dal hastened to place his hand on the second plate in the dashboard, hoping that the next region would be less inhospitable. As he withdrew his hand, an immense flock of bats flew across the sky and disappeared.

He was on a high deserted plateau, swayed by a glacial wind. An immense hand was outlined on the horizon, with the index-finger cut off. What remained of it was reaching for a charcoal sky, in which echoes of discordant music lingered. The titanic hand was surrounded by effluvia, and Dal knew that he must not get too close to it, lest it close upon the fragile necroship and turn it into a shower of debris—but if he kept his distance from it, the regions of light unconsciousness, in their solitude, seemed less hostile than those of dreams. Even so, Dal decided not to remain there any longer. He placed his hand on the third plate.

He was a few meters from the surface of a waveless ocean, whose liquid seemed to have the consistency of glue. From time to time, a viscous form emerged in part, to sink into it again immediately. Dal moved over that surface without noticing anything else. He dared not operate the vertical tiller so as to dive into it. That would have been like entering a coma within a coma.

He travelled in this manner for a long time, without seeing anything else. Gradually, he felt that he was running into a damp indifference, in which preoccupations and projects became blurred. Why make an effort? Why try to do anything at all? What was the point of the vain agitation that had led him into this place of origins, this antechamber of oblivion—what was the point, if not to lose himself in it forever?

He had to mobilize all his energy to place the back of his hand in one of the imprints.

“Did you have a pleasant voyage?” asked Brother Alban.

Dal leaned his hand on the edge of the gondola, and immediately snatched it back; it was red hot.

Brother Alban came closer. “What happened?” he asked, leaning forward.

“Oh, nothing!” said Dal, with difficulty. “A man threw a handful of flaming branches at me...”

“Ah! Good!” said the necrosoph. “One has to be careful of dreamers. In circumstances like that, it’s necessary to take action.”

“How?”

“Shout at them. They wake up and disappear.”

Dal looked at him suspiciously—but Brother Alban’s expression was serious.

“What about the other regions?”

“They’re no more restful,” Dal admitted. “At any rate, if all that didn’t happen solely in my imagination, I have to admit that the vessel works...one way or another.”

“Is your imagination capable of burning the gondola?” Brother Alban asked.

Dal did not answer, and got out of the boat. Brother Alban took him to the card table. Tapping them with his fingers, he said: “You’ll find that everything you’ve seen is, in a sketchy fashion, already contained here. Tell me about your journey.”

Dal obeyed, as faithfully as he could.

“Setting aside the beginning,” said the necrosoph, “which was your own, look at what is on the first card.”

Dal examined the card. In the middle of large white zones, he found the delimitation and summary description of what he had seen for himself.

“The forest on fire, for example, is always there. There aren’t always two people quarreling in the bubble in the ground, but the bubble is always there—and so on. It’s like a stage-set established once and for all, in which sleepers display their dreams. I ought to warn you, in passing, that you didn’t reach the region of true nightmares—but you were on the frontier. Others have stopped in the domain of erotic dreams, where they have routinely found themselves at odds with those who happen to be there. It’s one domain where travelers are unwelcome.”

The necrosophs had left, having work to do elsewhere.

“I utilized the second and third plates,” Dal recalled. “According to you, I was then exploring the depths of syncope and coma. How was my body?”

“At the end, you were really in a coma. You came out of it abruptly, as one does.”

One of the necrosophs reappeared. “There’s a man here,” he said, with an alarmed expression. “I don’t know how he found the way to the laboratories.”

Brother Alban straightened up anxiously. “What does he want? He isn’t hiding anything?”

“He arrived abruptly and asked to speak to Knight Ortog. He says that he’s a Housemaster-Baron, and that his name is Zoltan Charles Henderson de Nancy.”

“What!” cried Dal. “He’s back! Let him in!”

Brother Alban looked severely at the necrosoph who had brought the news. “So you don’t know the Housemaster-Baron, even by name? The Knight’s companion-in-arms?”

The young priest hung his head. “I... Yes, of course... But...”

Zoltan came into the room. He was a tall man, whose upper lip was adorned with a fine moustache—an affectation that had fallen out of fashion centuries before. His eyes shone with an extraordinary brightness. He came toward Dal and the two men shook hands—an equally outdated custom. In addition to his bizarre name, however, Zoltan never behaved like anyone else. He knew things about the past that even the Sopharchs did not know, and spread around himself a sort of superstitious dread. It was even worse when he did not hide his telepathic power—then, some fled.

“I wish you good day, Ortog,” he said. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you again.”

Brother Alban remained silent. He shook his head. The Housemaster-Baron always expressed himself in an extravagant fashion; people did not understand half of what he said. At that moment, Zoltan turned to him. “Good day, Abbé,” he said. As usual, Brother Alban did not understand, but he returned the greeting, as politeness demanded.

“Good day to you too,” said Dal, ceremoniously. “So you’ve returned from your tour of inspection of the Order of Perfecti on Mars and Venus.”

With Zoltan, there was no question of using the informal form of *you*. The polite plural had been virtually lost in the Blue War, but Zoltan had never been cured of it. He addressed everyone as *vous*, and if anyone could not reply in the same manner, he had to learn. Zoltan had a horror of vulgarity and the disgusting familiarity of language. He prided himself on his immemorial origins, and added to his authentic title of Housemaster that of Baron, which had no significance for anyone, but which he treasured more than the former.

“Nasty places,” Zoltan remarked. “Those people conduct themselves with a culpable nonchalance. I thought of having a large number of them executed, in order to accelerate the birth-rate...”

Dal smiled vaguely; he was aware of Zoltan's generosity.

"But let's leave that subject," said the Housemaster-Baron. "I permitted myself to undertake small psychological probe in order to discover where you were, my dear Ortog. On this occasion, I learned some very strange things."

Dal's face darkened. "Yes," he admitted. "A crazy endeavor."

"Crazy if you depart alone," Zoltan replied, "but I've nothing urgent summoning me. Would you deign to accept the collaboration of my sword? Death is an adversary worthy of me!"

Dal straightened up with a glimmer of joy. "Let your sword aid mine, then. I'm grateful to you, Henderson! But first I must warn you about the dangers of such an expedition."

"I know," said Zoltan. "It was fatal to the man who attempted it before you..."

"What?" said Dal, suddenly attentive. "Someone has tried it before?"

"It's a trifle legendary," said Zoltan. "A fabulously old story. I'll tell it to you someday."

"Permit me to interrupt you, Lords," said he necrosoph, coming forward. "The Housemaster-Baron could not have put it better in speaking of his sword. We had decided to furnish the Knight with a weapon, but the only one that has any chance of being effective in the course of this voyage is the Blue Weapon. Now, one cannot transport it as it is, for reasons inherent in the method of...displacement. It was therefore necessary to make it into another of similar power, and that is why I tempered the Knight's ardor. I shall therefore give orders that—under the high authorization of Dal Ortog Dal—two blades should be forged in the crucible that gave birth to the Blue Weapon."

"We shall go together, Brother Alban," Dal concluded. "Otherwise, you would not even be able to get close to the Edifice of the Terror, where the laboratories of war are located."

The Edifice had been built a long way from Lassenia. It was a rather derisory precaution, for if a catastrophe were to occur, it would have annihilated such a surface area that nothing would have remained of the continent, but it was necessary to satisfy public demand.

In order to be visible from afar and to discourage any approach, the laboratories were crowned by a roof of vast height, at the four corners of which red searchlights blinked day and night. They were so formidable in their power that it was easier to look at the sun. Even that was insufficient, though; the edifice was flanked by four bell-towers with immense steeples, where eight huge bronze organ-pipes founded expressly for that purpose played an incessant carillon at full volume. The howling tocsin of their brazen bellies bent the trees in the countryside and put the most monstrous hybrids to flight.

It was into this apocalyptic atmosphere that Dal, Zoltan and the necrosoph advanced, deafened and blinded, toward the doors that were permanently guarded by phalanges of Navigators with hearts of iron. There, the sound was held at bay.

Dal parted the flaps of the cape that he had thrown over his shoulders, displaying the golden chain on his breast—but that did not satisfy the Navigators, even though they knew him well. He had to pass through the psychogram chamber, which occupied a barbican.

"That's all right, Ortog," said the commander of the phalanges. "You may go in, as may your friends." He adopted a flinty smile to add: "I recognize the famous Housemaster-Baron. How are things in the Solar System?"

Zoltan was several meters away and had not heard. Nevertheless, he replied: "Ticking over, Sire, ticking over."

The Navigator looked at him with some slight astonishment, but no more. He was an athletic individual, with a face as grey as is uniform—a face in which two sea-green eyes shone almost as brightly as Zoltan's. "Thank you, Henderson," he said. And long live the Sopharchy!"

"Long live the Soparchy!" repeated Brother Alban, as he passed before the Navigator's suspicious gaze.

"One moment," the officer said to Ortog. "You've brought a priest?"

"I'm capable of anything," Dal replied. "Don't worry—he's a friend of the Sopharchy."

"There are still some among them, then?" remarked the officer, curtly.

"A few," Dal confirmed. "One rarely encounters them."

The Navigator shrugged his shoulders. "How can you remain on his damned planet, Ortog?" he said. "It's only two months since I returned from my last mission, and I'm already yearning for space."

Ortog looked at him and smiled. He understood completely. "Would you like to be an itinerant overseer?" he said. "You'd assist in the productive application of ectogenesis on the two sister planets?"

The officer's face suddenly took on a hint of humanity. "I'm at your disposal."

Dal took a psychosensitive card from his jerkin, and pressed his thumb on it momentarily. "Take it," he said. "Have yourself replaced tomorrow and request an audience with Sopharch Karella. Repeat my words to him. Tomorrow evening, you'll be in space."

The Navigator stiffened as he took the card and bowed. "Thank you, Ortog!" He stood aside to let them pass.

No one could get close to the crucible; it could only be contemplated from afar. A gravitic barrier surrounded it, but a human form was vaguely discernible within it.

"The temperature inside the crucible isn't very high," said a physicist. "3000 to 4000 degrees. The protective suit that the smith wears can support 5000 to 6000."

Dal craned his neck. "It really is a forge," he said.

"Of course. No manufacturing process can work with fragments of cerulite, whose particular radioactivity makes spatons explode. They have to be fashioned as a mass."

"But that's absurd," said Dal, shrugging his shoulders. "You'll be telling me next that nothing but a wheelbarrow is suitable for some space vehicle!"

The physicist made a gesture of helplessness. "That's the way it is—we think it had to do with the fundamental irregularity of human movement. A machine can be programmed to vary the energy of its impacts continually, but that wouldn't do. The result isn't viable unless the entire process is governed by hazard, as occurs with human muscles. I assume that it's something to do with the probability curve representing the integration of the fibrils."

Dal shook his head, but continued his contemplation. Wading through the molten metal, the smith, whose protective suit was equipped with a cylindrical helmet, rained forceful blows upon an anvil constantly cooled by a jet of liquid air, in order to prevent it from melting. With the aid of pincers, he held a piece of mineral more flamboyant than all the rest, which was deformed by the hammer-blows.

"Very well," said Dal, finally. "We require two swords."

"Made of cerulite?" queried the physicist, amazed.

"Yes. We're leaving on a voyage, and we can't carry the Blue Weapon in its current form, as a rifle."

The physicist reflected. "It's the scabbard," he said, "that will pose problems."

"Why?"

"Because, if you carry it without a scabbard, you're going to damage the space-time around you, and you'll be gradually destroyed yourself. It's necessary that the scabbard be similar in nature to the traditionally-employed rifle.

Zoltan moved closer. "Can't we fashion a gravitic scabbard, like the barrier surrounding the crucible?" he said.

"Yes, undoubtedly...but it's at your own risk and peril. That hasn't been tested."

"Ortog will take the risk," Zoltan replied, "and I the peril."

And the swords were forged.