

A Childe Cycle Novel

# SOLDIER, ASK NOT



Classic Military Science Fiction

# GORDON R. DICKSON

Hugo & Nebula  
Award-Winning Author

# **Soldier, Ask Not**

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**Gordon R. Dickson**

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# Chapter 1

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**Menin aeide thea, Peleideo Achileos** —begins the *Iliad* of Homer, and its story of thirty-four hundred years ago. *This is the story of the wrath of Achilles.*—And this is the story of my wrath; Earthman, against the people of the two worlds so-called The Friendlies, the conscript, fanatic, black-clad soldiers of Harmony and Association. Nor is it the story of any small anger. For like Achilles, I am a man of Earth.

That does not impress you? Not in these days when the sons of the younger worlds are taller, stronger, more skilled and clever than we of the Old World? Then, how little you know Earth, and the sons of Earth. Leave your younger worlds and come back to the Mother Planet, once, and touch her. She is still here and still the same. Her sun still shines on the waters of the Red Sea that parted before the Children of the Lord. The wind still blows in the Pass of Thermopylae, where Leonidas with the Spartan Three Hundred held back the hosts of Xerxes, King of the Persians, and changed history. Her men fought and died and bred and buried and built for more than five hundred thousand years before your newer worlds were even dreamed of by man. Do you think those five centuries of tens-of-centuries, generation upon generation, between the same sky and soil left no special mark on us, blood and bone and soul?

The men of the Dorsai may be warriors above imagining. The Exotics of Mara and Kultis may be robed magicians who can turn a man inside out and find answers outside philosophy. The researchers in hard sciences on Newton and Venus may have traveled so far beyond ordinary humans that they can talk to us only haltingly, nowadays. But we—we duller, shorter, simpler men of Old Earth still have something more than any of these. For we are still the whole being of man, the basic stock, of which they are only the refined parts—flashing, fine-honed, scintillant parts. But parts.

But, if you still are one of those, like my uncle Mathias Olyn, who think us utterly bypassed, then I will direct you to the Exotic-supported Enclave at St. Louis, where forty-two years ago, an Earthman named Mark Torre, a man of great vision, first began the building of what a hundred years from now will be The Final Encyclopedia. Sixty years from now will see it too massive and complicated and delicate to endure Earth's surface. You will start to find it then in orbit about the Mother Planet. A hundred years from now and it will—but no one knows for sure what it will do. Mark Torre's theory is that it will show us the back of our heads—some hidden part of the basic Earth human soul and being that those of the younger worlds have lost, or are not able to know.

But see for yourself. Go there now, to the St. Louis Enclave, and join one of the tours that take you through the chambers and research rooms of the Encyclopedia Project; and finally into the mighty Index Room at their very center, where the vast, curving walls of that chamber are already beginning to be charged with leads to the knowledge of the centuries. When the whole expanse of that great sphere's interior is finally charged, a hundred years from now, connections will be made between bits of knowledge that never have been connected, that never could have been connected, by a human mind before. And in this final knowledge we will see—what?

The back of our heads?

But as I say, never mind that now. Simply visit the Index Room—that is all I ask you to do. Visit it

with the rest of the tour. Stand in the center of it, and do as the guide tells you.

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—*Listen.*

Listen. Stand silent and strain your ears. Listen—you will hear nothing. And then finally the guide will break the reaching, almost unendurable silence, and tell you why he asked you to listen.

Only one man or woman in millions ever hears anything. Only one in millions—of those born here on Earth.

But none—*no one*—of all those born on the younger worlds who has ever come here to listen has ever heard a thing.

It still proves nothing, you think? Then you think wrong, my friend. For I have been one of those who *heard*—what there was to hear—and the hearing changed my life, as witness what I have done in arming me with self-knowledge of power with which I later turned in fury to plan the destruction of the peoples of two Friendly worlds.

So do not laugh if I compare my wrath to the wrath of Achilles, bitter and apart among the boats of his Myrmidons, before the walls of Troy. For there are other likenesses between us. Tam Olyn is my name and my ancestry is more Irish than otherwise; but it was on the Peloponnesus of Greece that I, like Achilles, grew to be what I became.

In the very shadow of the ruins of the Parthenon, white over the city of Athens, our souls were darkened by the uncle who should have set them free to grow in the sun. My soul—and that of my younger sister, Eileen.

# Chapter 2

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It was her idea—my sister Eileen’s—that we visit the Final Encyclopedia that day, using my new travel pass as a worker in Communications. Ordinarily, perhaps, I might have wondered why she wanted to go there. But in this instance, even as she suggested it, the prospect struck forth a feeling in me, deep and heavy as the sudden note of a gong—a feeling I had never felt before—of something like dread.

But it was not just dread, nothing so simple as that. It was not even wholly unpleasant. Mostly, it resembled that hollow, keyed-up sensation that comes just before the moment of being put to some great test. And yet, it was this—but somehow much more as well. A feeling as of a dragon in my path.

For just a second it touched me; but that was enough. And, because the Encyclopedia, in theory, represented all hope for those Earthborn and my uncle Mathias had always represented to us a hopelessness, I connected the feeling with him, with the challenge he had posed me during all the years of our living together. And this made me suddenly determined to go, overriding whatever other little reasons there might be.

Besides, the trip fitted the moment like a celebration. I did not usually take Eileen places; but I had just signed a trainee work-contract with the Interstellar News Services at their Headquarters Unit here on Earth. This, only two weeks after my graduation from the Geneva University of Communication. True, that University was first among those like it on the sixteen worlds of men, including Earth; and my scholastic record there had been the best in its history. But such job offers came to young men straight out of school once in twenty years—if that often.

So I did not stop to question my seventeen-year-old sister as to why she might want me to take her to the Final Encyclopedia, on just that particular day and hour she specified. I suppose perhaps, as I look back on it now, I told myself she only wanted to get away from the dark house of our uncle, for the day. And that, in itself, was reason enough for me.

For it had been Mathias, my father’s brother, who had taken us in, Eileen and me, two orphan children after the death of our parents in the same air-car crash. And it was he who had broken us during our growing years that followed. Not that he had ever laid a finger on us physically. Not that he had been guilty of any overt or deliberate cruelty. He did not have to be.

He had only to give us the richest of homes, the choicest of food, clothing and care—and make sure that we shared it all with *him*, whose heart was as sunless as his own great, unpierced block of a house, sunless as a cave below the earth’s surface that has never felt the daylight, and whose soul was as cold as a stone within that cave.

His bible was the writings of that old twenty-first century saint or devil, Walter Blunt—whose motto was “DESTRUCT!”—and whose Chantry Guild later gave birth to the Exotic culture on the younger worlds of Mara and Kultis. Never mind that the Exotics had always read Blunt’s writings with a difference, seeing the message in them to be one of tearing up the weeds of the present, so that there would be room for the flowers of the future to grow. Mathias, our uncle, saw only as far as the tearing and day by day, in that dark house, he drummed it into us.

But enough about Mathias. He was perfect in his emptiness and his belief that the younger world had already left us of Earth behind them to dwindle and die, like any dead limb or atrophied part. But neither Eileen nor I could match him in that cold philosophy, for all we tried as children. So, each on our own way, we fought to escape from him and it; and our escape routes brought us, that day together to the Exotic Enclave at St. Louis, and the Final Encyclopedia.

We took a shuttle flight from Athens to St. Louis and the subway from St. Louis to the Enclave. An airbus took us to the Encyclopedia courtyard; and I remember that, somehow, I was last off the bus. As I stepped to the circle of concrete, it struck again, that deep, sudden gong-note of feeling inside me. I stopped dead, like a man struck into a trance.

“—Pardon me?” said a voice behind me. “You’re part of the tour, aren’t you? Will you join the rest of us over here? I’m your guide.”

I turned sharply, and found myself looking down into the brown eyes of a girl in the blue robes of an Exotic. She stood there, as fresh as the sunlight about her—but something in her did not match.

“You’re not an Exotic!” I said suddenly. No more she was. The Exotic-born have their differences plain about them. Their faces are more still than other people’s. Their eyes look more deeply into you. They are like Gods of Peace who sit always with one hand on a sleeping thunderbolt they do not seem to know is there.

“I’m a co-worker,” she answered. “Lisa Kant’s my name.—And you’re right. I’m not a born Exotic.” She did not seem bothered by my penetrating her difference from the robe she wore. She was shorter than my sister, who was tall—as I am tall—for a man from Earth. Eileen was silver-blond while, even then, my hair was dark. It was the same color as hers when our parents died; but it darkened over the years in Mathias’s house. But this girl, Lisa, was brown-haired, pretty and smiling. She intrigued me with her good looks and Exotic robes—and she nettled me a little as well. She seemed so certain of herself.

I watched her, therefore, as she went about rounding up the other people who were waiting for the guided tour through the Encyclopedia; and once the tour itself was underway, I fell into step beside her and got her talking to me, between lecture spots.

She showed no hesitation in speaking about herself. She had been born in the North American Midwest, just outside of St. Louis, she told me. She had gone to primary and secondary schools in the Enclave and became convinced of the Exotic philosophies. So she had adopted their work and their ways. I thought it seemed like a waste of a girl as attractive as herself—and bluntly I told her so.

“How can I be wasting myself,” she said, smiling at me, “when I’m using my energies to the fullest this way—and for the best purposes?”

I thought that perhaps she was laughing at me. I did not like that—even in those days, I was not used to laugh at.

“What best purposes?” I asked as brutally as I could. “Contemplating your navel?”

Her smile went away and she looked at me strangely, so strangely that I always remembered the

look, afterward.

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It was as if she had suddenly become aware of me—as of someone floating and adrift in a night sea beyond the firm rock shore on which she stood. And she reached out with her hand, as if she would touch me, then dropped her hand again, as if suddenly remembering where we were.

\* ‘We are always here,’ she answered me, strangely. ‘Remember that. We are always here.’

She turned away and led us on through the spread-out complex of structures that was the Encyclopedia. These, once moved into space, she said, speaking to us all now as she led us on, would fold together to form a roughly spherical shape, in orbit a hundred and fifty miles above the Earth's surface. She told us what a vast expense it would be to move the structure into orbit like that, as one unit. Then she explained how, expensive as this was, the cost was justified by the savings during the first hundred years of construction and information-charging, which could be done more economically here on the ground.

For the Final Encyclopedia, she said, was not to be just a storehouse of facts. It would store facts, but only as a means to an end—that end being the establishment and discovery of relationships between those facts. Each knowledge item was to be linked to other knowledge items by energy pulses holding the code of the relationship, until these interconnections were carried to the fullest extent possible. Until, finally, the great interconnected body of man's information about himself and his universe would begin to show its shape as a whole, in a way man had never been able to observe it before.

At this point, Earth would then have in the Encyclopedia a mighty stockpile of immediate available, interrelated information about the human race and its history. This could be traded for the hard science knowledge of worlds like Venus and Newton, for the psychological sciences of the Exotic Worlds—and all the other specialized information of the younger worlds that Earth needed. By itself alone, in a multi-world human culture in which the currency between worlds was itself the trading of skilled minds, the Encyclopedia would eventually pay for itself.

But the hope that had led Earth to undertake its building was for more than this. It was Earth's hope—the hope of all the people of Earth, except for such as Mathias, who had given up all hope—that the true payment from the Encyclopedia would come from its use as a tool to explore Mark Torre's theory.

And Torre's theory, as we all should know, was a theory which postulated that there was a dark area in Man's knowledge of himself, an area where man's vision had always failed, as the viewing of an object by a perceptive device fails in the blind area where it, itself, exists. Into man's blind area, Torre theorized, the Final Encyclopedia would be able to explore by inference, from the shape and body of total knowledge. And in that area, said Torre, we would find something—a quality, ability or strength—the basic human stock of Earth that was theirs alone, something which had been lost or was now unavailable to the human splinter types on the younger worlds that now seemed to be fast out-stripping our parent breed in strength of body or mind.

Hearing all this, for some reason I found myself remembering the strange look and odd words Lisa told me earlier. I looked around the strange and crowded rooms, where everything from heavy construction to delicate laboratory work was going on, as we passed; and the odd, dread-like feeling began to come back on me. It not only came back, it stayed and grew, until it was a sort of



consciousness, a feeling as if the whole Encyclopedia had become one mighty living organism, with me at its center.

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I fought against it, instinctively; for what I had always wanted most in life was to be free—to be swallowed by nothing, human or mechanical. But still it grew on me; and it was still growing as we came at last to the Index Room, which in space would be at the Encyclopedia's exact center.

The room was in the shape of a huge globe so vast that, as we entered it, its farther wall was lost in dimness, except for the faint twinkling of firefly lights that signaled the establishment of new facts and associations of fact within the sensitive recording fabric of its inner surface, that endless surface curving about us which was at once walls, ceiling and floor.

The whole reaching interior of this enormous spherical room was empty; but cantilevered ramps led out and up from the entrances to the room, stretching in graceful curves to a circular platform poised in the midst of the empty space, at the exact center of the chamber.

It was up one of these ramps that Lisa led us now until we came to the platform, which was perhaps twenty feet in diameter.

"...Here, where we're now standing," said Lisa as we halted on the platform, "is what will be known as the Transit Point. In space, all connections will be made not only around the walls of the Index Room, but also through this central point. And it's from this central point that those handling the Encyclopedia then will try to use it according to Mark Torre's theory, to see if they can uncover the hidden knowledge of our Earth-human minds."

She paused and turned around to locate everyone in the group.

"Gather in closely, please," she said. For a second her gaze brushed mine—and without warning, the wave of feeling inside me about the Encyclopedia suddenly crested. A cold sensation like fear washed through me, and I stiffened.

"Now," she went on, when we were all standing close together, "I want you all to keep absolutely still for sixty seconds and listen. Just listen, and see if you hear anything."

The others stopped talking and the vast, untouchable silence of that huge chamber closed in about us. It wrapped about us, and the feeling in me sang suddenly up to a high pitch of anxiety. I had never been bothered by heights or distances, but suddenly now I was wildly aware of the long emptiness below the platform, of all the space enclosing me. My head began to swim and my heart pounded. I felt dizziness threatening me.

"And what're we supposed to hear?" I broke in loudly, not for the question's sake, but to snap the vertiginous sensation that seemed to be trying to sweep me away. I was standing almost behind Lisa when I said it. She turned and looked up at me. There was a shadow in her eyes again of that strange look she had given me earlier.

"Nothing," she said. And then, still watching me strangely, she hesitated. "Or maybe—something, though the odds are billions to one against it. You'll know if you hear it, and I'll explain after the sixty seconds are up." She touched me lightly, requestingly on the arm with one hand. "Now, please be

quiet—for the sake of the others, even if you don't want to listen yourself.”

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“Oh, I'll listen,” I told her.

I turned from her. And suddenly, over her shoulder, behind us, below me, small and far off by the entrance to the Index Room by which we had come in, I saw my sister, no longer with our group. I recognized her at that distance only by the pale color of her hair and her height. She was talking to a dark, slim man dressed all in black, whose face I could not make out at that distance, but who stood close to her.

I was startled and suddenly annoyed. The sight of the thin male figure in black seemed to slap at me like an affront. The very idea that my sister would drop behind our group to speak to someone else after begging me to bring her here—speak to someone who was a complete stranger to me, and speak as earnestly as I could see she was speaking, even at this distance, by the tenseness of her figure and the little movements of her hands—seemed to me like a discourtesy amounting to betrayal. After all, she had talked me into coming.

The hair on the back of my neck rose, a cold wave of anger rose in me. It was ridiculous; at that distance not even the best human ears ever born could have overheard their conversation, but I found myself straining against the enclosing silence of the vast room, trying to make out what it was they could be talking about.

And then—imperceptibly, but growing rapidly louder—I began to hear. Something.

Not my sister's voice, or the voice of the stranger, whoever he was. It was some distant, harsh voice of a man speaking in a language a little like Latin, but with dropped vowels and rolled r's that gave his talk a mutter, like the rapid rolling of the summer thunder that accompanies heat lightning. And it grew, not so much louder, as closer—and then I heard another voice, answering it.

And then another voice. And another, and another and another.

Roaring, shouting, leaping, like an avalanche, the voices leaped suddenly upon me from every direction, growing wildly greater in number every second, doubling and redoubling—all the voices of all the languages of all the world, all the voices that had ever been in the world—and more than that. More—and more—and more.

They shouted in my ear, babbling, crying, laughing, cursing, ordering, submitting—but not merging as such a multitude should, at last into one voiceless, if mighty, thunder like the roar of a waterfall. More and more as they grew, they still remained all separate. *I heard each one! Each one* of those millions, those billions of men's and women's voices shouted individually in my ears.

And the tumult lifted me at last as a feather is lifted on the breast of a hurricane, swirling me up and away out of my senses into a raging cataract of unconsciousness.

# Chapter 3

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I remember I did not want to wake up. It seemed to me I had been on a far voyage, that I had been away a long time. But when, at last, reluctantly, I opened my eyes, I was lying on the floor of the chamber and only Lisa Kant was bending over me. Some of the others in our party had not yet finished turning around to see what had happened to me.

Lisa was raising my head from the floor.

“You *heard!*” she was saying, urgently and low-voiced, almost in my ear. “What did you hear?”

“Hear?” I shook my head, dazedly, remembering at that, and almost expecting to hear the uncountable horde of voices flooding back in on me. But there was only silence now, and Lisa’s question. “Hear?” I said, “—them.”

“Them?”

I blinked my eyes up at her and abruptly my mind cleared. All at once, I remembered my sister Eileen; and I scrambled to my feet, staring off into the distance at the entrance by which I had seen her standing with the man in black. But the entrance and the space about it was empty. The two of them together—they were gone.

I scrambled to my feet. Shaken, battered, torn loose from my roots of self-confidence by the mighty cataract of voices in which I had been plunged and carried away, the mystery and disappearance of my sister shook me now out of all common sense. I did not answer Lisa, but started at a run down the ramp for the entrance where I had last seen Eileen talking to the stranger in black.

Fast as I was, with my longer legs, Lisa was faster. Even in the blue robes, she was as swift as a track star. She caught up with me, passed me and swung around to bar the entrance as I reached it.

“Where are you going?” she cried. “You can’t leave—just yet! If you heard something, I’ve got to take you to see Mark Torre himself! He has to talk to anyone who ever hears anything!”

I hardly heard her.

“Get out of my way,” I muttered, and I pushed her aside, not gently. I plunged on through the entrance into the circular equipment room beyond the entrance. There were technicians at work in their colored smocks, doing incomprehensible things to inconceivable tangles of metal and glass—but no sign of Eileen, or the man in black.

I raced through the room into the corridor beyond. But that, too, was empty. I ran down the corridor and turned right into the first doorway I came to. From desks and tables a few people, reading and transcribing, looked up at me in wonder, but Eileen and the stranger were not among them. I tried another room and another, all without success.

At the fifth room, Lisa caught up with me again.

“Stop!” she said. And this time she took actual hold of me, with a strength that was astonishing for a girl no larger than she was. “Will you stop? —And think for a moment? What’s the matter?” —

“Matter!” I shouted. “My sister—” and then I stopped. I checked my tongue. All at once it swam over me how foolish it would sound if I told Lisa the object of my search. A seventeen-year-old girl talking to, and even going off from a group with, someone her older brother does not know, is hardly a good reason for a wild chase and a frantic search—at least in this day and age. And I was not of an open mind to rehearse for Lisa’s benefit the cold unhappiness of our upbringing, Eileen’s and mine, in the house of my uncle Mathias.

I stood silent.

“You have to come with me,” she said urgently after a second. “You don’t know how terribly inconceivably rare it is when someone actually hears something at the Transit Point. You don’t know how much it means now to Mark Torre—to Mark Torre, himself—to find someone who’s heard!”

I shook my head numbly. I had no wish to talk to anyone about what I had just been through, and least of all to be examined like some freak experimental specimen.

“You have to!” repeated Lisa. “It means so much. Not just to Mark, to the whole project. Think! Don’t just run off! Think about what you’re doing first!”

The word “think” got through to me. Slowly my mind cleared. It was quite true what she said. I should think instead of running around like someone out of his wits. Eileen and the black-dressed stranger could be in any one of dozens of rooms or corridors—they could even be on their way out of the Project and the Enclave completely. Besides, what would I have said if I had caught up with them anyway? Demand that the man identify himself and state his intentions toward my sister? It was probably lucky I had not been able to find them.

Besides, there was something else. I had worked hard to get the contract I had signed three days ago, just out of the University, with the Interstellar News Services. But I had a far way to go yet, to the place of my ambitions. For what I had wanted—so long and so fiercely that it was as if the want were something live with claws and teeth tearing inside me—was freedom. Real freedom, of the kind possessed only by members of planetary governments—and one special group, the working Guild members of the Interstellar News Services. Those workers in the communications field who had signed their oath of nonallegiance and were technically people without a world, in guarantee of the impartiality of the News Services they operated.

For the inhabited worlds of the human race were split—as they had been split for two hundred years now—into two camps, one which held their populations to “tight” contracts and the other which believed in the so-called loose contract. Those on the tight-contract side were the Friendly worlds of Harmony and Association, Newton, Cassida and Venus, and the big new world of Ceta under Tau Ceti. On the loose side were ranged Earth, the Dorsai, the Exotic worlds of Mara and Kultis, New Earth, Freiland, Mars and the small Catholic world of St. Marie.

What divided them was a conflict of economic systems—an inheritance of the divided Earth that had originally colonized them. For in our day interplanetary currency was only one thing—and that was the coin of highly trained minds.

The race was now too big for a single planet to train all of its own specialists, particularly where other worlds produced better. Not the best education Earth or any other world could provide could produce a professional soldier to match those turned out by the Dorsai. There were no physicists like the physicists from Newton, no psychologists like those from the Exotics, no conscript hired troops so cheap and careless of casualty losses as those from Harmony and Association—and so on. Consequently, a world trained one kind or type of professional and traded his services by contract to another world for the contract and services of whatever type of other professional the world needed.

And the division between the two camps of worlds was stark. On the “loose” worlds a man’s contract belonged in part to him; and he could not be sold or traded to another world without his own consent—except in a case of extreme importance or emergency. On the “tight” worlds the individual lived at the orders of his authorities—his contract might be sold or traded at a moment’s notice. When this happened, he had only one duty—and that was to go and work where he was ordered.

So, on all the worlds, there were the non-free and the partly free. On the loose worlds, of which as I say Earth was one, people like myself were partly free. But I wanted full freedom, of the sort only available to me as a Guild member. Once accepted into the Guild, this freedom would be mine. For the contract for my services would belong to the News Services, itself, during the rest of my lifetime.

No world after that would be able to judge me or sell my services, against my will, to some other planet to which it owed a deficit of trained personnel. It was true that Earth, unlike Newton, Cassidy, Ceta and some of the others, was proud of the fact that it had never needed to trade off its university graduates in blocks for people with the special trainings of the younger worlds. But, like all the planets, Earth held the right to do so if it should ever become necessary—and there were plenty of stories of individual instances.

So, my goal and my hunger for freedom, which the years under the roof of Mathias had nourished in me, could be filled only by acceptance into the News Services. And in spite of my scholastic record as good as it was, that was still a far, hard, chancy goal to reach. I would need to overlook nothing that could help me to it; and it came to me now that refusing to see Mark Torre might well be to throw away a chance at such help.

“You’re right,” I said to Lisa. “I’ll go and see him. Of course. I’ll see him. Where do I go?”

“I’ll take you,” she answered. “Just let me phone ahead.” She went a few steps away from me and spoke quietly into the small phone on her ring finger. Then she came back and led me off.

“What about the others?” I asked, suddenly remembering the rest of our party back in the Indentation Room.

“I’ve asked someone else to take them over for the rest of the tour,” Lisa answered without looking at me. “This way.”

She led me through a doorway off the hall and into a small light-maze. For a moment this surprised me and then I realized that Mark Torre, like anyone in the public eye constantly, would need protection from possibly dangerous crackpots and cranks. We came out of the maze into a small empty room, and stopped.

The room moved—in what direction, I could not say—and then stopped.

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“This way,” said Lisa again, leading me to one of the walls of the room. At her touch, a section of the wall folded back and let us into a room furnished like a study, but equipped with a control desk, behind which sat an elderly man. It was Mark Torre, as I had often seen him pictured in the news.

He was not as old in appearance as his age might have made him appear—he was past eighty at the time—but his face was gray and sick-looking. His clothes sat loosely on his big bones, as if he had weighed more once than he did now. His two really extraordinarily large hands lay limply on the little flat space before the console keys, their gray knuckles swollen and enlarged by what I later learned was an obscure disease of the joints called arthritis.

He did not get up when we came in, but his voice was surprisingly clear and young when he spoke, and his eyes glowed at me with something like scarcely contained joy. Still he made us sit and wait until after a few minutes another door to the room opened and there came in a middle-aged man from one of the Exotic worlds—an Exotic-born, with penetrating hazel-colored eyes in his smooth, unlined face under close-cropped white hair, and dressed in blue robes like those Lisa was wearing.

“Mr. Olyn,” said Mark Torre, “this is Padma, OutBond from Mara to the St. Louis Enclave. He already knows who you are.”

“How do you do?” I said to Padma. He smiled.

“An honor to meet you, Tam Olyn,” he said and sat down. His light, hazel-colored eyes did not seem to stare at me in any way—and yet, at the same time, they made me uneasy. There was no strangeness about him—that was the trouble. His gaze, his voice, even the way he sat, seemed to imply that he knew me already as well as anyone could, and better than I would want anyone to know me, whom I did not know as well in return.

For all that I had argued for years against everything my uncle stood for, at that moment I felt the fact of Mathias’s bitterness against the peoples of the younger worlds lift its head also inside me, and snarl against the implied superiority in Padma, OutBond from Mara to the Enclave at St. Louis, on Earth. I wrenched my gaze away from him and looked back at the more human, Earthborn eyes of Mark Torre.

“Now that Padma’s here,” the old man said, leaning forward eagerly toward me over the keys of his control console, “what was it like? Tell us what you heard!”

I shook my head, because there was no good way of describing it as it really had been. Billions of voices, speaking at once, and all distinct, are impossible.

“I heard voices,” I said. “All talking at the same time—but separate.”

“Many voices?” asked Padma.

I had to look at him again.

“All the voices there are,” I heard myself answering. And I tried to describe it. Padma nodded; but as I talked I looked back at Torre, and saw him sinking into his seat away from me, as if in confusion.

or disappointment.

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“Only... voices?” the old man said, half to himself when I was done.

“Why?” I asked, pricked into a little anger. “What was I supposed to hear? What do people usually hear?”

“It’s always different,” put in the voice of Padma soothingly from the side of my vision. But I would not look at him. I kept my eyes on Mark Torre. “Everyone hears different things.”

I turned to Padma at that.

“What did *you* hear?” I challenged. He smiled a little sadly.

“Nothing, Tam,” he said.

“Only people who are Earthborn have ever heard anything,” said Lisa sharply, as if I should know this without needing to be told.

“You?” I stared at her.

“Me! Of course not!” she replied. “There’s not half a dozen people since the Project started who’ve ever heard anything.”

“Less than half a dozen?” I echoed.

“Five,” she said. “Mark is one, of course. Of the other four, one is dead and the other three”—she hesitated, staring at me—“weren’t fit.”

There was a different note to her voice that I heard now for the first time. But I forgot it entirely and abruptly, the figures she had mentioned struck home.

*Five people only, in forty years!* Like a body blow the message jarred me that what had happened to me in the Index Room was no small thing; and that this moment with Torre and Padma was not small either, for them as well as myself.

“Oh?” I said; and I looked at Torre. With an effort, I made my voice casual. “What does it mean then, when someone hears something?”

He did not answer me directly. Instead he leaned forward with his dark old eyes beginning to shimmer brilliantly again, and stretched out the fingers of his large right hand to me.

“Take hold,” he said.

I reached out in my turn and took his hand, feeling his swollen knuckles under my grasp. He gripped my hand hard and held on, staring at me for a long moment, while slowly the brilliance faded and finally went out; and then he let go, sinking back into his chair as if defeated.

“Nothing,” he said dully, turning to Padma. “Still—nothing. You’d think he’d feel something—or

would.”

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“Still,” said Padma, quietly, looking at me, “he heard.”

He fastened me to my chair with his hazel-colored Exotic eyes.

“Mark is disturbed, Tam,” he said, “because what you experienced was only voices, with no overburden of message or understanding.”

“What message?” I demanded. “What kind of understanding?”

“That,” said Padma, “you’d have to tell us.” His glance was so bright on me that I felt uncomfortable, like a bird, an owl, pinned by a searchlight. I felt the hackles of my anger rising in resentment.

“What’s this all got to do with you, anyway?” I asked.

He smiled a little.

“Our Exotic funds,” he said, “bear most of the financial support of the Encyclopedia Project. But you must understand, it’s not *our* Project. It’s Earth’s. We only feel a responsibility toward all worlds concerned with the understanding of Man by man, himself. Moreover, between our philosophy and Mark’s there’s a disagreement.”

“Disagreement?” I said. I had a nose for news even then, fresh out of college, and that nose twitched.

But Padma smiled as if he read my mind.

“It’s nothing new,” he said. “A basic disagreement we’ve had from the start. Put briefly, and somewhat crudely, we on the Exotics believe that Man is improvable. Our friend Mark, here, believes that Earth man—Basic Man—is already improved, but hasn’t been able to uncover his improvement yet and use it.”

I stared at him.

“What’s that got to do with me?” I asked. “And with what I heard?”

“It’s a question of whether you can be useful to him—or to us,” answered Padma calmly; and for the second my heart chilled. For if either the Exotics or someone like Mark Torre should put in a demand for my contract from the Earth government, I might as well kiss good-bye all hopes of working my way eventually into the News Services Guild.

“Not to either of you—I think,” I said, as indifferently as I could.

“Perhaps. We’ll see,” said Padma. He held up his hand and extended upward his index finger. “Do you see this finger, Tam?”

I looked at it; and as I looked—suddenly it rushed toward me, growing enormously, blocking out



the sight of everything else in the room. For the second time that afternoon, I left the here and now the real universe for a place of unreality.

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Suddenly, I was encompassed by lightnings. I was in darkness but thrown about by lightning strokes—in some vast universe where I was tossed light-years in distance, first this way and then that, as part of some gigantic struggle.

At first I did not understand it, the struggle. Then slowly I woke to the fact that all the lashing of the lightnings was a furious effort for survival and victory in answer to an attempt by the surrounding ancient, ever-flowing darkness, to quench and kill the lightnings. Nor was this any random battle. No I saw how there was ambush and defeat, stratagem and tactic, blow and counterblow, between the lightning and the dark.

Then, in that moment, came the memory of the sound of the billions of voices, welling up around me once more in rhythm to the lightnings, to give me the key to what I saw. All at once, in the way a real lightning-flash suddenly reveals in one glimpse all the land for miles around, in a flash of intuition I understood what surrounded me.

It was the centuries-old battle of man to keep his race alive and push forward into the future, the ceaseless, furious struggle of that beastlike, godlike-primitive, sophisticated-savage and civilized composite organism that was the human race fighting to endure and push onward. Onward, and up, and up again, until the impossible was achieved, all barriers were broken, all pains conquered, all abilities possessed. Until all was lightning and no darkness left.

It was the voices of this continuing struggle down the hundreds of centuries that I had heard in the Index Room. It was this same struggle that the Exotics were attempting to encompass with the strange magics of the psychological and philosophical sciences. *This* struggle that the Finney Encyclopedia was designed at last to chart throughout the past centuries of human existence, so that Man's path might be calculated meaningfully into his future.

This was what moved Padma, and Mark Torre—and everyone, including myself. For each human being was caught up in the struggling mass of his fellows and could not avoid the battle of life. Each of us living at this moment was involved in it, as its parts and its plaything.

But with that thought, suddenly, I became conscious that I was different, not just a plaything of the battle. I was something more—potentially an involved power in it, a possible lord of its actions. For the first time, then, I laid hands on the lightnings about me and began to try to drive, to turn and direct their movements, forcing them to my own ends and desires.

Still, I was flung about for unguessable distances. But no longer like a ship adrift upon a storm-wrenched sea, now like a ship close-hauled, using the wind to bear to windward. And in that moment for the first time it came upon me—the feeling of my own strength and power. For the lightnings were at my grasp and their tossing shaped to my will. I felt it—that sensation of unchained power within me that is beyond description; and it came to me at last that indeed I had never been one of the tossed and buffeted ones. I was a rider, a Master. And I had it in me to shape at least part of all I touched in the battle between the lightnings and the dark.

Only then, at last, I became aware of rare others like myself. Like me they were riders and Masters.

They, too, rode the storm that was the rest of the struggling mass of the human race. We would be flung together for a second, then torn measureless eons apart in the next moment. But I saw them. And they saw me. And I became conscious of the fact that they were calling to me, calling on me, not to fight for myself alone, but to join with them in some common effort to bring the whole battle to some future conclusion and order out of chaos.

But everything that was inherent in me rebelled against their call. I had been downtrodden and confounded too long. I had been the lightnings' helplessly buffeted subject for too long. Now I had won to the wild joy of riding where I had been ridden, and I gloried in my power. I did not want the common effort that might lead at last to peace, but only that the intoxicating whirl and surge and conflict should go on with me, like a fury, riding the breast of it. I had been chained and enslaved by my uncle's darkness but now I was free and a Master. Nothing should bring me to put on chains again. I stretched out my grasp on the lightnings and felt that grasp move wider and grow stronger, wider and stronger yet.

—Abruptly, I was back in the office of Mark Torre.

Mark, his aging face set like wood, stared at me. Whitefaced, Lisa also stared in my direction. But directly before me, Padma sat looking into my eyes with no more expression than he had shown before.

“No,” he said, slowly. “You’re right, Tam. You can’t be any help here on the Encyclopedia.”

There was a faint sound from Lisa, a little gasp, almost a tiny cry of pain. But it was drowned in a grunt from Mark Torre, like the grunt of a mortally wounded bear, cornered at last, but turning to raise up on his hind legs and face his attackers.

“*Can't?*” he said. He had straightened up behind his desk and now he turned to Padma. His swollen right hand was cramped into a great, gray fist on the table. “He must—he has to be! It’s been twenty years since anyone heard anything in the Index Room—and I’m getting old!”

“All he heard was the voices; and they touched no special spark in him. You felt nothing when you touched him,” said Padma. He spoke softly and distantly, the words coming out one by one, like soldiers marching under orders. “It’s because there’s nothing there. No identity in him with his fellow-man. He has all the machinery, but no empathy—no power source hooked to it.”

“You can fix him! Damn it!”—the old man’s voice rang like a steeple bell, but it was hoarse to the point of tears—“on the Exotics you can heal him!” Padma shook his head.

“No,” he said. “No one can help him but himself. He’s not ill or crippled. He’s only failed to develop. Once, some time when he was young, he must have turned away from people into some dark solitary valley of his own, and over the years that valley’s grown deeper and darker and more narrow until now no one can get down there beside him to help him through it. No other mind could get through it and survive—maybe even his can’t. But until he does and comes out the other end, he’s no good to you or the Encyclopedia; and all it represents for men on Earth and elsewhere. Not only is he no good, he wouldn’t take your job if you offered it to him. Look at him.”

The pressure of his gaze all this time, the low, steady utterance of his words, like small stones

dropped one after the other into a calm, but bottomless pool of water, had held me paralyzed even while he talked about me as if I were not there. But with his last three words, the pressure from him lifted up; and I found myself free to speak.

“You hypnotized me!” I flung at him. “I didn’t give you any permission to put me under psychoanalyze me!”

Padma shook his head.

“No one hypnotized you,” he answered. “I just opened a window for you to your own inner awareness. And I didn’t psychoanalyze you.”

“Then what was it—” I checked myself, abruptly wary.

“Whatever you saw and felt,” he said, “were your own awarenesses and feelings translated into your own symbols. And what those were I’ve no idea—and no way of finding out, unless you tell me.”

“Then how did you make up your mind to whatever it was you decided here?” I snarled at him.

“You decided it fast enough. How’d you find out whatever it was made you decide?”

“From you,” he answered. “Your looks, your actions, your voice as you talk to me now. A dozen other unconscious signals. These tell me, Tam. A human being communicates with his whole body and being, not just his voice, or his facial expression.”

“I don’t believe it!” I flared—and then my fury suddenly cooled as caution came on me with the certainty that indeed there must be grounds, even if I could not figure them out at the moment, for me not believing it. “I don’t believe it,” I repeated, more calmly and coldly. “There had to be more going into your decision than that.”

“Yes,” he said. “Of course. I had a chance to check the records here. Your personal history, like that of everyone Earthborn who’s alive at this moment, is already in the Encyclopedia. I looked at that before I came in.”

“More,” I said grimly, for I felt I had him on the run now. “There was more to it even than that. You can tell. I know it!”

“Yes,” answered Padma and breathed out softly. “Having been through this much, you’d know it, I suppose. In any case, you’d learn it soon enough by yourself.” He lifted his eyes to focus squarely on mine, but this time I found myself facing him without any feeling of inferiority.

“It happens, Tam,” he said, “that you’re what we call an Isolate, a rare pivotal force in the shape of a single individual—a pivotal force in the evolving pattern of human society, not just on Earth, but on all the sixteen worlds, in their road to Man’s future.

You’re a man with a terrible capability for affecting that future—for good or ill.”

At his words my hands remembered the feel of their grasp on the lightning; and I waited, holding my breath to hear more. But he did not go on.

“And—” I prompted harshly, at last.

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“There is no ‘and,’ ” said Padma. “That’s all there is to it. Have you ever heard of ontogenetics?”

I shook my head.

“It’s a name for one of our Exotic calculative techniques,” he said. “Briefly, there’s a continually evolving pattern of events in which all living human beings are caught up. In mass, the strivings and desires of these individuals determine the direction of growth of the pattern into the future. But, again, as individuals only, nearly all people are more acted upon, than act effectively upon the pattern.”

He paused, staring at me, as if asking me if I had understood him so far. I had understood—oh, I had understood. But I would not let him know that.

“Go on,” I said.

“Only now and then, in the case of some rare individual,” he continued, “do we find a particular combination of factors—of character and the individual’s position within the pattern—that combine to make him inconceivably more effective than his fellows. When this happens, as in your case, we have an Isolate, a pivotal character, one who has great freedom to act upon the pattern, while being acted upon only to a relatively small degree, himself.”

He stopped again. And this time he folded his hands. The gesture was final and I took a deep breath to calm my racing heart.

“So,” I said. “I’ve got all this—and still you don’t want me for whatever it is you want me?”

“Mark wants you to take over from him, eventually, as Controller, building the Encyclopedia,” said Padma. “So do we, on the Exotics. For the Encyclopedia is such a device that its full purpose and use, when completed, can only be conceived of by rare individuals; and that conception can only be continually translated into common terms, by a unique individual. Without Mark, or someone like him, to see its construction through at least until it is moved into space, the common run of humanity will lose the vision of the Encyclopedia’s capabilities when it’s finished. The work on it will run into misunderstandings and frustrations. It will slow down, finally stall, and then fall apart.”

He paused and looked at me, almost grimly.

“It will never be built,” he said, “unless a successor for Mark is found. And without it, Earthborn man may dwindle and die. And if Earthborn man goes, the human strains of the younger worlds may not be viable. But none of this matters to you, does it? Because it’s you who don’t want us, not the other way around.”

He stared across the room with eyes that burned with a hazel flame against me.

“You don’t want us,” he repeated slowly. “Do you, Tam?”

I shook off the impact of his gaze. But in the same moment I understood what he was driving at, and I knew he was right. In that same moment I had seen myself seated in the chair at the console before me, chained there by a sense of duty for the rest of my days. No, I did not want them, or their work.

on Encyclopedia or anywhere else. I wanted none of it.

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Had I worked this hard, this long, to escape Mathias, only to throw everything aside and become slave to helpless people—all those in that great mass of the human race who were too weak to fight the lightning for themselves? Should I give up the prospect of my own power and freedom to work for the misty promise of freedom for them, someday—for *them*, who could not earn that freedom for themselves, as I could earn my own, and had? No, I would not—I would not, I would have no part with them, of Torre or his Encyclopedia!

“No!” I said harshly. And Mark Torre made a faint, rattling sound deep in his throat, like a dying echo of the wounded grunt he had given earlier.

“No. That’s right,” said Padma, nodding. “You see, as I said, you’ve got no empathy—no soul.”

“Soul?” I said. “What’s that?”

“Can I describe the color of gold to a man blind from birth?” His eyes were brilliant upon me. “You’ll know it if you find it—but you’ll find it only if you can fight your way through that valley mentioned. If you come through that, finally, then maybe you’ll find your human soul. You’ll know when you find it.”

“Valley,” I echoed, at last. “What valley?”

“You know, Tam,” said Padma more quietly. “You know, better than I do. That valley of the mind and spirit where all the unique creativity in you is now turned—warped and twisted—toward destruction.”

‘DESTRUCT!’

There it thundered, in the voice of my uncle, ringing in the ear of my memory, quoting, as Mathias always did, from the writings of Walter Blunt. Suddenly, as if printed in fiery letters on the inner surface of my skull, I saw the power and possibilities of that word to me, on the path I wanted to travel.

And without warning, in my mind’s eye, it was as if the valley of which Padma had been speaking became real around me. High black walls rose on either side of me. Straight ahead was my route and narrow—and downward. Abruptly, I was afraid, as of something at the deepest depth, unseen in the farther darkness beyond, some blacker-than-black stirring of amorphous life that lay in wait for me there.

But, even as I shuddered away from this, from somewhere inside me a great, shadowy, but terrible joy swelled up at the thought of meeting it. While, as if from a great distance above me, like a weak bell, came the voice of Mark Torre sadly and hoarsely tolling at Padma.

“No chance for us, then? There’s nothing at all we can do? What if he never comes back to us, and the Encyclopedia?”

“You can only wait—and hope he does,” Padma’s voice was answering. “If he can go on and down and through what he has created for himself, and survive, he may come back. But the choice is his.”

always been up to him, heaven or hell, as it is to all of us. Only his choices are greater than ours.”

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The words pattered like nonsense against my ears, like the sound of a little gust of cold rain against some unfeeling surface like stone or concrete. I felt suddenly a great need to get away from them and to get off by myself and think. I climbed heavily to my feet.

“How do I get out of here?” I asked thickly.

“Lisa,” said Mark Torre, sadly. I saw her get to her feet.

“This way,” she said to me. Her face was pale but expressionless, facing me for a moment. Then she turned and went before me.

So she led me out of that room and back the way we had come. Down through the light-maze among the rooms and corridors of the Final Encyclopedia Project and at last to the outer lobby of the Enclave where our group had first met her. All the way she did not say a word; but when I left her at last, she stopped me unexpectedly, with a hand on my arm. I turned back to face down at her.

“I’m always here,” she said. And I saw to my astonishment that her brown eyes were brimming with tears. “Even if no one else is—I’m always here!”

Then she turned swiftly and almost ran off. I stared after her, unexpectedly shaken. But so much had happened to me in the past hour or so that I did not have the time or desire to try to discover why, or figure out what the girl could have meant by her strange words, echoing her strange words earlier.

I took the subway back into St. Louis and caught a shuttle flight back to Athens, thinking many things.

So wound up I was in my own thoughts that I entered my uncle’s house and walked clear into his library before I was aware of people already there.

Not merely my uncle, seated in his high wing chair, with an old leather-bound book spread open on his lap, face down and ignored on his knees, and not only my sister, who had evidently returned before me, standing to one side and facing him, from about ten feet away.

Also in the room was a thin, dark young man some inches shorter than myself. The mark of his Berber ancestry was plain to anyone who, like myself, had been required in college to study ethnology and its origins. He was dressed all in black, his black hair was cut short above his forehead, and he stood like the upright blade of an unsheathed sword.

He was the stranger I had seen Eileen talking to at the Enclave. And the dark joy of the promise made at that meeting in the valley’s depths leaped up again in me. For here, waiting, without my need to summon him, it was the first chance to put to use my newly discovered understanding and my strength.

# Chapter 4

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It was a square of conflict.

So much already of the discovery I had made in the place of lightning was already beginning work in my conscious mind. But almost immediately, this new acuteness of perception in me was momentarily interrupted by recognition of my own personal involvement in the situation.

Eileen threw me one white-faced glance as she saw me, but then looked directly back at Mathias who sat neither white-featured nor disturbed. His expressionless, spade-shaped face, with its thick eyebrows and thick hair, still uniformly black although he was in his late fifties, was as cold and detached as usual. He, also, looked over at me, but only casually, before turning to meet Eileen's emotional gaze.

"I merely say," he said to her, "that I don't see why you should bother to ask me about it. I've never placed any restraints on you, or Tam. Do what you want." And his fingers closed on the book that was face down on his knees as if he would pick it up again and resume reading.

"*Tell me what to do!*" cried Eileen. She was close to tears and her hands were clenched into fists at her side.

"There's no point in my telling you what to do," said Mathias remotely. "Whatever you do will make no difference—to you or me, or even to this young man, over here—" he broke off and turned to me. "Oh, by the way, Tam. Eileen's forgotten to introduce you. This visitor of ours is Mr. Jametho Black, from Harmony."

"Force-Leader Black," said the young man turning to me his thin, expressionless face. "I'm on attache duty here."

At that, I identified his origin. He was from one of the worlds called, in sour humor by the people of the other worlds, the Friendlies. He would be one of the religious, spartan-minded zealots who made up the population of those worlds. It was strange, very strange it seemed to me then, that of all the hundreds of types and sorts of human societies which had taken seed on the younger planets, that a society of religious fanatics should turn out, along with the soldier type of the Dorsai World, the philosopher type of the Exotics, and the hard-science-minded people of Newton and Venus, to be one of the few distinct great Splinter Cultures to grow and flourish as human colonies between the stars.

And a distinct Splinter Culture they were. Not of soldiers, for all that the other fourteen worlds heard of them most often as that. The Dorsai were soldiers—men of war to the bone. The Friendlies were men of Devotion—if grim and hair-shirt devotion—who hired themselves out because the resource-poor worlds had little else to export for the human contractual balances that would allow them to hire needed professionals from other planets.

There was small market for evangelists—and this was the only crop that the Friendlies grew naturally on their thin, stony soil. But they could shoot and obey orders—to the death. And they were cheap. Eldest Bright, First on the Council of Churches ruling Harmony and Association, could not underbid any other government in the supplying of mercenaries. Only—never mind the military skills

of those mercenaries.

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The Dorsai were true men of war. The weapons of battle came to their hands like tame dogs, and fitted their hands like gloves. The common Friendly soldier took up a gun as he might take up an axe or a hoe—as a tool needing to be wielded for his people and his church.

So that those who knew said it was the Dorsai who supplied soldiers to the sixteen worlds. The Friendlies supplied cannon fodder.

However, I did not speculate upon that, then. In that moment my reaction to Jamethon Black was only one of recognition. In the darkness of his appearance and his being, in the stillness of his features, the remoteness, the somehow *impervious* quality like that which Padma possessed—in all these I read him plainly, even without my uncle's introduction, as one of the superior breed from the younger worlds. One of those with whom, as Mathias had always proved to us, it was impossible for an Earth man to compete. But the preternatural alertness from my just-concluded experience at the Encyclopedia Project was back with me again, and it occurred to me with that same dark and inner joy that there were other ways than competition.

“...Force-Leader Black,” Mathias was saying, “has been taking a night course in Earth history—the same course Eileen was in—at Geneva University. He and Eileen met about a month ago. Now, your sister thinks she'd like to marry him, and go back to Harmony with him when he's transferred home at the end of this week.”

Mathias's eyes looked over at Eileen.

“I've been telling her it's up to her, of course,” he finished.

“But I want someone to help me—help me decide what's right!” burst out Eileen piteously.

Mathias shook his head, slowly.

“I told you,” he said, with his usual, lightless calm of voice, “that there's nothing to decide. The decision makes no difference. Go with this man—or not. In the end it'll make no difference either to you or anyone else. You may cling to the absurd notion that what you decide affects the course of events. I don't—and just as I leave you free to do as you want and play at making decisions, I insist you leave me free to do as I want, and engage in no such farce.”

With that, he picked up his book, as if he was ready to begin reading again.

The tears began to run down Eileen's cheeks.

“But I don't know—I don't know what to do!” she choked.

“Do nothing then,” said our uncle, turning a page of his book. “It's the only civilized course of action, anyway.”

She stood, silently weeping. And Jamethon Black spoke to her.

“Eileen,” he said, and she turned toward him. He spoke in a low, quiet voice, with just a hint of



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