

Feared by her friends, hated by her enemies,
only she could end the Winter of the World.

DARKWAR TRILOGY-3 CEREMONY

BY GLEN COOK Author of
WARLOCK

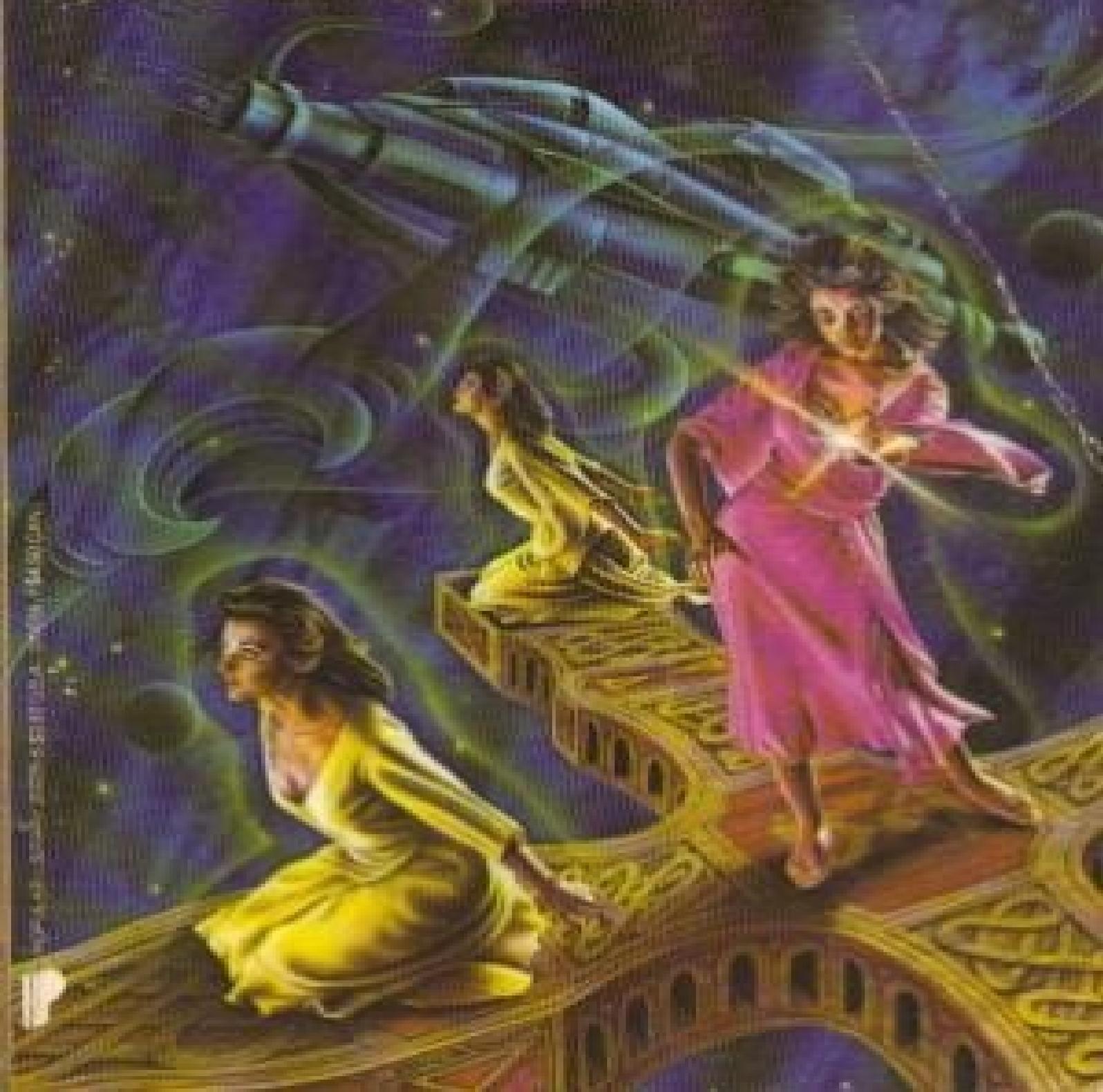


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CEREMONY

by Glen Cook

Book Three of *The Darkwar Trilogy*

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BOOK FIVE: METAL SUNS

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I

Marika's darkship was forty miles from TelleRai's heart when the first sword of fire smote the world.

The flash blinded her briefly. There were more flashes. She did not keep count. The Mistress of the Ship had been blinded, too, and had lost control. The darkship twisted toward the ground.

Marika reached with the touch. *Mistress! Get hold of yourself!*

Her vision cleared. A quarter mile to her left Kiljar's darkship fluttered downward, too, but it stabilized soon after she spied it.

Marika felt Kiljar's touch. The Redoriad second sent, *What has happened?*

I do not know. The strange weapons you mentioned?

Marika looked back to the city so recently and hastily fled. A grisly glow backlighted the snowclouds. The world within, the ghost world of the touch and dark, was filled with terror and pain, unfocused, diffuse, yet centered upon dying TelleRai.

Marika sent, *What should we do, Kiljar?*

Go on. We must go on to Ruhaack. Already the touch tells me there is nothing we can do back there.

How bad is it?

Worse than you can imagine. How did you know?

I just felt something bad coming. Premonition. Silth set great store by intuition. Not even that much when we started. I just knew we had to get away from the city. Then when Starstalker rose above the horizon I knew something terrible would happen. And it is not over yet. I feel a great hot wind coming.

The Serke will pay for this.

The Serke did not do this, mistress.

They made it possible. It will be impossible to assemble a true convention now, for a while. Perhaps it is best that way. At the moment you could demand and receive anything.

What happened? Marika demanded again.

Kiljar sent a mental picture of what she imagined TelleRai must look like now, with the fires raging and the mushroom clouds rising. Marika pushed it away, unwilling to believe the disaster she had predicted.

Her Mistress of the Ship appealed for her attention. *Mistress? Coming up on Ruhaack.*

Go carefully. She shifted touch back to Kiljar. *What do you think? Do you sense any perils ahead? I do not.*

I sense emptiness within the Serke cloister. I sense death. I do not believe what I sense. No Community has committed kalerhag in centuries.

Kalerhag. Ritual suicide. The Ceremony. The ultimate silth ritual. The one that, at one time, had ended most silth lives.

In the packs of the wild, like that of Marika's puphood, the very old were put out of the packstead in hard times, after the less useful males and pups. In the sisterhoods

of old the aged had retired themselves through kalerhag. And any sister had done so when she felt honor demanded it.

The two darkships moved in on the Serke cloister, losing altitude, slowing, watching it belch smoke that rolled up into the clouds, reminding Marika of Maksche aflame after the perfidious brethren attack there.

No sisterhood has committed kalerhag here, Kiljar sent, correcting herself, more distressed. *They took some with them and left the others poisoned.*

Marika instructed her Mistress of the Ship to drop lower still, to approach the Serke Ruhaack cloister below the worst of the heat. Inrushing air tugged at her clothing.

It is safe, Kiljar sent. *Set down.*

Marika had her darkship taken to ground. She stepped off. Her vactor, Grauel, stepped down beside her and stared at the cloister in awe. “What happened, Marika?”

“Kiljar says they poisoned everyone they could not take with them. I suppose the fires were meant to destroy evidence.”

“Evidence? Of what?”

The earth beneath their feet was trembling, groaning, carrying news of the destruction of TelleRai.

“Who knows? Let’s see what we can find.”

As Marika unslung her rifle the hot wind from TelleRai overtook them. Most of its force had been spent, but still it was enough to stagger them. Marika regained her balance. She looked toward TelleRai. “That they could do such a thing,” she snarled into the wind. Then, to her Mistress of the Ship, “Stay here. Remain prepared to lift off.”

The Ruhaack Serke cloister stood at the heart of the city Ruhaack, surrounded by a broad belt of green. That belt was filling with meth. Marika considered the creatures, Serke bonds all. She felt no danger there. They were nothing more than bonds.

Kiljar left her own darkship and joined Marika. “You intend to go inside?”

“If I can.” The cloister gate stood sealed. She ducked through her loophole, caught a small ghost attracted by the disaster, and used it to demolish the gate.

Grauel went in first, behind a short warning burst from her rifle.

There was no one to resist them, silth, vactor, or bond. They found most of the Serke still in their cells, apparently resting peacefully. The stench of death filled the place. Marika could not long stand the sight of dead novices bloating in the heat. She asked Kiljar, “Do you think they did this at all their cloisters? Or just here?”

“Probably just here. This was the beast’s head.”

“Why, Kiljar?” she asked as they retreated through the gate. “Why would they do such a thing?”

“I suspect to sever all ties that might allow us to trace them.”

“But . . .”

“They are running. All the guilty of the Serke and the brethren. Together. I expect to the world where they found their aliens. I doubt that the Serke wanted to do it this way. They are not as wicked as we have painted them. Imagine the pain they will carry with them into exile. It would not surprise me to learn they had turned on the brethren. Bestrei is simple. She has her concepts of honor. She will demand that a price be paid. When we find them . . .”

“Find them?” Marika asked.

“You know we will. Someday. I have not seen TelleRai, but I have sensed it. What was done there cannot be forgiven. Ever. The voidpaths will be filled with silth on the hunt.”

“And that explains this, I suppose. The brethren strike on TelleRai compelled the guilty Serke to burn their bridges in kalerhag.”

“Exactly. There is nothing we can accomplish here. I suggest we return to TelleRai. We must join the bonds in Mourning. There will be time to worry about settling scores later.”

Despite her own cold-blooded excesses against the base and rogue males the rebel brethren had used to attack and destroy her cloister in Maksche, Marika was sickened by what she saw in TelleRai. Broad patches of glassy, glowing desert had replaced miles of once proud and beautiful cloisters—including that of her own Community, the Reugge.

Six of the gruesome weapons, whatever they were, had come down upon the great city. One had fallen upon the convention ground where Marika and Kiljar had thought to disarm the villains forever. It had destroyed the highest sisters of scores of Communities. Others had fallen upon the Reugge cloister and the Redoriad. A fourth had fallen upon the Tovand, the headquarters of the brethren. The remaining two weapons seemed to have fallen where they would.

Touch brought the news that the brethren rebel facility in the Cupple Islands had been vaporized too. Another cutting off of backtrails.

Voidships from several dark-faring Communities had lifted in pursuit of the Serke already, but they would not reach orbital altitude in time. Already the great Serke-brethren voidship *Starstalker* and her convoy of darkships were departing into the great night between the suns.

Kiljar predicted, “We will hear from them again if we do not find and neutralize them first.”

Marika did not believe that required any prophetic vision. “I insist on being trained to walk the void. I want to be there when they are found.”

“It shall be as you wish.”

A cold wind blew out of the north, bringing with it snow that melted as it approached the still hot craters. The winter of the world was a slower enemy, but the fate it bore was as certain. The great glaciers were on the move. Nothing could withstand them.

Nothing? Marika reflected. That was not true. Now she was in a position to do something about the ice age. At last.

II

As years trickled into the well of time it seemed to Marika that her homeworld, and the meth who populated it, drifted backward into their own history, into an era of peace unlike any known since the system had entered the interstellar dust cloud responsible for the cooling cycle. The bonds of brethren who survived the terror after the destruction of TelleRai became extremely conservative and accommodating. They surrendered much of the power they had gained in recent generations and hunted out the heretics among themselves. The vestiges of the Serke Community were absorbed by sisterhoods with claims or were allowed kalerhag. Serke properties became reparations paid to Communities hurt at TelleRai.

The Reugge, with a prior and stronger claim, took the biggest bites. Marika successfully argued her right to claim Serke starworlds for the Reugge, though few of the established dark-faring orders were pleased. Only a tiny fraction of what the Serke had held off-planet, a mere token, those holdings nevertheless legitimized the Reugge as starfarers.

In the early going, while she was trying to take possession of the new holdings, Marika had to borrow voidships and crews from friendly sisterhoods. She had to borrow again in order to properly exploit the new far territories.

“Grauel, alert the darkship crew,” Marika said.

The huntress asked, “Where to now, Marika? How much longer must we live paw to mouth, upon the charity of other sisterhoods?”

“Not long. Not long at all. Where is Barlog? Is she recovered enough to make a journey with us?”

“Try to leave her behind. Where are we going, anyway?”

“To visit Bagnel.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t take that tone. I am indifferent to Kublin.”

“I do not want to call you a liar, Marika. I do understand. Somewhat. I would have difficulty dealing with a littermate myself. Yet he was at the very root of the crimes, one of the chief criminals.”

“He will remain where he is. The rest of his natural life.”

Grauel held her tongue, but it was obvious she did not find the risk of leaving him alive acceptable. Marika let the argument alone. As strength goes. She was most senior of the Reugge. Her word was law. That was enough.

The three bath reported immediately. The Mistress of the Ship delayed a few minutes. Marika was irked by the delay, but said nothing. Mistresses of the Ship were that way, even when they served a most senior. They felt compelled to assert themselves.

She was tempted, briefly, to take the command position herself. She did not get to fly as much as she liked now that she was trying to drag an entire Community out of

the despair brought on by the destruction of TelleRai.

The darkship dropped into the landing court of a packfast hidden far to the north, in territories all other meth believed had been abandoned to the ice. Senior Edzeka came out to meet Marika. She did not have much to say. Just another example of the widespread emotional paralysis Marika encountered everywhere.

“How may we serve you?” Senior Edzeka asked, and when Marika told her she wanted to see her friend, the tradermale Bagnel, the senior assigned her a guide and disappeared.

Following Marika’s instructions, Bagnel had been treated as an honored guest. “Really more an honored prisoner,” he said. “But I should complain? If I hadn’t been here I’d probably be among the dead.”

“They have kept you posted on the news?” Marika asked.

“Those two arfts still shadow you, I see,” Bagnel said, nodding toward Grauel and Barlog. “Yes. It was a form of taunting, I suspect. They were certain whatever favor I enjoyed would be withdrawn.” The male looked haggard for a moment, betraying the fact that he feared *that* might be why Marika had come.

“I have come to bring you out of hiding, to send you back to the brethren. Those who destroyed your bond, and Maksche and TelleRai are dead, scattered, or on the run. The brethren need new leaders—rational and reasonable leaders.”

“I would be no puppet.”

“We have been friends long enough for me to know that, Bagnel. If you pretended to be I would become more suspicious of you than I normally am.”

“Of me?”

“Of course. You are brethren. I am silth. There is no way our interests will ever approach identity. But we can live together amicably. We have done before.”

Bagnel looked at Grauel and Barlog for a moment. Marika had the distinct feeling that, more than ever, he wished her two old packmates elsewhere.

“So,” he said. “Tell me Marika’s plans. I hear you are most senior of the Reugge now.”

“A temporary inconvenience. I will shed the mantle as soon as I can. I have another destiny. Out there.” She pointed skyward. “My dream.” She had shared her dream of the stars with no one but Grauel, Barlog, Bagnel, and a few meth whose goodwill would be critical in achieving it. Only the named three knew how much an obsession the stars were.

“I see.”

“I have made certain arrangements on your behalf. Wherever you go when you return to the brethren, a small number of aircraft will remain available. The arguments were bitter, and I had to lie to convince some members of the convention, but the fact is, they’re there for you. Because I know what my life would be like if I could no longer fly.”

Bagnel bowed his head and said nothing for a long time. Then, “I am sure they have said terrible things about you, Marika. After what you did at the base at . . . But they do not know you. Thank you.”

“I remember my friends as well as my enemies. The sisters here have instructions to see you prepared for the journey. I have a few things to do here before we depart. I hope you do not mind traveling blindfold.”

Bagnel snorted. "I expected nothing else. This place, with its secret manufactories, would be too precious to you for you to do otherwise."

Marika shrugged. "Darkships are too precious to we silth to allow control of production or distribution to rest in outside paws. Were it not for this place the Reugge would have none left but mine after the battles in the Ponath and the destruction of Maksche and TelleRai.

"I will see you later. We will fly together again, as we did when we were innocent."

Marika was barely out of Bagnel's hearing when Barlog remarked, "You told Grauel you were no longer interested in Kublin's fate."

"I said nothing of the sort. I am no longer interested in making special dispensations for him, but he is still my littermate, even though he turned rogue. He is still the meth who was closest and dearest to me during my puphood years. Those days cannot be regained, but they need not be discarded."

The two huntresses exchanged glances. Marika knew they were thinking they would never understand her. To them she must seem an incongruous and incompatible mixture of sentimentalism and deadly cold ambition, too often subject to masculine weaknesses.

They would never understand. For all they wore the dress of Reugge vactors of the leading rank and were accustomed to the technological and social marvels of the south, at heart they remained neolithic huntresses with a very primitive black-and-white view of the world's workings. Mostly they did not try to reconcile their beliefs with what they saw. They followed orders, often with sullenly silent or formal disapproval, and held themselves aloof from their effete and decadent surroundings and associates.

Their disapproval was graven on their faces, but neither said another word as Marika stalked into the packfast's signal intercept section.

Kublin was imprisoned there, compelled to translate brethren cant and coded messages Reugge technicians stole from the satellite network. "He is as isolated as if he had been sent to rejoin the All," Marika said. "And this way his blood is not on my conscience. Not to mention that we get some use out of him."

Grauel and Barlog did not speak to arguments they considered weak excuses. Blood meant little or nothing to a Ponath female dealing with males.

Kublin was at work when Marika arrived. She stood out of the way of the small team on duty, and signaled the supervisor to continue as though she were not there. She watched Kublin.

He did what he was supposed to do, no faster than he had to. He looked much older than he had when she had captured him. When she mentioned that to Grauel the huntress remarked, "You look much older too. And you two look very much alike. Persons who did not know you nevertheless would suspect you were littermates."

The discussion, though whispered, caught Kublin's attention and he noticed Marika for the first time. Their gazes met. He betrayed no expression whatsoever.

Marika did not try to speak to him. There was nothing to say anymore. After a few minutes she left and collected Bagnel, and returned to warmer southern climes and the business of righting a Community decimated by the attack upon TelleRai.



III

The initial fury of the hunt for the fugitive Serke and brethren faded, but the search never ceased entirely. Nor did it enjoy any success. The villains had vanished as though they had never been, and surviving members of the Serke Community could provide no hints as to where they had gone.

Contrary to her announced intentions, Marika did not immediately step down as most senior of the Reugge Community. She claimed that was because there was no one qualified to replace her. All the Reugge ruling council excepting herself had been in TelleRai when death fell from the sky. So she remained on till she was confident that the order was no longer in disarray, by which she meant till it was made over to her own specifications. She sorted through the ruling councils of the surviving cloisters, identifying and elevating sisters whose philosophies mirrored her own.

In time she did yield first chair, to a silth named Bel-Keneke. Bel-Keneke hailed from a frontier province as remote as the Ponath. Her attitudes were very much like Marika's, though she was nowhere near as strong in the talents.

Marika collected Grauel and Barlog and retreated to the secret darkship factory in the snow wastes, there to continue interrupted studies and to pursue her slightly paranoid watch on signals traffic.

At first Marika came out of hiding regularly, to study with Kiljar, to fly with Bagnol, as had been their custom for years, except when broader events interrupted them. She learned to handle a voidship with the best of the starfaring Mistresses of the Ship, though she never actually pursued her dream and traveled to any of the starworlds. She did not, in fact, go much beyond the orbits of the two larger moons, Biter and Chaser.

Once she had become proficient with the voidships her ventures out of isolation became even more infrequent, then not at all.

She fell out of the public eye for nearly three years.

The permanent snowline crept southward steadily till it reached the remains of TelleRai. The land of Marika's birth lay buried beneath a hundred feet of ice and snow. The ruins of Maksche were little more than lines beneath a cloak of white.

Hunger stalked the world for all the effort of the silth to care for their bonds, for all the abnormal cooperation that developed between disaster-besieged sisterhoods. Too many meth were being compressed into too little territory.

The population of the meth homeworld had never been large, but neither was much of its surface developed agriculturally. Development efforts started after the destruction of TelleRai were too little, too late. Land could not be brought into production quickly enough to support the shifting populace.

Marika watched from isolation. In time she lost patience with the efforts of others.

“Grauel, send word up to have my darkship prepared. Find Barlog. Arm

yourselves.”

Surprised, Grauel asked, “What are we doing, Marika?”

“We’re going out. It is time I stopped waiting for others to do something. No one seems inclined to act.”

“Really?” It had been three years since Grauel had been out of the fortress, which Marika had renamed Skiljansrode in honor of her dam, and which she had made over into an independent packfast populated by refugees, fugitives, and malcontents from a dozen sisterhoods. Viewed from a traditional silth perspective, Skiljansrode could be considered the germ of a new Community.

Marika never thought of breaking away from the Reugge.

Other silth contemptuously called those of Skiljansrode the brother-sisters because they worked with their paws. The principal product of the fortress remained darkships, but other, more technical items went out as well, increasingly in competition with the brethren. Most of the meth at Skiljansrode were curiosities like Marika herself, little interested in the fashions and forms of silthdom.

“Really, Grauel. Really. Have Kloreb message the cloister at Ruhaack that we’ll be coming. I will want our quarters warmed. I will want a précis of the current political climate prepared. And I will want Kiljar of the Redoriad told that I will be in Ruhaack and that I would like an audience.”

“Is something afoot, Marika?”

“In a sense. It’s time we tried to do something about reversing the winter of the world.”

Grauel looked at her long and hard. Finally she said, “Not even you have the witchcraft to make the sun burn hotter.”

“No, but there are ways. What do you think I have been working on all this time? It can be done. I think the brethren knew that in the old days. Had they won, they might have taken steps. I suspect many of them know what to do even now, but they allow the long winter to go on because it weakens us.”

“I believe you when you say . . . It’s just . . .”

“Just?”

“I haven’t been out of here for so long. I find I am very uncomfortable when you talk about going.”

“I’m uncomfortable too, Grauel. And that is a sign that we have sat still too long. We have allowed ourselves to become sedentary. We have become like our dams. We have reverted to being the pack meth we once were. I think we’re overdue to reenter the active world.”

“Shall I have Bagnel messaged as well?”

“That can wait till after we reach Ruhaack.”

In the past three years Bagnel had risen high among the brethren. Marika found she was excited about seeing him again. More excited than she was by any other prospect, including the possibility that she would mount a voidship again, and this time maybe actually fly off in pursuit of her dreams. After, of course, she had won the struggle to get a program started to reverse the long winter.

How many more years might that take?

She knew the exact cause of her excitement. She examined it with sardonic self-mockery.

Toghar ceremonies or not, she was female. And she was into a female's prime pupbearing years. Some hormones were produced despite Toghar.

"Not a distraction I need," she murmured to herself. There were silth who assuaged that natural need, who enjoyed a sort of false esterus, using male bonds. Marika refused. She considered that degraded, despicable, even perverted. She forced the need out of mind.

"Go on, Grauel."

She paced after the huntress departed, concerned that she had been gone from the world too long, that it might have passed her by during her three-year sabbatical.

Chapter Thirty

I

Ruhaack had become the site of the new dam cloisters of several Communities bombed out of TelleRai. The city was a welter of construction. TelleRai itself had been abandoned. It was no longer healthy.

The Reugge had been awarded possession of the former Serke cloister. The reconstruction and refurbishing begun during Marika's administration were finished. The Reugge Community was back to business as usual—as much as it could be.

The Redoriad were building their new main cloister in one of Ruhaack's satellites. Construction was far advanced from what it had been at the time of Marika's last visit.

Though Marika had departed the immediate equation, the two orders remained closely allied. For a time, soon after the bombs, there had been talk of a merger. The main talkers had been Marika's enemies, who wished to keep her from taking control. Nothing had come of it. Marika's supporters and other conservatives within both Communities had scuttled the proposal.

The same conservatives supported the alliance, though. It had proved of great benefit to both orders. The Reugge, particularly, were now considered a force to be reckoned with in everything.

Marika nervously stalked around a hastily prepared apartment. Kiljar, now most senior of the Redoriad, was coming to see her. She felt like a pup again, as unsure of herself as she had been when first she had arrived at Akard.

"I shouldn't have locked myself up in Skiljansrode," she told Barlog. "Not so thoroughly. I've lost something."

Grael entered. She looked sour. "Bagnel the tradermale is here, Marika." Which explained that. Grael never had approved of Bagnel. "And the Redoriad say that mistress Kiljar has departed the Redoriad cloister."

"Good. Good. What of Bel-Keneke?"

"She will be here soon, I think more out of curiosity than because you implied that you were about to call in her debt to you."

"Fine."

Both huntresses considered her. She continued to pace.

"I spent too long in the safety and nonpressure of Skiljansrode," she explained again. "I have lost my edge. I am not comfortable being Marika. The weapons . . . I feel almost silly carrying them. But they were our sigil. Going around armed, making dramatic gestures. We are too old. I'm almost ready to become one of the Wise."

Grael snorted. "Maybe in another twenty years. You're still hardly more than a pup." She spoke thus in defense of herself. She was much older than Marika, but she was not ready to lay down her huntress's role.

Barlog said, "I think I understand, Marika. When I am out in the cloister I too get the feeling that the world has left me behind."

Grael agreed. "I encountered young vactors who didn't know who we are. Or were, perhaps I should say. Not that we were ever that famous. But there was a time