

Peg shifted uneasily at this sign of rebellion.

"I would be a little careful if I were you, before you start shooting off your mouth. Look at it from our point of view. You are pushed in through the door. You are in much better condition than the rest of us - washed, tidy and you've been somewhere we haven't. How do we know who you are or what you are? Perhaps our dear Martha sent you to stir up trouble so that she could have the excuse to make more rules or to push us around. Perhaps you are a spy who has to report back on what we say and what we plan - "

June looked into the shrewd eyes of the old lady. Thoughts of an alliance faded, she couldn't really blame her for her caution.

"I can say only this, that the Councilman thought he could get me to do something for him and kept me apart for a while, but I've been a prisoner too - and now he's decided to keep me with the rest of you - "

"We have only your word for that - as for the Councilman - how do we know that he exists? We've heard Martha talk about him and now you, but he hasn't shown his nose anywhere near us. Most of the women think he's a myth. Martha's running the show, she's got some sort of control over her team of yellows, they never argue with her or look as if they're about to question anything she says. We think she's the boss - "

June nodded and lowered her eyes. There wasn't any point in arguing. She had no strength to argue, she closed her eyes again and slowly reclined on the heap of cloth. She

was conscious of the old woman's eyes on her for a while and then there was a rustle of movement and she was left alone. She kept her eyes tightly shut in case she was being spied upon. She started to plan again, or at least, to search around for another plan.

The hostile group of women into which she had been thrust, would prove to be of no help. She couldn't count them into any strategy. Perhaps she had spoken too soon in her eagerness to enlist allies. Now they would watch her, suspicious of her every move. They would be so many more jailers who would limit her freedom of action. That was what she needed - freedom of action and movement. She had to explore the chamber or chambers in which they were kept. There had to be more than one way out and there had to be access to the quarters where the men were kept. The whole problem was that she had no idea of the geography of the complex. The men could be a matter of a few yards away, or miles. This she doubted, they would be fairly close, the complex wasn't all that large despite the wanderings back and forth through cross passages to give that illusion. She wondered what the men were planning. Before long the lid was going to blow off the tight little society the Councilman was trying to regulate and by that time, she wanted to be well away from them, with her son and David.

She made up her mind, there was no point in delay. She had a strong feeling of urgency to get away from the Councilman and his little empire. Peg was still absent, June opened her eyes wide and tried to adjust them to the gloom. She was laying in a corner of a larger chamber. Someone had found empty cartons, had flattened them and then constructed flimsy walls to shut off the two sides that were exposed to the big room.

She stood up, pleasantly surprised to find that her legs did not feel as

weak as before. The effects of the drug were wearing off. She peered round the edge of the cardboard wall and found that the space beyond it wasn't overcrowded. Peg was nowhere to be seen, the women were all concentrated at the other end of the large chamber. Some sort of meeting was going on. Indistinctly, she could hear that one speaker was holding forth and that sometimes there were murmurs of approval and at other times, stronger reactions of disagreement.

It was a perfect time to explore, although a quick look around didn't prove to be encouraging. The chamber was one large room and didn't appear to have many exits - perhaps there was only one and that was beyond the meeting. June walked along the side of the wall, hoping that no one from the crowd would notice her activity. There was nothing but a bland surface on the side she chose and it soon ended in a corner that led down to the crowd. She retraced her steps beyond Peg's quarters and tried the other wall. There were small passages, which proved one after the other, to lead to toilet or washing facilities. Her nose wrinkled, they stank of overuse and overcrowding. If the Councilman wasn't careful, his empire would go down with typhoid or cholera. There was nothing to be gained by stealth. She drew in her breath and marched resolutely to the back of the crowd. At first, her coming raised no reaction, after a while the speaker paused and stared at her pointedly. Faces and bodies were turned and she was the focus of silent and watchful eyes. The speaker's tone was harsh. She was a heavy built, youngish woman, whose blond hair was matted and as dirty as the rest of her.

"You were not invited here - "

June's response was as harsh.

"I don't need any invitations, nor do I need your permission - if you have anything to say, I want to hear it, especially if it concerns me!"

The blond one contemplated her.

"Why would it concern you - unless you've got orders to report what you hear to your boss?"

"I have no boss - I want to get to my son and my cousin - they're with the men. With or without your help, I intend to do that - so go ahead with your chatter. I prefer to take action!"

There was a ground swell of a murmur. June wasn't afraid, just a little amazed that she was so calm. If the women turned ugly, she would have little chance of defending herself. She made a quick calculation, there were well over two hundred crammed into the chamber - far too many for its size. The blond one had appointed herself the spokeswoman.

"Let us know when you come up with your master plan. Do you imagine that you're the only one who has that idea? The only time we see that door opened is when the food is brought in twice a day. There's always a troop of our yellow bellied jailers with submachine guns - or hadn't you noticed that they are armed?"

Her voice was heavy with indulgent sarcasm, as if she was dealing with someone who was half witted. June refused to be stung into anger. She stared back at resolutely.

"I suppose it hasn't registered with most of you that we are being fed? They may have guns but has anyone stopped to think whether they would be prepared to use them? I would imagine that the Councilman - or Martha, if you prefer, since you don't seem to believe that he exists - has reasons for keeping us alive. I am prepared to bet that he doesn't want a blood bath- for some reason we're more valuable to him alive. After all, how can you build a

kingdom where the subjects are corpses - and that is what I think our Councilman and his lady friend are trying to do."

It had been quite a long speech. This time the audience wasn't so quick to respond. Even the blond one had nothing to say, except for a shrug and:

"Please yourself, if you want to get a string of bullets across your chest!"

"I'm prepared to chance that. When they come the next time, I'm going to march out of here and look for the men. If anyone else wants to do the same, you're welcome - otherwise I go alone!"

It sounded a great deal more brave than she felt. There was no immediate response from the women, who continued to stare at her silently. She turned and walked away from the group - let them carry on with their chatter. She moved around them and towards the door leading back to the passages. She had no idea of when the food would come, she wished she had asked while she had the chance but there was nothing to be gained by returning to the women to enquire. She felt their eyes watching her but she ignored them, standing for a while as if assessing the bland surface of the door and its potential. There came the point where to continue to do so would have turned the action into a comedy. She retreated towards the corner where Peg had taken her.

The women had dispersed, they avoided individual contact, as if she was suspected of some obscure but lethal disease, so there was no obstruction. Peg was waiting for her within the enclave of cardboard. The old woman said nothing. She was squatting on the floor on the thin pile of blankets that had been issued by the beneficence of the Councilman. There was no place for June and the old lady didn't move aside to make any. Clearly, June had outstayed her welcome.

"Thank you for helping me when I needed it - I'll find my own way from here."

Peg nodded.

"Watch your back."

It was an old saying but it took on an extra meaning - a precise meaning, given the mood of the other women. June nodded again and turned to go.

"You won't get out, you know - more than likely get hurt or even killed if you try."

"I have to try - these people have no right to keep us as prisoners and the longer it isn't challenged, the easier it will be for them to keep control. I didn't hide from the missiles to become somebody's slave!"

"Brave words but not practical!"

June nodded again and left the old lady sitting on the floor. Outside the cardboard walls, the women had gathered again. They stood solid and silent across her path. The blond one was in front. For a long moment, nothing was said. June stood very still, they were in control. The blond one spoke.

"The girls have been talking. There's a lot of sense in what you said - and in what you've just said to Peg. We'll back you!"

June nodded her thanks, she didn't succumb to the temptation to ask them why they had changed their minds so abruptly. The blond one called out.

"Come out of there, Peg - you're in this too!"

The old lady joined them and stood beside June, she moved slowly whether from age or reluctance wasn't clear.

"I think you're all mad!"

"Maybe, but what's the point in letting this Martha and her boss call the shots?"

June noticed the tacit acceptance of her story of the Councilman. They

THE DRAGON'S TIME

made a few plans and when that was finished, it showed how little they could plan. The food was delivered in large buckets twice a day. The morning ration had long since been consumed. Without means of telling the time, it was hard to judge when the next lot would arrive. All they could do was wait. The food was usually accompanied by two armed guards. Together with the men who carried the buckets, there would be no more than ten men against hundreds of resolute women. The guns were a worry but there was nothing they could do about that, until they could see the reactions when the men would be confronted by a mob.

The meeting dispersed and resumed the apparent aimless wandering.

June noticed that they all kept close to the end where the doors were. As soon as they opened, the group would gather as if to receive their evening rations. Nothing would be suspected - or so June hoped. She prayed that no one would act prematurely. She was also a little surprised that she had prayed at all, it was a habit she had allowed to lapse.

The waiting seemed interminable. Because they were thinking of the doling of the rations, their stomachs complained of hunger a lot earlier than usual. Despite their expectations, they were almost taken unawares when the doors were thrust open abruptly and two armed troopers preceded four men staggering under the weight of a full cauldron of something that comprised their evening rations. The women seemed to hesitate and June felt a stab of alarm that they might have withdrawn their support, but then they moved forward towards the place where they were accustomed to being served. She looked beyond the two trouper and the four bearers of the cauldron and saw that the door were still open but flanked by two more armed guards.

The women were too silent as they approached. The guards sensed the menace but couldn't understand the change, they glanced at each other but before they could make up their minds to do anything, there was a concerted rush forward and they found themselves grasped and pressed down to the floor by the mob. The same fate was afforded to the bearers of the food. The two guards at the door hesitated, not sure whether to attempt a rescue for their overwhelmed comrades, or whether to beat a hasty retreat. The hesitation proved to be their undoing, for some of the women, led by the big blond, rushed them and they found themselves pinned down to the ground as well.

June breathed a great sigh of relief, not one shot had been fired and the women seemed to be in command of the situation. Not only that, but the alarm had not been raised, unless the proceedings had been monitored by hitherto unsuspected electronic surveillance. The blond one advanced triumphantly.

"Stage one complete - what now?"

"Find the men - these should be able to tell us."

The luckless trouper had been hauled to their feet, they looked decidedly nervous. June confronted one who had carried a rifle.

"You are going to take us to the men!"

The man shook his head - she had chosen the one showing the most defiance.

"Do you want the women to make you talk?"

The defiance faded a little.

"I won't help you!"

June nodded to the blond one, who took a menacing step forward.

June looked at one of the others, from his appearance and the stains of food that had slopped on him during the tussle, he had been one who had carried it in.

"Are you going to be brave or co-operative?"

The man swallowed, clearly he didn't have much stomach for the alternative.

"I'll show you."

Some of the woman had had the presence of mind to secure the corridor outside of the chamber in which they had been kept. The cooperative captive was thrust to the front of the crowd and propelled in the direction he indicated. The corridor was narrow and choked with women. They were noisy and aggressive and the surprise factor had long since been dissipated. If the Councilman was going to do something to reassert his authority, it would have to be soon. She had a fatalistic sense of calmness. There was nothing he could do to stop her from reaching Darren and David and even the sudden confrontation of a dozen armed men blocking the passage ahead, did nothing to change that opinion. The women stopped, the captives looked suddenly hopeful and the two groups eyed each other in silence.

June pushed to the front and advanced ahead of the women, she heard the blond one draw in her breath as she stepped forward. She hissed after her.

"Come back, you fool, they mean business!"

June ignored the command or plea - whatever it was. Unerringly, she focused on the one who looked to be the leader.

"You will let us pass, or you will have a massacre on your hands. You can kill us because we are not going back. If you start a fight, we will not be the only ones who will get hurt or killed. We are too many for you and even if you stop some of us, the rest will carry on and walk over your bodies!"

It was bloodthirsty and theatrical and would have been hissed off the stage of the local amateur dramatic society, but this audience was less critical. Behind the leader were no more than a dozen men. They filled the corridor but behind them was no one in support. June continued.

"I'm sure the Councilman wouldn't be too pleased if you kill off half of his empire and leave him with a group of revengeful husbands sons and lovers." It was a calculated suggestion, somehow June wasn't convinced that the Councilman was behind the move to stop them, he would have been much more organised and Martha would have been around, directing operations. The leader's eyes flickered and she could see his indecision. June flagged the women forward and slowly they moved until they almost touched the muzzles of the rifles being trained upon them. The pressure grew and like a tidal wave, swept over the dozen men blocking their way. They went down under the pressure of superior strength. There were screams and shouts and the battle was won - this time there was a little blood, some of the men looked decidedly the worse for wear when they were hauled to their feet. The original guide was pushed to the front and told to lead they way to

the men in no uncertain terms and soon they  
<were confronted with two unguarded doors, similar to the ones that had  
blocked the way to the women's chamber. Levers were thrown on the outside  
of the doors and they crashed open inwards. For a moment, the startled men  
inside stood like statues and then, there was a roar of exaltation and  
exuberance as the two groups blended. The captives were forgotten in the  
excitement and June saw them, one after the other, making a hasty retreat  
back along the corridor in the direction from which they had come. There was  
nothing she could do to stop them. They would rejoin the Councilman and he  
would organise a counter-attack. In the meantime, she looked around  
desperately for Darren and her cousin. She saw David first, at about the  
same time that he saw her. They hugged each other wordlessly, then:

"Where's Darren?"

David licked his lips and stepped back from her.

"Where is he, David?"

Her voice rose to nearly a scream.

"They took him, June - Martha and some of her yellow clad goons - "

She stared at him speechlessly for a moment.

"And you let them!"

"I couldn't stop them, June - they pushed me back and took him - "

She hit him hard across the face, he staggered under the blow but  
didn't retaliate.

"I couldn't stop them, June - "

Loud speakers blared above the tumult and gradually there was  
silence - the speakers repeated the call for silence - it was the Councilman's  
voice.

"I want to ask you to stop and think about your position. At the same  
time, I will concede that we were ill advised to attempt to separate families in  
the way we did. We are in an enclosed environment and you will surely die if  
you attempt to return to the surface at this time. We all have to share this  
environment, where there is shelter and food provided. Outside, nuclear fires  
still rage and great clouds of debris and radioactive material have almost  
blotted out the sun. It is not the place for you to go and I would like to invite  
you to remain within the shelter - together in your family groups. We are  
taking steps to provide more comforts - after all, these are very early days  
and it takes time to restore even the basic amenities of life. I hope you will be  
patient with those who are trying to make this situation tolerable. You might  
be wondering why it has been necessary to confine you into separate  
quarters and to equip our personnel with weapons, this has been a  
precaution, to guard against trouble makers and those who would attempt to  
cause community strife. Now that we have identified the disruptive elements,  
it will no longer be necessary to brandish weapons about. We will exclude the  
troublemakers. We ask you, as a token of co-operation, to withdraw your  
support from them where they have become visible in your groups. Let the  
authorities deal with them in an appropriate way."

The Councilman sounded like a benevolent father trying to pacify  
rebellious children. June sensed the change that swept through the group of  
women who had supported her. They became quiet and then drew their men  
away. June and David stood isolated and it was quite easy for yellow-clad  
trouper to enter the chamber and escort them out. June didn't look back at  
the women and the men to whom they had been reunited. She didn't look at  
David who marched silently at her side. Their escort said nothing, they were

not apparently armed but that could have been an illusion, for weapons could have been hidden in the folds of the yellow costumes they wore.

The route to the Councilman was direct. Obviously, there was no more need to try to confuse by wandering through a tangle of passages. As she had suspected, the complex was not all that large. Martha was not in the outer office when they were led through to the inner chamber. The Councilman sat at his large desk and she sat to one side. The escort was not dismissed.

"This interview will be short - We cannot tolerate the sort of behaviour that creates civil strife and disturbance. You have instigated a riot - and you young man, are closely implicated with this woman. I have nothing more to say to you, except to pass sentence. Under the powers invested in me by the Emergency Act, I have the alternative of prescribing death for civil disobedience in a time of war, or I may prescribe expulsion. I have decided to exercise mercy and therefore sentence you to expulsion from our community. You will be escorted to a point where you will be shut out of our environment - that is all!"

"That is not all! Where is my son Darren - I demand to have him with me - it is my right as his mother!"

"You have no rights and you are not in any position to make demands. In all conscience, I cannot expel a twelve year old boy from this complex. I do not believe that the sins of the parent should be exacted on the child. He will be cared for under my guidance and that of Martha, whose friendship you have rejected. We thought you to be a specially blessed person, who was destined to lead us into safety in these difficult times. It seems we must wait for another!"

"So said John the Baptist - and he lost his head! Make sure you do not lose yours, Councilman - Now! enough of this nonsense - I demand to be reunited with my son!"

The Councilman's face had contorted into anger.

"Remove her - and her companion!"

June screamed all the way through the corridors leading upward and away from the Councilman's presence. She screamed the name of her son through the empty corridors and then through the heavy doors that were shut after them. She cried out in the small chamber into which they had been thrust and she screamed out again into the darkness beyond the outer doors. Then she collapsed in a senseless heap, leaving David to cope alone with the new circumstances.