

Mind Games



William Walling

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*Toil not to find a better Paradise,
If other Paradise indeed there be!*
The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam,
a poet of Old Earth antiquity

Prologue

Venture there now if the exorbitant wherewithal is yours, and it will be impossible to imagine Eden's raw, pristine state — a frigid, backwater planet smaller than Old Earth, the neohuman ancestral home. Selected from among hundreds of candidates because it best fit the prescribed template, the lonely planet featured large, ice-covered seas, a crust readily manipulable by advanced terraforming technology, and chanced to sustained no higher life forms per se, a fact totally immaterial to the founders. Had such been the case, the anonymous world would have been “cleansed.” Of almost equal importance, the isolated mote circled a G₂V main sequence primary, Sol's veritable twin, in a sector of the visited galaxy untrammelled by cultures in conflict.

The absentee owners, shadow masters of a far-flung commercial empire, inhabit a remote, enigmatic hydrosphere transliterated as Parvo in Lingua Stella, the interstellar trade patois. A species of exotics known only by hearsay due to its “otherness” and reputation for entrepreneurial brilliance, Parvons resemble neohumans in only one respect: intelligence.

Following a round of stiff competitive bidding, the Parvon Syndicate awarded lucrative contracts to a terraforming specialty conglomerate in Chalseanne, thirty parsecs distant along an in-galactic geodesic. Titanic mobile fusion cells were brought to bear powering teragauss generators that “seized” the raw world's molten ferrous core in a magnetic vise. During the course of an entire standard decade, the barren planet was pulled into a stable orbit closer to its primary within Rasool's Optimum, where exposure to radiation flux and the particulate “stellar wind” was deemed ideal for neohuman tenancy. Dual moons were orbited to silver the night skies. Minor adjustments were made to the system dynamics of two inner planets, and four outlying gas giants orbiting broods of natural satellites. The obscure stellar system's lesser bodies were left to seek equilibrium on their own.

Terraforming then began in earnest. An atmosphere enrichment program began concurrently with extensive mountain-building projects. Conclusions derived from the multiple, exhaustive studies of neohuman consultants led to “cleansing” inimical life forms from the seas, continents and islands — life forms inimical to profit in the Parvon sense — after benign, ecologically compatible substitutes were procured, or cloned, and readied for transport.

Architects and ecologists, engineers, agronomists, marine biologists, artists, designers, social scientists — legions of professionals boasting expertise in a host of disciplines —

descended on the gestating world in droves along with a huge, multi-ethnic construction crew. The Parvon Syndicate's directors worked reflexively, weighing from afar the economic versus aesthetic aspect of each prospective venture. Trade-offs involving trillions of stellars and millions of labor manhours were debated at length, and reconciled.

More than eighty planetary systems populated by unmutated and lightly mutated neohuman stock were screened for their most inordinately attractive male and female specimens. Thousands of cloning contracts were signed. As living quarters became available, cloned infants and toddlers were transported to newly established crèches in Eden, the resort world's chosen name. Reared in accordance with Syndicate precepts, their maturation rates paralleled final constructions.

The Parvon Syndicate's investment of time, energy and valuta was immense. The predicated long-range return on the investment was estimated to be astronomical.

Toward the end of the sixth standard decade, a pair of senior Syndicate directors — iridescent, vermiculate exotics encased in bioregenerative null-grav capsules to interdict them from the poisonous, oxygen-rich atmosphere — roamed Eden on a final inspection tour. They found the cloned android population enjoying its teens and early twenties.

The Parvon Syndicate looked upon its handiwork, and was pleased.

During the seventh standard decade, it rested.

Paradise Found

Gessim Ahmed Kallas
Terranova, 3427 C.E.

ONE

The weapons technician was nervous. He looked away to avert the inquisitor's chill, steady gaze.

"You did work that night," said Klavik.

"Yessir." The technician licked his lips. "Not much got done. We spent the wee hours crowded in the test lab while His Omnipotence was on site."

A rippling burble of anxiety mixed with corollary twinges of foreboding impinged upon Klavik's consciousness, reactions common in subjects under interrogation. State Security Director by appointment to the Crown, the absence of hoped-for intimidation — his secondary stock in trade — disappointed Klavik. Intimidating a subject under questioning was something his impassive features and fixed, unblinking stare usually brought into full flower. If told, few would have believed his primary weapon, enhanced empathic perception, a cultivated "sixth sense" that enabled him to perceive gross emotional patterns in others. Schooled in the psychic discipline, he had previously interviewed a parade of so-called witnesses, and recently resumed questioning arsenal personnel at random, trolling with folded hands and searching mind for stray slips, scraps of hitherto unrevealed information, while remaining alert for any hint of elevated emotional disquiet that might prompt more intensive questioning.

Where the weapons technician was concerned, he knew that once again he was pumping at a dry well. Other than general anxiety over being questioned by someone in authority, the middle-aged technician's emotional tenor fell within nominal parameters.

"Who instructed you to leave the arsenal proper?"

"The supe . . . Our, uh, supervisor told us to clear out. We cooled our heels in the lab till His Omnipotence and those with him went back aboveground."

"I see," said Klavik, who saw nothing revelatory. During the wee hours, Kraan's semi-deified monarch had dismissed his escort of Royal Elite Guardsmen and paid an unannounced visit to the underground nuclear arsenal. None of the scientists, engineers, technicians or administrative staffers grilled to date could imagine why the ruler had put in an impromptu, unheralded appearance.

Wearied by sessions of fruitless interrogation, Klavik felt it futile to voice the familiar concluding mantra, but did so anyhow on general principles. "You noticed nothing unusual that night, no untoward incidents, no strangers on the premises?"

A blink of surprise. "Strangers down *here*? Security's tight as a bung in the complex, sir." The technician tapped the badge clipped to the pocket of his dun-colored jumpsuit. "Iris eye patterns and a fancy hologram are digitized on our rad badges. Doors stay shut if the computer doesn't like what it reads. Can't begin to guess how a stranger'd get inside."

Nor I, thought Klavik darkly. "You saw no one you failed to recognize?"

The technician's brow creased. "Scuttlebutt says a half-dozen priests came down with His Omnipotence. Didn't see 'em myself."

Having interviewed the prelates in question, Klavik had found their accounts in total agreement. His Omnipotence had ordered the clergymen to wait for him in the blockhouse below the arsenal's sealed, guarded entrance. As in all prior interviews, questioning the technician was leading nowhere. "Wouldn't you think it highly unlikely," he asked "for our gracious sovereign to arrange for the theft of costly, weapons grade thorium isotope?" Hoping the off-the-wall query would nudge loose an emotional spike, he was not surprised when it failed to do so. "His Omnipotence," he added, knowing the added bait useless even before dangling it, "would have no reason to steal anything that was already Crown property."

The middle-aged technician puffed his cheeks. "Never thought about it that way. Me and the others, we kicked the whole crazy business around amongst ourselves. What happened to the thorium is . . . No one has a glimmer."

His enhanced sense of esthesis reconfirmed the technician's innocence. The puzzle had deepened another notch.

Ultra-sophisticated surveillance systems had recorded nothing unusual, nor had equally complex alarm systems been triggered, on the night a lethal, extremely valuable quantity of weapons-grade thorium isotope vanished from the subterranean arsenal. As security director, it was Klavik's prerogative to work alone on those rare cases with global security implications. Having chased a number of skimpy leads, all of which had proved to be either hearsay, or confusion attributable to mildly contradictory eyewitness accounts. The current interview had once again led him into a blind cul-de-sac. Yet a nagging suspicion remained that some higher-up within Kraan's fractionated government had engineered the outrageous theft, and then heaped over it a tangled skein of incidentalia no amount of sleuthing could unravel.

Stymied by the lack of progress, he dreaded the thought of a connection between the theft and the civil uprising he feared might be brewing in Kraan. The enriched thorium isotope could be in the hands of radical elements within the Kaolin or Kamala political factions, or for that matter both. And when the time was ripe . . .

“Now hear this, Klavik!”

In the act of dismissing the technician, Klavik flinched when a high-pitched, bone-conducted voice erupted from the nanotechnology implant behind his right ear. “Why the crisis circuit?” he demanded of thin air.

Hearing his inquisitor respond to an unseen presence was too much for the technician. He instinctively recoiled.

“Now hear a Class I Directive!” announced the voice. *“Report to the Palace without delay. Prime Minister Kurani awaits your arrival. Go now, now, now!”*

Klavik frowned. “Particulars?”

“A planetary emergency has been declared. The PM ordered a crash-priority search for your whereabouts. On his authority, proceed directly to the level six roofpark. Do not tarry for any reason.”

“Acknowledged.” Klavik thanked the technician for his cooperation. “You can go now, but remember your promise. You are not to discuss what was said here under any circumstances. Understood?”

“Yessir!”

* * *

Caught up in the stagnant thorium investigation, Klavik in his official capacity had not yet been presented to Kraan’s recently invested chief of state. Guiding the null-grav verticraft toward the Palace, he reflected upon what he knew, and what he’d been told, about Prime Minister Kurani. A Royal Aerospace Forces icon, the Grand Marshal’s investiture had come about in an unheralded way.

Urged by his personal physician to enjoy a rest and rehabilitation holiday, Kewart ab Kraan, Esemplastos, His Omnipotence XXIV, had left his consort and juvenile heir apparent, departing on a long-overdue sojourn in the resort world of Eden. The Lord Regent, Protector of the Crown during the monarch’s extended absence, had been viciously maligned by the right-wing Kaolin media, also condemning Kraan’s wan, unwell ruler in absentia for “turning his back” on grossly unsettled conditions in the homeworld.

Planning to be offworld for a standard month or more, Kraan’s beloved sovereign had invited Grand Marshal Kurani to form a bipartisan government, seemingly a spur-of-the-moment decision not entirely agreeable to either major political party. A staunch though previously unannounced adherent of Kamala political philosophy, Kurani had been deemed marginally acceptable to the Kaolin nobility due to his reputation for rectitude and fair dealing. A political null throughout his distinguished military career, the PM had explained in his inaugural address that laying aside his cherished marshal’s baton had been the most excruciatingly difficult thing he had ever done, or considered doing, and in the very next breath voiced a conviction that planetary politics must by necessity end at the ionosphere. Even so, with the world watching and listening, he had taken the bit in his teeth, then and there donning the burnt-orange robes favored

by the Kamala, and announced that his deeper loyalty had always been, and would forever remain, to the Crown.

Controversy and political infighting notwithstanding, popular acclaim for the former marshal had risen to landslide proportions. His straight-from-the-shoulder approach to governing had fueled public perception of being ably led by a rare military professional who viewed himself above the political fray. In accepting the role of statesman, he had at first demurred, but in the end had responded without reservation to his sovereign's invitation to form a bipartisan government.

However 'bipartisan,' thought Klavik, was a slippery term. Upon assuming office, the PM had inevitably become embroiled in the thick atmosphere of finger pointing, behind-the-scenes intrigue and innuendo emanating from radical elements within the Kaolin Party. Dismayed by the polarization sundering his homeworld, his patriotic soul sickened by the looming prospect of Kraan warring against Kraan, Kurani had seized the nettle firmly, with typical bluntness and no vestige of bluster. During the Regency's first chaotic month, a number of heads had rolled, Kamala burnt-orange antagonists and Kaolin oyster-white radicals alike. With Kraan's hereditary monarch enjoying a recuperative holiday in the notorious, parsecs-distant resort world, the threat of civil war had been narrowly averted.

Or had it? Klavik asked himself. It was this potential reason for the emergency summons that worried him deeply.

Orbiting high above the forested, night-shrouded reservation extending for kilometers all around the Royal Enclave, he waited impatiently for a bull's-eye landing pad to illuminate on a mid-level Palace roofpark. Disengaging the autopilot, he left the ID transponder activated; lacking its encrypted signal, concentrated laser fire would have incinerated the verticraft the instant it encroached upon restricted airspace over the reservation.

He brought the vehicle to a full hover, rotated the four-seater about its yaw axis and nudged it forward until a green cross glowed in the head-up display slightly off-center of the orange bull's eye symbol below. He jockeyed the verticraft sideways until the green cross in the display superimposed itself on the concentric, illuminated landing target.

Winds aloft gently buffeted the hovering vehicle. Klavik stretched forward, preparing to initiate descent, and hesitated when widespread activity below caught his attention. Red and blue lights were flashing all around the reservation's perimeter. Pressing his forehead against the transpex bubble, he studied the scene below. What from on high looked like null-grav heavy weapons sleds were drawn up outside the reservation's four cardinal point access-egress gates. Tiny figures milled about in the adjacent, canyon like streets. Far off, beyond Constitution Mall, something similar was apparently taking place in and around the greenbelts and esplanades separating a cluster of high-rise government buildings.

The looming specter of civil war elevated his pulse rate. Punching up Doppler radar turned command of the verticraft over to ground control. He felt a sharp drop off in power as the verticraft fell toward the roofpark, flared to a semi-hover, surged propulsively twice, and settled on wheels beneath pneumatic shock-dampening struts. Klavik kicked on the brakes and depowered. He unbelted hastily and opened the hatch.

Holding megajoule laser weapons at port arms, led by a Royal Elite Guards subaltern, a quartet of gray-green uniforms jogged toward the grounded vehicle.

“This way if you please, sir.”

Apprehension lent haste to Klavik’s strides when escorted across the roofpark’s deserted expanse, and ushered into an express lift compartment. The floor fell away with gut-wrenching suddenness, all but went into freefall. Seconds later, the compartment juddered to a stop under knee-bending deceleration. The doors rolled apart, exposing a wide, glassed-in hallway carpeted in muted tones of blue and gray.

Clad in a sleeveless burnt-orange robe, Prime Minister Kurani stood in the hallway, feet apart, hairy, muscular forearms folded belligerently across his chest. Waves of red rage emanated from the PM’s mind, reverberating in Klavik’s attuned consciousness like the somber drumbeat of tom-toms. He cringed inwardly.

* * *

Expressionless, his stolid features sharply at odds with the emotional turmoil boiling up inside him, Kurani curtly dismissed the guardsmen. “Come, we must speak in private.” Erect and straight-backed, the former marshal’s age-defying military carriage and brisk strides forced Klavik to increase his pace.

“Unfortunately, we haven’t met until now,” said the statesman over his shoulder, “But your reputation precedes you, Klavik.” Leading the way into the Palace’s opulent, high-ceilinged library, his craggy features composed by what Klavik judged sheer force of will, the PM’s manner was stiff, uncompromising. He commanded the library’s parquetry double doors to close behind them. His rumbling bass voice edged with rancor, he said, “We’ve a major crisis to contend with, and learning you were out of your office made me doubt you. May I ask where you were?”

“At the arsenal, Prime Minister. I’m still investigating the —”

“Ah, the thorium! Of course. In the erupting furor, the theft had slipped my mind.” Despite the climate-controlled library, Kurani was perspiring. Head lowered in thought, hands clasped behind his back, he announced without further preamble that with the Lord Regent’s concurrence he had ordered full mobilization of all aerospace, ground and naval forces. “More than once His Omnipotence has spoken highly of you, praised your ability, your devotion to the Crown. I therefore have no qualms about where your loyalties lie. If, as I suspect, a Kaolin coup is in the making we must learn of it immediately.”

A cascade of shock mixed with naked outrage impinged upon Klavik’s consciousness, inhibiting his own clarity of thought. He made an effort to sublimate his own emotional turmoil. “May I ask why you believe a Kaolin coup might be brewing, sir?”

“Why . . . ? It’s not a matter of what I *believe*,” assured the other, his intonation acerbic. “It’s all but a surety. That pack of white-robed renegades has readied a stealthy move of some kind, and a murderous, underhanded move will most likely be. I know they’re behind it. Know it!”

“Behind . . . what, sir? What basis have you for —?”

“Basis!” The other blanched, directed a scathing glare at Klavik, and abruptly subsided. “Forgive me. I assumed you’d been told. Less than two hours ago, the Lord Regent received a hyperspace transmittal from that pigsty of hedonism, Eden. His Omnipotence has been assassinated.”

His limbs turned rubbery, Klavik sank back into a lounge. He stared upward, speechless, at the artificially stoic mask of Prime Minister Kurani.

TWO

Massed drummers beat a slow dirge tempo, the heartbeat of a planet in mourning. A uniformed Royal Elite Guardsman held the reins of a saddled, riderless kelwaat, and marched beside the tawny beast in solemn, slow-step cadence. Although the animal's bullet head and smooth-furred, rippling musculature bore no resemblance to its equine counterpart, a military boot reversed in one stirrup preserved a tradition born in Old Earth many standard centuries earlier.

Preceded by a mounted honor guard, the Lord Regent led the funeral procession, riding alone in a bejeweled coach, his brocaded ceremonial robe hanging from his shoulders heavily as his heart. An antique, slowly rolling caisson bore the catafalque and empty, flag-draped coffin, followed by the opulent Royal carriage drawn over the Sacred Way's worn cobblestones by a matched pair of kelwaat. The sorrowful cortege wound its way past silent, densely packed throngs lining the broad, tree-shaded Sacred Way ten-deep. Subdued and silent for the most part, the spectators were desolated by the knowledge that they had been deprived not only of their hereditary sovereign, but his remains as well.

The Royals struggled to sustain their regal bearing. Prince Kewart sat stiffly, knees together, unseeing eyes staring straight ahead. Proud and expressionless beside him in the ornate coach, the veiled widow who was his mother rested a hand on her son's arm.

Trailing the Royals, a third, much less ostentatious carriage swayed beneath the PM and Klavik as it clicked over the cobblestones. When the conveyance passed beneath a soaring triumphal arch erected to honor of ancient Kraan Colony's first omnipotent sovereign, the PM took advantage of the brief respite from public scrutiny. "Their mood?" he asked in a monotone. "What do you make of it?"

Tall and rangy, clad in neutral gray rather than the burnt-orange robe signifying the PM's Kamala allegiance, Klavik's dark, hooded eyes lent him an air of looking far beyond what he saw. His cultivated sense of esthesis had pulsed the throng's emotional tenor as they rode, and his response was slow in coming. "Sublimated rage, Prime Minister. Simmering outrage, icy fury melded with the deepest imaginable sorrow. For the moment, I doubt if there is much to fear from the loyal opposition."

"Loyal, hah!" The exclamation, although quietly uttered, grated in Klavik's ear like a boar's throaty grunt of disgust. "The conniving Whites are about as loyal as brook trout. There'll be a reckoning for this infamy, I promise you. Once we learn how treasonous Kaolin nobles used the odious pleasure world to effect their regicide, well . . ." Kurani left the somber threat unfinished.

"Forgive my presumption, sir, but we agreed to let the dust settle before going forward. Random finger pointing is a lame substitute for conducting a logic-driven, intensive investigation."

"Logic, aye! Assuming the worst by that pack of Kaolin fanatics is most logical."

Uncomfortable over what he knew had to be said, Klavik reminded the PM of their previous discussions, when a variety of possibilities and probabilities had been postulated. “Take no offense, sir. But mightn’t your brand of ‘logic’ be tainted by personal bias?”

The other’s low-voiced expletive was lost in the sound of iron-shod carriage wheels rolling over worn cobblestones. Kurani’s only response was a brusque nod of acquiescence.

Settling back against the cushions, Klavik retrieved the train of thought derailed by the PM’s caustic comments. Under the circumstances, the hideous reason for cutting short his investigation of the vanished thorium could not be gainsaid, nor could Kurani be faulted for preempting it by giving his full attention to the recent horror. Even on short acquaintance, it was easy to admire the former grand marshal’s dogged determination, his towering strength of character. Yet it rankled him to be torn away from the pursuit of justice, denied even an opportunity to put a semblance of closure to the thorium investigation with a formal report.

Rife with speculation ever since learning of the assassination, he could not shake an intuitive feeling that some connection existed between the missing thorium and the awful crime in distant Eden. The PM, on the other hand, held fast to a preconceived assumption, his virtual certainty that radical elements within the Kaolin nobility were responsible for the sovereign’s demise, and planning additional crimes to come.

Under enormous pressure due to the infinitely more pressing investigation thrust under his cognizance, Klavik had hoped to dismiss the thorium puzzle for the duration of the emergency. But unfinished business nagged him, as he had known it would. Discovering who had perpetrated the infamy in Eden, and almost as importantly why, came first and foremost of course, and yet . . .

Shock and bereavement at losing His Omnipotence Kewart ab Kraan, XXIV, Esemplastos, had rocked the planet to its foundations. In less than three standard cycles, if the Regency were not extended, adolescent Prince Kewart ab Kraan would accede to the Throne, thereby perpetuating an unbroken succession of hereditary monarchs stretching back to standard decades after the neohuman colony’s founding.

Strangely enough, news of the tragedy had for some reason welded Kraan’s formerly divisive citizens into one people, with a single mind and purpose. The protest marches and vicious rioting disrupting society had subsided, and then ceased altogether seemingly of its own accord, as if a switch had been thrown. Although still diametrically opposed politically, dissidents within the conservative, moderate and radical factions of either party had apparently fallen back to regroup in the face of common adversity.

Neither the Kamala nobility nor their Kaolin counterparts, or for that matter the polarized, partisan, hoi-polloi followers of either party, had voiced one syllable of discontent with the age-old institution of a constitutional monarchy, nor most certainly with Kraan’s late, revered monarch. The Kamala-controlled media had of course hurled allegations of regicide at the Kaolin hierarchy, while the loyal opposition — Klavik wondered how “loyal” the Whites had been during those first, desperate hours — had retrenched, drawing about themselves a shell of wary . . .

Had it been indignation, or guilt?

The ensuing uneasy truce had placed the guilty party or parties squarely in the limelight. Effecting swift, concomitant punishment — a hoary Kraan tradition — had inspired a firestorm

of public outcry. With a single voice, the peoples of Kraan had shouted vociferous demands for the culpable head or heads to be searched out, run to ground and severed. Media pundits aligned with either political faction had trumpeted a concerted warning that if some unknown malefactor had used Eden's arbiters of pleasure to effect the loathsome crime, why then so much the worse for Eden. Klavik knew resolving the question of guilt, and bringing the perpetrator before the bar of justice, were endeavors that would occupy his every waking moment for some time to come.

* * *

The hem of the Lord Regent's rich robe rippled about his crimson boots as he and Prime Minister Kurani mounted the cathedral steps side by side, as a measure of deference staying four risers behind the Royals. Slowly, one halting step at a time, the foursome ascended to the cathedral's marbled entrance and filed into the vast basilica. A robed arch prelate bowed low and ushered them to seats in the front row of hand-carved pews.

Strains of ancient music, the "Dead March" from Handel's Saul, accompanied the lock-step entrance of uniformed pallbearers bearing the ebon catafalque to an alcove in the nave, the figurative if not literal resting place of His Omnipotence XXIV. Beneath the lofted ceremonial sabers of a dozen Royal Elite Guardsmen, the coffin was lowered below the gleaming tiles into a niche in the royal columbarium. At the sight, it was Prince Kewart who covered the hand of his mother, a comforting gesture.

Clad in cloth-of-gold vestments and miter, the sad-eyed Lord First Advocate stood before the coved altar. After the mixed choir finished a psalm and fell silent, his sonorous baritone filled the basilica. "Your Royal Highnesses, Lord Regent, Prime Minister, cherished and honored friends, we gather on this dolorous occasion to pay homage to the thrice-blest Father of us all, He who has been rudely taken from our midst.

"Yet His Omnipotence shall be remembered not as he was, for in this, our hour of supreme bereavement, He is with us still. The Holy First Principle states that Change is universal, the universe nurturing dynamic, not static, and by no means immutable. The universe is evanescent, ever-changing, and our solemn obligation is to change with it.

"His Omnipotence is now one with the universe, where naught is ever lost or gained. Hence it matters not whether in our minds and hearts He assumes the form of a wise, benevolent Father cast in the neohuman image, or as an invisible essence dwelling forever in the seas of infinity . . ."

* * *

High in the nave, Klavik stayed out of sight from the vast floor below. Large-boned, with the breadth of shoulder befitting a mature denizen of a massive world like Kraan, he crouched behind the mirror-faced shield held by a sculpted Kraan warrior of old.

Rough-chiseled features jelled in concentration, he gazed down at the sorrowful congregation below, his enhanced sense of esthesis probing the cathedral floor, sorting and categorizing the fleeting emotional impressions. While the task proved extremely difficult, he never ceased asking himself the detective's immemorial question: Who stood most to gain by the murder of Kraan's revered sovereign? In each instance, a tentative answer formed in his mind of its own volition, and in each instance was refuted.

Targeting the contingent of Kaolin nobles and officials — row upon row of somber men and women clad in flowing, oyster-white robes — he strained to separate and absorb the nuances

of emotion wafting up to his coign of vantage. His searching mind met subtle, fluctuating ripples of sorrow, here and there spikes of profound outrage tinged with smatterings of outright fearfulness. The dearth of clearly perceptible emotional patterns did nothing to encourage, or for that matter discourage, a suspicion he had unwillingly begun sharing with the PM. Tenuous yet tangible, he could not put aside an intuitive feeling that one or more nobles of the “loyal opposition” were either directly or tangentially responsible for the despicable crime.

Unable to clearly differentiate the emotional tenor of one segment of the congregation from another, he grimaced in frustration. The broad, infinitely varied emotional maelstrom rising from the thousands jammed into the immense basilica had one uniform quality: overwhelming sadness tainted with and all-pervasive rage lurking beneath the veneer of grief.

Somewhere in the Lord First Advocate’s ever-changing universe, he thought bitterly, *the abysmal sadness visited upon us has created sheer delight*. A professional criminalist blessed by having been conditioned to the status of an adept in the quasi-telepathic discipline of empathic perception, he sincerely appreciated the gift he had worked so hard to gain. Yet an uncommon thoroughness of self-knowledge also made him realize that, for the time being, his own outrage tended to defeat whatever insight he might have gained from pulsing the multitude seated and standing on the cathedral floor. Unnerved by what he considered an uncharacteristic lack of self-control, and angry with himself for what to him was a weakness, he stepped out from behind the warrior’s statue, briskly strode away.

Descending the cramped spiral stair, disappointed and dispirited, he reached the basilica’s floor just as the Lord First Advocate concluded the invocation.

“... nor shall we dwell upon the injustice of the supreme tragedy visited upon us. While in deepest mourning, we must and shall go forward, one people striving toward a universal goal. We have no choice but to accept the devastating loss Change has thrust upon us, for only in such acceptance does sanity lie. We shall live out our lives in the spirit of the Holy First Principle, for Change is all and all is Change. A truly vile deed has snatched His Omnipotence from our midst.

Long live Kewart ab Kraan, His Omnipotence Esemplastos!”

THREE

Prime Minister Kurani swirled amber liquid in the brandy snifter, shifting his weight impatiently in the leather armchair.

“Will that be all, sir?” inquired the elderly manservant.

“Yes, thank you. Please tell the majordomo we are not to be disturbed. Not by staff, retainers, anyone other than the Lord Regent.”

“As you wish, sir.” The doddering elder lifted the cut-glass decanter, set it on a silver tray. Kurani watched in heavy-lidded silence as the library doors closed automatically behind him. Sipping brandy, he eyed Klavik over the snifter’s rim. “Well, the dismal affair is behind us. Time to get cracking.”

“Agreed, sir.”

“Drop the ‘sir,’” urged the other testily, “when we’re in private. Have you learned anything relevant since we last spoke?”

“We’ve drawn a total blank,” said Klavik matter-of-factly. “An unnaturally total blank I might add.”

“Um, yes; I fear you’re correct about that.” The PM ruminated. “The funeral ceremony was an emotionally charged affair. I assume you used your . . . talent. Anything come of it, anything at all?”

“Nothing, Prime Minister. My own emotional state interfered. The ranking Kaolin nobility seemed neither more nor less agitated than Kamala’s upper strata.” Klavik paused to marshal his thoughts. “Circumstances in the cathedral also made it exceptionally difficult to distinguish patterns in the raw emotional storm clouding the cathedral floor. The collective tone was outrage mixed with a sadness so profound it shrouded all other feelings.”

Kurani grunted. He tipped back his head, downed the dregs in his snifter and put it down with a resolute thump. “Where to begin, Klavik?” Bushy brows knitted, he patted stubby fingertips together. “The obvious starting point is of course Eden. If we’re to halfway believe the data sent along by the operator of that noisome hellhole, all we’re liable to find there is a cratered roadway surrounded by packs of unreliable, two-faced pimps and scoundrels.”

“What might be found in Eden,” said Klavik, “is too important for a rush to judgment, Prime Minister. The death site may provide a substantive lead; you issued instructions for it to be left entirely intact. First I plan to obtain a ‘feel’ for the place, especially for the people in charge, before beginning a search for specifics. My team and I went over the transmitted data exhaustively, and chased down every minor inconsistency here at home. With zero success, I’m sorry to say. Yet one conclusion I believe valid leapt out at me. Whoever conceived and perpetrated the crime to have worked through some agent or agency in Eden.”

An emphatic nod. “I surmised as much. We shall go to Eden straightaway.”

“We . . . ?” Klavik shot the PM a worried glance. “I work best alone, sir. I mean to slip into Eden as an anonymous tourist. It will be essential for the investigation to be conducted quietly so that whoever is responsible will not be tempted to—”

“Negative!” The denial was crisp, not-to-be-argued-with. “I wasn’t speaking rhetorically, Klavik. I mean to come with you, nor will we ‘slip in quietly.’ We shall charge boldly into the hedonistic playground, daggers drawn. I want the vermin who consummated this infamy to realize we’re riding hard on their scent. I want them to sweat bullets, jump at shadows and stew in their own juices before they bleed.”

Dismayed by the volatile outburst, Klavik did his best to remain calm, tactful. He explained that in his opinion the perpetrator had almost certainly been in Eden, but was not necessarily *of* Eden, and tentatively suggested going in boldly might not be the wisest course.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” argued the PM. “Wisdom wears a number of guises. Whether right or wrong, that is precisely what we shall do.”

Sorely troubled by the uncompromising nature of the reply, Klavik dared a rebuttal. “Prime Minister, I hope to convince you of the danger associated with that approach. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to preserve your anonymity in Eden. As an individual, I can pass myself off as just another wealthy vacationer. I can roam freely, see whatever I wish to see, poke around without hindrance.”

“Into the putrid pit with anonymity!” Kurani’s deep-set eyes glistened with vengeful fervor. “I intend to accompany you every step of the way, let’s be clear about that. Nor do I care

a whit if anyone knows who we are, what we're about. The matter is decided, a closed issue, no longer a topic for discussion."

The other's authoritarian, conning bridge manner inspired Klavik to offer a tentative counter suggestion. "I fully understand your purpose, why you feel the way you do. But with the situation as it is here at home can you even think of letting go the reins for an appreciable length of time? I don't anticipate a short stay. I could be in Eden for some time before turning up —"

"*We* could be there for some time," insisted Kurani. Then his manner softened somewhat. "Your objection is noted, and deserves a meaningful response. Where the big picture at home is concerned, the Lord Regent is not only fully empowered, but also has my absolute confidence. Absenting myself for a standard month or more should pose no significant problems, especially since an odd yet apparently authentic phenomenon leads me to believe common adversity may have temporarily salved all wounds. Either the Kaolin renegades are better actors than credited, or they've done a remarkable switch about and formed solid ranks behind my so-called 'bipartisan' government. Until complicity by the Whites is proven or disproven, whichever the case, I've no qualms about leaving Kraan in the Lord Regent's capable hands.

"To be brutally frank," he pursued in the same vein, "I'd be miserable sitting behind a desk, giving token effort to leading the government while spending sleepless nights fretting about how you were faring in that nest of degenerate sybarites. No, we shall go together. There, you've had my last word on it. My former flagship recently underwent retrofit and major overhaul. The *Kolodaan* is recertified for deep space, and the cohort of Royal Elite Guardsmen we shall carry should convince Eden's purveyors of self-gratification that something dangerous is afoot, something to be greatly feared."

Klavik could not hold back a strenuous objection. "Prime Minister, it would be an egregious error to enter Eden in force."

"An error . . . ?" Color rose in the other's leathery cheeks.

"Hear me out, please! I have no wish to be argumentative, but whatever can be accomplished in Eden will come about through subtlety, not flamboyance, and *never* by the use of force. A quiet, behind-the-scenes investigation without coercion or the use of arms — any variety of blatant inquisitory methods — is the single course that will prove effective. I ask your pardon for being obstinate, but as a tactic boldness is by its very nature self-defeating."

Displeased, and by no means convinced, the former grand marshal stroked his bulldog jaw. He stewed in silence, then reluctantly conceded that Klavik had made his point. "Very well; never apologize to me for speaking your mind, Klavik. I appreciate candor, always have. Feel free to have your say whenever you firmly believe you're in the right. As for going in with combat-ready guardsmen, we shall see. Tell me, have you adequately researched the hellhole?"

On firmer ground, Klavik tempered his response. "Much of it was done for us, Prime Minister. As you may recall, His Omnipotence enjoyed a holiday in Eden almost twenty standard cycles ago. In order to prepare for that visit, deep background investigations were conducted on Eden's neohuman administrative and operational executives, in addition to an unsuccessful attempt to learn something concrete about Parvo and its business syndicate."

"Um, yes; odd breed of exotics own the pricey bordello. Absentee landlords."

"Hardly any data on Parvo is available," said Klavik. "My predecessor's report described the Parvons as enigmatic, wrapped in conjecture cloaked in otherness. Accessing Encyclopedia

Galactica's classified database was a waste of time. It's inordinately difficult to get a handle on exotic species in general. Where the Parvons are concerned, practically no information is available on the planet itself, a distant hydrosphere, or its infrastructure, social matrix, culture, anything else."

Kurani's contemptuous snort indicated what he thought of exotic species. "Ownership is not actually our primary concern, Klavik. You mentioned Eden's neohuman leadership, but timeworn information strikes me as useless. Key personnel, operational means and methods, so forth and so on, have undoubtedly undergone shuffling in twenty standard cycles."

"Less so than I anticipated," informed Klavik. "The window dressing, perhaps, but not the essentials. Eden's senior executive, Emil Shatterhand, has apparently made service to the Parvon Syndicate his lifework. He continues to guide the fortunes of what many consider the ne plus ultra of neohuman resorts. He signed the hyperspace transmittal of data relating to . . . what befell His Omnipotence."

"Umm-m-m, interesting. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe our . . ." The PM broke off when golden handles turned, and the library's high, hand-carved doors swung inward manually. "Thought I'd find you here, Prime Minister." Poised in the doorway, a hand on either handle, stood the adolescent heir to Kraan's ancient throne.

* * *

The PM and Klavik rose together, and bowed low.

"May I join you?" The youth stepped into the library, once his father's favorite haunt.

"Your Royal Highness," assured Kurani, "need never pose that question in your own hall. But shouldn't you be comforting your mother?"

"The medic gave her something." Kewart pulled the library doors closed behind him. "She's asleep." He nodded politely to Klavik, a stranger. "I suppose you've been discussing what's to be done?"

"Aye, we were. But, here! Your Royal Highness, allow me to present Kraan State Security Director Klavik."

Klavik repeated his low bow. "Your servant always, Highness."

"Ah, yes; my father spoke highly of you, Klavik."

"I'm honored, Highness."

"With your permission," said the PM, "Klavik and I plan to shortly be off to Eden."

"Include me in your plans, Prime Minister."

"Your pardon, Highness . . . ?"

"I'm coming with you."

Klavik's mental processes came to a full stop. *No!* he thought. The adolescent prince's words ricocheted in his mind like a hot marble, accompanied by strong emotional tremors emanating from him. Klavik sensed his impetuous nature, his fierce, forceful resolve.

The uncompromising statement also brought Kurani up short. "Impossible, your Royal Highness."

"I'll listen to no argument, Prime Minister. I meant what I said."

Visibly upset, Kurani took a grip on himself. "The terrible happening in Eden drives your noble urge, Highness. Your motive is easily understood. Yet I beg you to let common sense

prevail. I realize you have only the best of intentions, but to brashly place yourself in harm's way would be —"

"Prime Minister," interrupted the youth, "I'll listen to no further objections, not from you or anyone."

"What you hope to do, Highness, is totally out of the question."

"I'm honor-bound to avenge my father," said Kewart defiantly. "I will *not* be talked out of my sacred duty."

Kurani shot a glance at Klavik. "Be reasonable, Highness. Neither the Lord Regent nor your grieving mother would think of condoning such a venture, nor for that matter will I, your chief of state. Forgive me for speaking bluntly, but in a short time you will ascend to the Throne. Your place is here with your people."

Tall for his age, the muscular youngster proudly drew himself to full stature. "Prime Minister, let me remind you that it is not *your* place to explain *my* place to me. I invoke the ancient privilege. If need be, I'll do it formally, in an oath sworn before the Lord First Advocate."

Kurani's leonine head rocked in frustration. Chagrined at being forced to oppose the will of his future sovereign, he pulled in his horns, moderated his tone of voice. "I beg you to reconsider, Highness. For all we know the vermin responsible for perpetrating the infamy may still be in Eden."

"Oh, I hope so," said Kewart with feeling. "It will make them easier to track down, and exterminate."

While he admired the prince's spirit, if not his stated ambition, Klavik's enhanced sense of esthesis red-flagged a warning that Kurani's blood pressure was soaring.

On the verge of saying something he might later regret, Kurani drew a deep breath and willed himself to calmness. "What you propose, Highness, could place Kraan's entire future in jeopardy. Stated in the simplest terms, it would be improper for you to contemplate —"

"That will do!" Mildly incensed in his own right, Kewart announced in ringing tones, "The rite of vengeance is mine!" He realized how self-dramatizing the declaration sounded, and backed off a hair. "I'm honor-bound to repay the debt owed my father, and our people." Wagging a forefinger for emphasis, he added, "I'll listen to no more words of wisdom from you, the Lord Regent, my mother, or anyone else."

"But Highness, it's sheer madness to —"

"Is it? What would *he* do if happenings had been the other way round?" Kewart gestured at the library's far wall, where a larger-than-life oil portrait of His Omnipotence enthroned graced the lustrous paneling above an arched marble fireplace.

"His Omnipotence," replied Kurani gruffly, "would have listened to reason."

"Not for one second," denied the prince, his manner contemptuous. "He would have done exactly what I mean to do, *must* do."

"But Highness, you —"

"Enough! You've heard my last word on it, so make your travel plans accordingly." With that, Kewart ab Kraan directed a meaningful glance at Klavik, turned on his heel and took his leave.

Although chronologically juvenile, Kewart, the primogenitive inheritor of a centuries-old monarchy and its traditions, was the scion of Kraan's Royal House; in not many standard months, he would be crowned His Omnipotence XXV, Kewart ab Kraan, Esemplastos, and therefore impervious to rhetoric, especially if perceived as anything discouraging.

Alone with Klavik in the library, the PM swore a blistering oath and banged the coffee table, rattling glassware. "Obstinate! That one's his father's son to the marrow, nor has the fruit fallen far from the tree. He refuses to be budged, something we may have to accept. Complicates matters rather awfully, doesn't it?"

Klavik did not attempt to conceal his consternation. Confident that his investigative skills, amplified by the cultivated "sixth sense" with which he'd been endowed would eventually garner results, he had eagerly anticipated a lone investigative sojourn in Eden. By no means reconciled to Kurani's implacable decision, the prince's declaration of intent had left him in a state of shock melded with a foreboding verging on abject despair. Kurani had grossly understated the youth's unshakable desire to accompany them as 'a complication.' *As if*, he thought bitterly, *being saddled with the volatile former grand marshal was not enough, he would also be forced to keep watch over the strong willed, semi-spoiled heir apparent*, and wondered exactly what he could hope to accomplish when most of his energy would be devoted to making certain both prospective charges were safe.

Taking pains to conceal his true feelings, he swallowed the critical remark forming in his mind of its own volition, and met the PM's penetrating appraisal squarely. "Prime Minister, we shall go together as a team," he said with feigned confidence, "and we shall learn what there is to learn — *must* be learned — and then do what is necessary."

"Hear, hear!" The PM seized Klavik's hand and pumped it with reborn enthusiasm.

* * *

Three periods later, after the tears of his widowed mother had dried over the public clamor protesting the departure of Kewart ab Kraan, Princeps, the youth stood beside Kurani on the conning bridge of the former grand marshal's quondam flagship, *Kolodaan*.

Behind them, Klavik felt a gut-wrenching twinge, coupled with mild dizziness and a brief surge of nausea, as the vessel went irrational, its thousands of metric tonnes instantaneously transposed into the non-relativistic continuum. Harboring decidedly mixed emotions, he watched the lambent disc emulating Kraan's primary dwindle within the astrogation tank, fade further in brilliance and lose itself in a clotting sea of stars. He and his unwelcome charges had left behind a world seething with anxiety, its populace impatiently awaiting the answers to a pair of burning questions: Who had perpetrated the loathsome crime, and of almost equal importance, why.

It was the second question that had lodged itself uppermost in Klavik's thoughts. How had the sovereign's violent demise advantaged anyone in the homeworld, or for that matter anyone elsewhere? Kraan had been at peace with neighboring cultures for a number of standard cycles, too preoccupied with its own internal strife to consider indulging in interstellar squabbling, had the threat of such arisen. Yet he was certain the guilty party, or parties, whoever they might be, wherever they might have gone to ground, would eventually be ferreted out, dragged into the light and subjected to Kraan's harsh, exemplary brand of justice. That lure was the basis for transporting he and his distinguished, unwanted companions across the thousand-

parsec gulf separating the massive world of Kraan from a synthetically beautiful, quietly floating mote known as Eden.

FOUR

At first glance, Emil Shatterhand gave an impression of being a descendant of Old Earth's least mutated bloodline, but such was not the case. Seated in the mobile prison of a geriatric chair, his aristocratic masculine features and dark, almond-shaped eyes suggested remote Asian ancestry, a second impression quickly dispelled by an unusually high forehead, a crown of helmet-like, wavy platinum hair. For most of a standard decade, atrophy in both legs had relegated him to the throne-like, polychromatic chair floating millimeters above the floor of his penthouse office suite, its null-grav field depressing the lush carpet in a rectangle that shifted with the appliance when he moved about.

Engaged in a rather one-sided conversation, Eden's planetary director listened with half an ear to the vociferous complaint of a caller whose agitated image glowed in the vidicom display. When the renowned holovision auteur's diatribe began to run down, Shatterhand started framing a response intended to mollify the other. But an amber light began flashing insistently on the geriatric chair's padded armrest. He ignored the blinking nuisance until it turned from amber to red, and nagged him more urgently.

The director cut glance at the offensive nuisance, and broke into the holovision director's waning recital of grievances. "Mr. Chatham," he said in *Lingua Stella*, "excuse me for a moment. Something here demands my attention."

"What . . . ?" Disconcerted by the interruption, the other said, "Yeah, okay. But make it march, Shatterhand. My whole crew's standing by on the beach, waiting for me to get off the horn."

Shatterhand promised to be brief. Putting the director on hold, he opened the audio-only intercom circuit. "Were my instructions unclear? I asked you to hold all calls."

"Mr. Buford's here, sir." The receptionist, a chic android unit drawn from the Village labor pool, had the makings of an efficient buffer, but slipped up on occasion. "He says it's terribly urgent."

"What is it, Buford?"

"I must see you," responded a nasal tenor. "Please, Emil."

Minute crow's feet gathered at the corners of Shatterhand's eyes. "You were slated to meet the party from Kraan this afternoon."

"I, yes . . . That is, I did, uh . . . meet them." Buford sounded badly shaken. "They're in the VIP Lounge."

"You abandoned our guests?"

"Uh, not abandoned . . . Emil; I *have* to see you."

"Come in. It had better be important."

"It is!"

The portal dilated. In late middle age, Eden's nattily attired operations manager would have looked suave had he been less agitated. Bustling in from the loggia, he stood on one foot, then the other, waiting for his presence to be acknowledged.

Shatterhand had reopened the vidicom channel. "Apologies, Mr. Chatham. I'm very much aware of our mutual problem, how seriously it has impacted your filming schedule. For the time being, I'm afraid the unfortunate blemish must remain as it is. An unavoidable inconvenience, I know. The crater will be eradicated the instant doing so is possible."

"Inconvenience! Shatterhand, you've been singing the same damn 'ASAP' tune for *how* many standard weeks?"

"Speaking as one director to another, Mr. Chatham, this time you have my solemn pledge."

"Pledge, uh-huh," the other declared testily. "Have you any idea how much that gawdawful hole in the roadway is costing me in calendar time and stellars?"

"Allow me to once again beg your indulgence, Mr. Chatam. I had no intention of denigrating the seriousness of our mutual problem."

A groan. "Okay, okay! But as you say," warned Chatham, "this time I'm going to hold you to your 'pledge.' ASAP, or sooner, whichever comes first. I need that damn roadway *intact*, need it desperately."

"It will be taken care of shortly, Mr. Chatham. I promise to get back to you the instant repairs are underway."

"Thanks for nothing! Try and keep your promise. Do try!"

Eden's director switched off and looked expectantly. "Well, Buford . . .?"

"A Kraan heavy weapons cruiser," blurted the operations manager, "is in a parking orbit."

"A warship?" Shatterhand blinked, outwardly nonplused. "No stunning surprise," he said thoughtfully "Not when you consider what has taken place, why our friends from Kraan are here. How many in the party?"

"Th-three," faltered Buford. "That's what stunned me, why I left them and rushed over here." Despite the climate-controlled chamber, Buford tugged out a monogrammed kerchief, daubed at the perspiration on his brow, under his chin. "Two men and a boy came down. You won't believe me when I tell you who they are."

"How can I," said Shatterhand with no hint of malice, "if you never get around to telling me?"

"Royalty!" There was high drama in Buford's declaration. "The heir apparent of those stiff-necked barbarians has come in person, along with no less a personage than their chief of state, and a huge, brutish lout who hovers near them like a watchdog. Y-you don't suppose they're thinking of revenge?"

"From what the database has to say about Kraan, I'd be amazed if they were thinking of much else."

"But," objected Buford, "vengeance could mean, uh . . ."

"Ah, yes; but against whom would their vengeful attitude be directed?"

"Add m-matters up for yourself," faltered Buford. "Kraan has a nasty reputation, a planet of hotheads, perhaps the most bellicose neohuman strain in the visited galaxy who cling to an

archaic monarchy. What if they should decide it was *we* who . . . ?” Eden’s second-ranking executive broke off in distress.

“Nonsense.” Shatterhand’s eyelids drooped pensively.

“No, Emil; I don’t believe that. Didn’t you hear what I —?”

“Certainly I heard. Stop blathering and let me think.”

Seemingly of its own volition, the geriatric chair pivoted, glided silently across the lush carpeting, and halted on the far side of the high-ceilinged chamber in front of a tinted floor-to-ceiling glass wall. Fist to chin, Shatterhand contemplated distant green hillsides where shaggy cattle grazed in limpid afternoon sunlight. Beyond the rolling pasturelands, under a sky of glaring nude pearl, the tranquil Southern Sea sheened to a foreshortened horizon.

After a moment, the geriatric chair rotated a half-circle. “Send in a trance technician, and a disc of conversational Kraant.”

“Kraant . . . ? I don’t . . .”

“It’s a dullard you don’t want to be. Their language, Buford. Where are your wits?”

“But, Kraant . . . Emil, I’m not sure we have —”

“The linguistic database,” reminded his superior, “stores every neohuman-derived tongue spoken within a two-thousand-parsec spherical radius. I also want you to run an errand. Go find Ramyn. Go yourself; don’t send an android. I want her here within the hour.”

“I, uh . . . Ramyn? Yes. Afterward, shall I . . . ? Do you want me to entertain our guests until you can —?”

“No, no. Stay away from the VIP Lounge, and keep everyone else away until I get over there.”

Buford relaxed a trifle. “Why the sudden change of heart? I thought you and Ramyn had called it quits.”

Shatterhand did not respond.

“Any notion,” inquired Buford, “where she might be?”

A wry twist curled the director’s under lip. “The nearest casino might be a logical place to begin your quest. Don’t take no for an answer, Buford. I want her here as quickly as possible.”

“I’ll try and locate her, but, uh . . .”

“No buts! ‘Trying’ will not suffice. Go fetch her. Call around first, make certain of her whereabouts, and take my private verticraft. Now go!”

His affirmative nod at odds with his obvious reluctance to undertake the ‘errand,’ Buford left the tower office.

When the portal slid closed, Shatterhand guided the geriatric chair to the suite’s inner wall. Confronting a pointillistic oil portrait of his much younger self, he depressed a switch concealed under the geriatric chair’s armrest. The painting slid aside, exposing a flush-mounted wall safe. He punched an alphanumeric cipher code; the safe’s maraging steel door swung wide and he stretched to depress a stud concealed in the frame. A faint pop signaled the opening of an audio circuit.

“They have arrived,” he said without preamble.

“This poor creature is gratified.” The neutral, uninflected response, totally devoid of resonance, had the sound of a flat computer voice. “The endgame’s initial moves often invite

error on the part of both contestants. The opening gambit we discussed will be exercised. Has all been arranged?"

"The stage is set," replied Shatterhand, "with one minor difference."

"Might this poor creature learn how 'minor'?"

"For what I believe is an excellent reasons, I selected a different female to insert in their midst."

"You acted thusly, knowing how adversely we view impromptu change?"

"Since we spoke last," explained Shatterhand, "two unforeseen factors have been introduced into the equation." He mentioned the unheralded arrival of Kraan's first-line military starship, the heir apparent and chief of state.

Heartbeats of silence greeted the declaration. "An interesting development withal." A second silent interlude ensued. "Integrating an unanticipated turn of events," pursued the dead voice, "requires a measure of serious thought."

"Shall I use the woman I have in mind, or . . .?"

"Woman? An authentic neohuman female, not an artfully crafted synthetic?"

"Neohuman. I mean to have her pose as an android unit."

The reply gave rise to a third period of thoughtful silence. "Wheels within wheels, Shatterhand? An authentic female posing as an android unit? This poor creature distinguishes a potential advantage in that intriguing concept. It may well expedite progress. Proceed, and keep this poor creature fully informed. We abhor the prospect of an indefinite stay in this frigid, unwholesome dungeon."

"As you wish." Shatterhand killed the audio circuit. He locked the safe, commanded the portrait to slide back in place, and closed his eyes tightly. His throbbing temples told him his mind had been probed much more deeply than his choice of words. A faint shudder ran through him.

* * *

"The garden's pretty," remarked Prince Kewart, breaking a lengthy silence.

"Indeed, High . . ." Klavik caught himself just in time. Titles and honorifics were to be dispensed with to retain the anonymity of his charges. His sense of enhanced esthesis warned him of the acid retort Kewart's casual observation would provoke from Kurani.

The garrulous PM had taken to prowling back and forth across the VIP Lounge's tessellated paving. He did not disappoint Klavik. "Huh!" came his basso grunt. He halted, letting his jaundiced gaze rove past a bank of delft-blue flowers, sculpted hedges, the rolled and manicured lawn. "Pretty as an android doxy sweet-talking a customer. The brothel keepers who run this pest hole made it *look* like paradise." His tiger-pacing resumed.

Kewart sniffed wordlessly, pouted in silence.

When it became apparent that the prince would not bother with a rejoinder, Klavik breathed easier. In every visible aspect an improvement on nature, Eden was thus far as perfect in both broad strokes and detail as monied ingenuity could make it. Despite the resort world's notoriety, its clientele, while doubtless much less than perfect, was self-limiting, with patronage automatically restricted to the *crème de la crème* of the wealthiest, most prestigious neohumans in the galaxy's relatively near reaches. Consumed as they were by the urgency of the

investigation to come, he and his illustrious charges had not come to revel in Eden's varied diversions, delights and raptures.

For whatever reason, they had been forced to endure one another's presence in the VIP Reception Lounge longer than seemed reasonable, exhibiting the deference of relative strangers thrown together by circumstance. A protracted wait in the lounge's subdued splendor made Klavik feel distinctly out of place. Seated on a stone bench near Kewart, he listened to the PM's metronomic footfalls and made a silent wager with himself, wondering how long it would take for impatience to topple what remained of the aging warrior's self-restraint.

Never one to cool his heels in an antechamber, Kurani's flowing burnt-orange robe did little to soften his erect carriage, the belligerent thrust of his jaw. His seamed visage a paradigm of indignation, he stalked to and fro between the glass wall framing a garden too perfect to be real, and a classic fountain jetting crystalline water to tinkle into a tiled, egg-shaped pool. "By the revered First Principle!" he said. "I thought you'd settled the arrangements, Klavik. What's keeping their high mucky-muck director?"

Realizing any response would sound defensive, he avoided heaping fuel on the PM's mounting fires of indignation. "I imagine it's a matter of protocol, sir. They had no inkling who we . . . No advance notice of our status."

"Protocol . . ? How did the infernal question of protocol arise? This chrome-plated fluff ball has nothing one could call a *government*."

"In a larger sense, the Parvon Syndicate is Eden's governing body, Director Shatterhand its surrogate. He may be upset about our starcruiser on-orbit, and even more so by the unexpected arrival of . . . important guests."

"Damned well 'upset' he'll be if he doesn't show himself soon." Kurani stumped away muttering, "Degenerate band of whoremongers, murderers."

"Klavik, what's that funny inscription?" Kewart pointed to curving lines of golden, stylized script decorating the high marble wall over the lounge's arched entry.

"While researching Eden, my staff ran across the motto. It's a transliteration from Persian, a semi-forgotten language of Old Earth."

"From what . . ?"

"A culture known in antiquity as Persia."

"Can you read it?"

"No, but if rote memory serves me, it says, 'Toil not to find a better Paradise, if indeed other Paradise there be'."

"Better paradise . . ? Kurani used that same word. What's a paradise?"

Klavik glanced apprehensively at the PM. During a conversation in transit, he had explained the saying; Kurani had lost no time putting a derogatory spin on it. Knowing further explanation might tweak the PM's irascible nature, Klavik said, "A mythical place of beauty in the afterlife. Certain ancient cultures subscribed to an idyllic Paradise where after death one might enjoy an eternity of hedonistic delights." He was relieved when the prince seemed to lose interest.

"Fancy-worded gibberish." Kurani's indictment underscored his contempt. "This 'Paradise' was devised by money-grubbing exotics, their sole aim to rake in gross quantities of stellars. Why in the name of the Holy First Principle would a gaggle of alien exotics hang a name

like Eden on their plush bagnio? Surely not to honor a mythical garden spot from some tidbit of Old Earth lore.”

Klavik framed his response with care. “Our research team learned that when Eden was conceived the Parvons procured advice and counsel from numerous neohuman consultants. I imagine it was they who . . .”

The portal dilated, and Klavik rolled lithely to his feet, prepared to address whoever entered politely, or defend his charges with his life. Fingering the haft of a throwing knife through a slit in his loose-fitting gray tunic, his other hand slipped to the butt of a custom-designed hand laser nested in an underarm holster. The knife slid back into its sheath at sight of gleaming geriatric chair all but filling the arched entry, its fastidiously groomed occupant favoring the visitors with a thin smile of welcome.

“Good evening,” said the director, his smooth baritone conveying minimal warmth. “I am Planetary Director Emil Shatterhand. I wish to beg forgiveness for your tiresome wait.”

FIVE

His psychic antennae fully extended, probing, Klavik noted the executive’s fluent if rather flat Kraant. He bowed low. “A pleasure, sir. May I present His Royal Highness, Kewart ab Kraan, Princeps, future Protector of the Holy First Principle, heir to the Throne of our late sovereign, His Omnipotence XXIV, Esemplastos.”

“Your Royal Highness.” Shatterhand bent forward in the geriatric appliance, the best he could manage in the way of a bow. “Your visit honors us beyond words.” Upon being introduced to Prime Minister Kurani, the director’s manner struck Klavik as deferential, but not at all subservient, the demeanor of someone accustomed to dealing with VIPs of all stripes.

Brusque due to their long, unexplained wait, Kurani said, “Our journey wearied us, Shatterhand. Might we be shown directly to our suites? Klavik, here, will take care of the arrangements.”

“‘Arrangements’ are unnecessary, Mr. Prime Minister. In light of the recent tragedy, my colleagues and I wish to extend every courtesy and privilege Eden has to offer. I realize a terrible tragedy brought you here. Nevertheless, I beg you to think of yourselves as cherished guests. Enjoy Eden’s hospitality as long as you wish. Go wherever your business takes you, do whatever you feel necessary. You have only to ask, and every available aid and assistance will be placed at your disposal.”

“I want to see the place where my father died,” said Prince Kewart.

Alert to each perceived emotional nuance, Klavik wondered how Shatterhand would field the loaded request. He was surprised to find that during the following brief, uncomfortable silence, the director remained emotionally unruffled, serene.

“Your Royal Highness,” the director said agreeably, “your every wish will be fulfilled. Eden’s security staff has looked into the horrible affair in depth, and their findings will be made available at your convenience. We were notified that investigators from Kraan were in transit, but the hyperspace transmittal neglected to mention your lofty status, Mr. Prime Minister, nor any hint that His Highness would be accompanying you. My operations manager and I were

distressed over our inability to prepare an adequate welcome, and find suitable facilities for your comfort.”

A deft sidestep, thought Klavik, pulsing the executive’s emotional tenor. His respect for Shatterhand’s self-containment grew by an order of magnitude.

“Yes, yes,” rattled Kurani. Short-circuiting the prince’s retort, he directed a meaningful look at Klavik, who took his cue in stride. Knowing how imperative it would be for the prince and prime minister to remain incognito, he asked how many others in Eden knew of their actual personas.

“Only myself,” said Shatterhand, “and Buford, the gentleman who escorted you here from the space terminal. As operations manager, he had the presence of mind to inform me personally, and told absolutely no one else.”

His sense of esthesis outstretched, Klavik detected neither overtones of anxiety in the utterance, nor any trace of dissimulation.

Kurani nodded. “We intend to conduct our business strictly under the rose, Shatterhand. Swear this fellow Buford to secrecy, if you will. You might also advise your orbital traffic controllers to keep mum about the *Kolodaan*.”

“Both matters have already been taken care of, Mr. Prime Minister.” Shatterhand paused, looking thoughtful. “I do have one suggestion,” he said. “It might be expedient to inform a third individual.”

“Negative,” declared Kurani. “We dare not accept the risk. The party or parties responsible for the murder of our sovereign may still be here, readying another act of infamy.”

“On that score, Mr. Prime Minister,” Shatterhand said smoothly, “let me reassure you twice over. No risk whatever will obtain by informing the female unit I have in mind.”

“Female unit . . . ?”

“Female indeed, but not a woman strictly speaking. Ramyn, a custom-programmed android unit, has served as personal escort and guide for many prestigious guests. Your other personal servants need know nothing of your actual status, but the unit I’ve penciled in is exceptionally intelligent, resourceful and accomplished in the social graces. I’m certain you will find her a rewarding addition to your entourage. She will make your stay not only much safer, but less conspicuous.”

“A guide . . . ?” Kurani frowned.

To further clarify her status, Shatterhand described the “unit” as an android specifically programmed to undertake confidential assignments, guaranteed that her refined programming made it impossible to violate a confidence. “I hope you’ll forgive my presumption,” he concluded. “I have her standing by in the atrium.”

Kurani mulled the proposal. “We’ll want no servants traipsing about underfoot. As for an escort . . . What do you think, Klavik?”

Strain as he might, Klavik had not detect the slightest vestige of an emotional tremor in either Shatterhand’s speech or body language, nothing out of the ordinary. Hoping to learn where the executive’s suggestion might lead, he said, “We’re here on unfamiliar ground, sir. I think a confidential escort might be permissible under the circumstances.”

“Umm-m-m-m, yes.” Kurani rocked on his heels, revolving the potential ramifications of allowing a stranger — a “programmed android unit” to use Shatterhand’s term — into their midst. He did not consult the prince, an omission the director chalked up for future reference.

“Very well,” Kurani said at last, making up his mind. “Fetch in your, uh, ‘unit’.”

Shatterhand hesitated. “On this, your first visit, I should tell you that in order to avoid embarrassment all androids wear a distinguishing symbol, a small dot like a beauty mark, on the left cheekbone. Most will be self-evident; they are all superb specimens. If there any doubt exists, look for the stigmata.”

When it became apparent that no comment would be forthcoming Shatterhand depressed a switch on the geriatric chair’s armrest.

The portal dilated. Framed in the entry was the most exquisite feminine creature Klavik had ever seen.

* * *

With a torrent of raven hair spilling about her bare shoulders, her vivid hazel eyes lit with intelligence, the android glided into the VIP Lounge. Carrying herself erectly, like a ballerina, straight-backed and feather light on her feet in Eden’s gentle gravity, she performed a sensuous bow, her filmy white robe at once concealing and revealing a lissome figure. She stood waiting, eyes demurely downcast.

Klavik evaluated the “beauty mark” — a tiny, five-pointed star beneath her left eye.

“I, er . . .” Taken aback by the dazzling apparition, Kurani cast a nervous glance at the open-mouthed prince. “S’pose she’ll do . . . nicely, Shatterhand.”

The director issued terse instructions, not hesitating to reveal the identities of the personages Ramyn would escort, a disclosure that left the “unit” nonplused. He concluded by instructing her to conduct the guests to their suites.

Klavik caught the PM’s eye. “Sir, it might be prudent for me to inspect our quarters before taking up residence.”

“Are they close by?” asked Kurani.

“A few steps across the plaza,” said Shatterhand. “I’m afraid both presidential suites here in the Village were reserved. I took the liberty of selecting the entire upper floor of Petite Palais, a charming hostelry, if not as luxuriously appointed as either reserved suite. Should the apartments fail to meet with your satisfaction, other arrangements can be made.”

“I’m sure they’ll do.” Kurani shot an uneasy glance at the lovely android “unit,” and changed his mind. “Best, I think, for you to look things over beforehand, Klavik.”

“As you wish, sir.

“Ramyn,” said Shatterhand, “will be happy to show you the apartments, Mr. Klavik.”

In a muttered aside, the PM said, “Don’t dawdle.”

“I’ll return shortly, sir.” Klavik bowed to Prince Kewart. “By your leave, Highness.” He followed the striking android “unit” into the azure twilight reigning outdoors.

* * *

Greeted by Operations Manager Buford when *Kolodaan*’s pinnacle grounded at the southern hemisphere space terminal, he and his charges had transited to the Village via an underground pneumatic tube system. Klavik therefore had no idea what to expect upon emerging into the glow of sunset. The plaza keynoted quaint perfection; flowering shrubs perfumed the

still evening air, birdsong twittered in an artfully landscaped brake of droop-limbed trees thick with unfamiliar leaves.

Without prompting, Ramyn pointed out the director's administrative tower rearing like an admonitory finger above low-lying structures surrounding the plaza. Strolling beside her along a tiled walkway, the Village unfolded before as a collection of wide-spaced, half-timbered cottages interspersed with moderately larger structures, the planners' impression of a picturesque, bygone era in Old Earth. In twilight, spherical lamps cantilevered from swooping bronze pylons cast friendlier illumination spectrum than Kraan's harsh glow panels, lighting the walkway's glazed-tile paving in pools of warm, yellowish radiance. No buildings other than the administrative tower were loftier than three stories, each a unique work of art reflecting subdued elegance. He questioned Ramyn about the architecture. She described the Village as scaled for neohuman occupancy rather than ostentation.

To Klavik, the diminutive perfection his surroundings was overpowering, almost cloying. Few pedestrians were about, mostly androids with classic, unmutated neohuman features marred by stigmata, arousing his curiosity. Unknown in Kraan, he had never seen one until now, and thought of them as synthetically engineered neohuman caricatures. Scanning the Village, he paid scant heed to Ramyn's on-going recital of attractions and diversions the Village had to offer. Adopting a light, bantering tone, he asked if everyone in Eden enjoyed a leisurely walkabout.

"A gravity-vacuum tube system serves the entire planet," she said, her lightly accented Kraant delivered in a honeyed contralto. "Carriages and trams are used locally, which may strike you as primitive, sir. But Petite Palais is there, beyond the flower boutique, and I . . . Oh, please forgive me; I should have asked your preference."

"Not at all. I'd much rather stroll," he assured her. "By the way, you use our language quite well, Ramyn. I find that surprising."

"Thank you, sir. I underwent indoctrination in conversational Kraant, and a two-fold overview of contemporary Kraan culture. My duties require that I remain unobtrusive, yet available. I hope my services will please you and the other guests."

Wry amusement drove Klavik to say, "I'm sure your services will be greatly appreciated, Ramyn. As for remaining unobtrusive . . ."

Her gaze level, she looked up at the much taller man. "If I am being too forward, sir, you have only to command me, and I shall adopt a more subservient role."

"No, what I meant is that you're far too attractive to remain unobtrusive."

"How kind of you," she said unselfconsciously. "My services call for proficiency in small talk and the social amenities. My personality and appearance have been optimized to complement those functions."

"A superb job of optimization," Klavik said drily.

Provocative dimples enhanced her smile. "You flatter me, sir. I'll be delighted to perform with you in any manner you choose, but you would be angry with me afterward for wasting your precious libido on a rank amateur. Our courtesans have sensual skills I lack entirely."

Walking beside the android "unit," Klavik probed for emotional ripples generated by the response, sensing only minor burbles. "And pleasure boys as well?" he asked.

"Naturally," she was quick to say. "Ingenious mechanical devices also, virtual-reality trance fantasies, holovision dramas, animals, anything and everything a guest might desire."

Request whatever your nature inspires, sir. Inhibition is a meaningless term here. Pleasing guests is our sole reason for being.”

“Fascinating.” Klavik suppressed a burr of irritation.

Using an electromagnetic key, Ramyn ushered him into the foyer of Petite Palais paneled in swirling, lustrous wood. A private lift whisked them up to penthouse level.

Klavik followed the chatting android through the interconnected suites, making a conscious effort not to let her chatter or the sumptuous yet subdued décor distract him from the security inspection. The high-ceilinged chambers offered variegated, subtly coordinated color schemes, were softly lighted, and furnished in Old Earth period pieces boasting one-of-a-kind artisanship. Nothing he saw was grand or grandiose; the net effect was one of restful elegance.

His primary interest was in the access-egress points of the adjoining suites, and their respective ease of defense. The electronically guarded foyer and private lift met with his approval, but each riparian chamber and bed-sitting room featured a sliding, floor-to-ceiling glass wall opening on a landscaped terrace. He touched a switch beside the drawn-back draperies. The glass wall retracted out of sight. He stepped out into the balmy dusk, with Ramyn at his heels.

“What’s above these chambers?”

“A sundeck, sir, and an intimate garden.”

The faint scent of jasmine perfumed the still air. Klavik stood with his hands on the balustrade, looking across the lamp lit plaza. Concentrating his inner energies, he groped mentally, attempting to attune with Ramyn. Psionic researchers at the institute — pragmatists every one — had refused to dub his partially inherent, enhanced talent ‘extrasensory.’ Elevated esthesis, or conditioned empathic perception, had been the commonly used catch phrases. He had learned through experience that rapport with strangers was often difficult to establish, perhaps especially so in the present instance. Having no prior experience to fall back on, yet determined to learn whether Ramyn’s pre-programmed composure could be ruffled, he inquired in an offhand manner how it felt to be android.

“How it . . . feels? Forgive me, I’m not sure I understand your question, sir. I am myself. I have no other referents.”

Clever non-answer, he thought, evaluating the jittery spike of apprehension his query had generated. He decided to press on. “Do you resent your station in any way, Ramyn?”

“I’m afraid your meaning once again eludes me, sir.” Her perplexity seemed genuine.

“I had assumed,” he said, “being ordered about by anyone and everyone, ‘programmed’ to serve the habitués of this place, might make you think of yourself as merely another item of furnishing.”

Her gaze cool, Ramyn said, “Not at all, sir. We’re subject to the same ups, downs and whims as neohumans. Conditioning and electrochemical programming help sublimate whatever emotional cycles tend to interfere with our functions.”

“I see.” He sensed a minimum of sincerity in the response, although the thought stream behind her words continued to ripple smoothly, and warmed to the contest.

“Actually,” she added, “life here is interesting, sir. Eden is so beautiful, so uncrowded compared to the commercial worlds I’ve seen pictured. We’re allowed to recreate ourselves as we please if our activities do not interfere with those of guests.”

Triggered by the amplified response, a red flag shot up. “Ever been in love, Ramyn?” he asked casually.

“Love . . . ? You mean with another . . . android?”

“Why, yes; I suppose that’s what I meant. An affair of the heart with a neohuman might be unseemly. Isn’t that so?”

“My programming doesn’t allow —”

“Forget your programming,” he said unkindly. “I imagine it wears off at times, diminishes. What then? On a holiday spree for instance?”

“I have never. . .” she said in a small voice. “My programming has never, as you say, ‘worn off.’”

“That aside,” he objected, “I would like to know if you’ve ever been in love.”

“I’m not sure what the term means, sir.”

There! That barb had evoked a brief emotional spike of considerable amplitude. He bore down, disliking himself for the necessity. “Come, Ramyn; unbend a little if you will. Your central nervous system must be identical to that of an authentic neohuman.”

Her aplomb had returned quickly — too quickly.

“Yes, of course,” she said. My makeup is physically the same, sir. Courtesans are programmed to display genuine affection for each guest to whom they are assigned, while in my work —”

“*Programmed* to fall in love?” Klavik tried to sound incredulous.

“I suppose it could be described . . . that way. My duties call for no input of that type, so I have no basis for —”

“How artificial you must feel,” he interrupted, “going through endless pre-programmed motions, performing repetitive duties time after time whether you wish to or not. For whatever reason, the notion of taking someone as desirable as you, someone not ‘programmed’ for love, is appealing, an exciting novelty.”

Shifted her weight uneasily beside him, she stared across the plaza as if she had not heard. “Courtesans,” she said, a small break in her voice, “can be programmed to behave as innocent virgins, sir. Our guests enjoy the wildest fantasies without fear of —”

“Ah, pointless sexual exercise,” he said. “It lacks any appeal whatever.” Jolted by a shock wave of anxiety that struck him like a physical blow, he eased behind Ramyn, slid his fingers across the satin warmth of her shoulder, inhaled the fragrance of her coiffure.

She stood perfectly still, frozen in place, the tenor of her emotions rising to match her pulse rate. Klavik bent and touched his lips to the creamy perfection of her neck, turned her half-around and covertly inspected the star-shaped stigma marring her left cheekbone.

She stiffened slightly, but failed to resist when he cupped her left breast through the diaphanous fabric of her gown, lightly massaged the nipple with a forefinger.

When he was certain she could stand no more, he stepped back with a sigh. “If only there were time.”

Hazel eyes smoldering, Ramyn edged away discreetly.

“You may fetch my companions now,” he told her woodenly.

“At once, sir.” She whirled, vanished into the suite with quick steps.

In wry humor, Klavik analyzed the upshot of his rude behavior. Seen up close, the “beauty mark” was no tattoo, but a cosmetically appliquéd five-pointed star. Lovely Ramyn had endured his caresses with something that verged on stoicism, but in the end her emotional control had partially deserted her. He had sensed nothing in the way of an emotional surge from Shatterhand, but the residue of Ramyn’s outrage expanded into the corners of his mind. As for being feminine, of that there could be absolutely no doubt. Yet while wholly feminine from topknot to toenails, Shatterhand’s oh-so-attractive, “programmed android unit” had inadvertently given herself away.

She was a mature if at the moment indecently perturbed neohuman woman. He and his charges had been deceived, but for what reason? The answer to that question was definitely worthy of serious investigation.

SIX

“Damn you, Emil!”

Shatterhand studied his former mistress with calculating objectivity. “I had hoped your hysteria would run its course.”

“I’m highborn!” She pirouetted angrily before the director’s gleaming geriatric chair. “The thought of that clod’s hands on me . . . ough!”

His unblinking gaze less than reassuring, Shatterhand said, “My dear, of all the spoiled, lovely women who have ever pursued Eden’s diversions you are no doubt the most spoiled. And perhaps the loveliest as well,” he added in afterthought. “This peculiar onset of righteous delicacy is surprising. Surely you don’t consider the overly large barbarian altogether unattractive. As I recall, your taste always ran toward exaggerated physical types who —”

“Emil, you are a corrupt, black-hearted son of a bitch! You’re not a woman. You can’t begin to imagine how horrible something like that would be. Would you stand idly by and let someone beat me up?”

“Certainly not.”

“Well, rape is no different, just infinitely worse.”

The deep cleft between Shatterhand’s brows tightened. “Ramyn, please pay close heed to what I’m about to tell you. Planet Kraan happens to be the habitat of a barbaric, exceptionally aggressive neohuman strain. Unfortunately, the sophistication of their weaponry perfectly matches the ferocity, tenacity and élan of their military elite. This unheralded visit by Kraan’s prince royal and chief of state has stirred concern in the highest of high places. Should our guests become less than satisfied with our innocence, they might well be inclined to —”

“— let you throw me to that baseborn scut just to satisfy them,” finished Ramyn.

“Patience, patience,” drawled the director. “Hear me out, please. Every effort will be made to avoid sacrificing your precious flesh, but this fellow Klavik is —”

“— a horny savage,” she said hotly. “How did you ever persuade me to go along with this . . . charade?”

“I do wish you’d let me have my say. As a case in point, very little persuasion was necessary.”

“Oh, that,” she scoffed. “A trifling gambling debt.”

“Trifling . . . ?” Shatterhand blinked. “Your accumulated markers,” he said with sardonic inflection, “total over two hundred and fifty thousand stellars, a debt hardly classifiable as ‘trifling.’ Avoiding the amorous advances of the brutish gentleman shouldn’t be too difficult. In the morning, you’ll begin escorting our distinguished guests as a group. Stay close to the young heir apparent and prime minister; that should suffice to quell Klavik’s ardor.”

“Emil, really! That hairy old goat of a prime minister wouldn’t bat an eye if he were to tear off my gown and throw me at his feet then and there. The prince is cuddly in a sort of foxy way, but he’s still a baby.”

“You would be exceptionally wise,” Shatterhand hastened to say, “to keep Prince Charming at arm’s length. When you have a moment free, drop by the tower and assimilate the trance tape on Kraan customs you had no chance to assimilate. In the eyes of our visitors, bedding an adolescent would be considered execrably bad form. However, and I stress the pluperfect enormity of ‘however,’ dallying with the heir apparent to the benighted kingdom they cling to for barbaric reasons of their own would cost you your head, and might even cost the boy his prospective reign.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Never more so, my dear. Catering to otherness is Eden’s common denominator. It is not merely our rationale for existence, but our universal goal. Nor must you ever think of your android pose as a frivolous adventure. This fellow Klavik bears close watching; an aura of feral competence hangs about him like a mist. I judge him a superb guardian, and nothing more — a watchdog, to borrow Buford’s term. I’m sure he would react instantly and violently at the slightest hint of a threat to his distinguished companions.”

Finding the subject distasteful, Ramyn pursed her candied lips, gazed scornfully at the director.

“Be observant,” he advised Shatterhand. “Remember everything you see, everything you overhear. Our friends are bound to say and do things in your presence that would be unthinkable in the presence of a neohuman woman. And keep one singular fact uppermost in mind: the presence of young Kewart and Kraan’s chief of state adds a frightful degree of hazard to their venture. One wonders what they were thinking by allowing the heir to their silly throne to come here. It was an egregious error, a serious gaffe. One royal assassination in Eden is more than sufficient, thank you. We assuredly do not need another.”

Ramyn’s anger had waned, although she still looking troubled. “Overreacting a tad, aren’t you? They’re traveling incognito.”

“So was their late, lamented sovereign,” reminded Shatterhand. “Whoever learned the truth, then conceived and consummated the bloody deed, could be poised to strike again.”

Ramyn pondered the ominous statement. “Sorry, but I’m not cut out for this android playacting gig. Judging from what you just said, leading them around by the nose could get me injured, or worse.”

“A remote possibility,” admitted Shatterhand, “but still a possibility. The Syndicate has been briefed on your role. You no longer have a choice in the matter.”

The woman squared herself, glared at the man in the geriatric chair. “Oh, I have a choice, Emil. I won’t be threatened by you, the Syndicate, anyone.”

Displaying an absence of sympathy, he said firmly, “Best to accept things as they are, my dear. The threat I suggested is genuine. The game has grown too rich for either of us to feel defensive about our roles.”

“Game . . . ?” A grimace of frustration. “You won’t help me get out from under?”

The director’s brows lifted. “I’m unable to get out myself.”

Her hazel eyes alight with banked fires of resentment, Ramyn made no rejoinder. She whirled, swept toward the portal like one of the Furies.

“Spirit!” said Shatterhand. “You’re twice as lovely when incensed,” he called after her. “Won’t you reconsider, and stay?”

She paused, tossed her raven tresses and cut a burning, over-the-shoulder look of pure hatred at her former lover. “Once upon a time, Emil, you were still a whole man, and I might have reconsidered. Now you can ring for one of your android sluts. They *can’t* object.”

* * *

Klavik’s lifelong habit of sleeping in the buff did not desert him in Eden. He awoke with a mild headache — an extremely rare occurrence — in strange surroundings imbued with a subliminal awareness of being in an unknown form of danger. Had it been a nightmare? He seldom dreamed, and afterward seldom recalled the dream’s content.

Chalking up the disoriented, dreamlike feeling of being threatened to having awakened in a splendiferous bed-sitting chamber, he threw back the coverlet, slid bare feet to the carpet and massaged his gently throbbing temples. The sense of foreboding receded, but the headache lingered. Standing nakedly, he raised himself on tiptoes, lifted his arms and stretched. The diminuendo patter of rain outside on the terrace made him to tug aside the plush draperies.

The sullen sky was just beginning to brighten. Lamplight from the plaza reflected on wet paving, threw back glistening highlights from the dewy foliage. He studied the slanting rain for a moment, let the drapery fall and pulled a dark blue robe over his shoulders.

The headache persisted, and that bothered him. He tried to remember the unsettling dream, if a dream it had been. Only a residue of whatever had been disquieting remained, a fuzzy impression of an intruder, possibly someone trying to break into the bed-sitting chamber where he slept. He thought about it, revolving the notion, unable to account for a lingering sense of oppression.

Deciding what nagged him might be a subconscious concern for the safety of his charges, he went to check on the prince and PM, finding both fast asleep. After a brisk walk-through inspection of the other adjoining suites, he returned to his apartment and luxuriated for minutes in the autolave’s warm, foaming water, then made his toilet with an economy of movement and relaxed in the riparian chamber. Verbally activating the holotank concealed in a sideboard of lustrous, hand-rubbed natural wood, he surfed the directory, scanning a cross-indexed catalog of planet wide events and entertainments.

Eden’s deluxe amalgam of recreations, pleasures, artistic pursuits and a host of diversions not considered vices had been in most cases spirited away from Old Earth during the now-ancient Diaspora, and then diluted, enhanced or cross-pollinated by mutant and alien cultures until, metamorphosed by time itself, they had been augmented by a number of original concepts. Tucked belowground not far from the Village, one of several casinos tempted wagering enthusiasts with everything from museum-piece games of chance like baccarat and roulette to

involved mechanistic and electronic games, success at which demanded solid grounding in mathematics and physics. Seasonal snow sports dominated the northern hemisphere's lakes and mountains. In the south, sea and sun were the order of the day in a necklace of villages, spas and fishing resorts draped along the Southern Sea's gold coast, where monied guests enjoyed any and all forms of water sport.

Klavik watched a travelogue depicting playgrounds given over to other, sundry activities: submarine exploration in the lucid waters of underwater habitats; backpacking expeditions into one wilderness area or another; big game hunting in the Veldt, an equatorial island set aside as a wildlife preserve where, using antique firearms, guests could bag superb specimens cloned from animals native to dozens of far-flung worlds.

Except for "civilized" attractions like the casinos, villages and spas, the pleasure world had been kept bucolic in theme and infrastructure. He viewed vineyard-strewn slopes in pastoral wine country, forested uplands replete with ski resorts, high desert dude ranches, working agristations where guests vacationed in rural quietude. Adding a touch of whimsy, the narrator described a lonely, rugged peninsula as a hideaway where people who lived way out in the country could "get away from it all."

Exposed to one descriptive set-piece after another, he began to appreciate the magnitude of creative effort, the staggering feats of terraforming and exquisite attention to detail contributing to Eden's phenomenal success. Simpler pleasures lost to "progress" and "civilization" were to be found in Eden, while ultra-sophisticated pastimes common to a spectrum of contemporary neohuman cultures were not merely available, but plentiful, pleasurable activities to be enjoyed for the asking, except amplified, stage-managed and custom-tailored to individual preference.

If one had the awesome price.

Living mannequins began to appear in the holographic display tank. Pneumatic females in penultimate or ultimate stages of undress artfully posed in an atmosphere of boudoir sensuality. Athletes and outdoorsmen shared a hard-bitten look. Fox-faced boys and slim-muscled young men glowed with vital energy. The parade of vacuous, "beauty-marked" faces drew a frown from Klavik. With mounting distaste, he tired of the parade of gender-neutral androids fairly brimming with feminine and masculine voluptuousness. He ordered the holotank to switch itself off, and the tambour doors slid closed.

When he looked up, Kurani's robed figure all but filled the doorway. "Sampling the local livestock, were you, Klavik?"

* * *

"It provides an interesting overview of Eden, sir."

"Yes, I watched the dreary thing last night." The PM yawned expansively. "Artificial games, synthetic dangers, pre-programmed bedmates. To my mind, making love to unfeeling flesh is but a short step from masturbation. It occurred to me that the hedonistic hell pit is a playground for children of all ages, yet offers naught for adults. Serve up a dish of true jeopardy, or a real woman, and I daresay these jaspers would duck and run for cover."

"A likely conclusion, sir. On the other hand, learning everything there is to learn about Eden is essential."

"I'll not argue the point. And drop the 'sir' while we're here, eh?"

“Consider it done. Did you rest well?”

“Tolerably. Hydraulic beds are a mite squishy for my taste. You’d best go roust the youngster now. I could use a spot of breakfast, and we’ve work to do.”

Klavik tapped on the door to Kewart’s suite. He received no response, and tapped again more loudly. Mildly alarmed, he eased the door open. The sight of a dimpled pillow and thrown-back coverlet gave him a start.

“Out here, Klavik.” The glass wall stood open. On the terrace, Kewart was looking down at the drying plaza. The sky overhead was flawless cerulean, the sparkling air held a salty tang. Dissipating rain clouds formed a saffron and bronze curtain far at sea.

“Good morning, Kewart,” said Klavik with more familiarity than felt comfortable when addressing his future sovereign.

Sleepy-eyed, the youngster blinked and perked up. “Is Ramyn here?”

“She mentioned joining us after breakfast. Are you hungry?”

His attention elsewhere, Kewart said wistfully, “I’ve never seen anyone half as pretty. Ramyn is . . . She doesn’t look real.”

Klavik could not help but agree. “She’s exceptionally attractive.”

“I know she’s artificial, and all that,” said the prince. “Someone in personal combat school told me androids were . . . He said they were almost the same as real people.”

Klavik did not relish the turn of conversation. “Other than their origins, and the programming they undergo, androids and neohumans are physically identical. As cloned semi-slaves, however, androids have no legal rights.”

“Their . . . origins?” questioned the youth.

Searching for a graceful way to change the subject, Klavik fell short. He explained that androids had no family ties, no specific parents. “The compendium of neohuman interstellar law, Lex Galacticum, defines them as chattel in most cultures.”

“No parents? That’s weird. Where do they come from?”

“Your pardon; I said no specific parents. Genetic experts select desirable genome characteristics from banks of frozen, donor-supplied tissue. Your tutors must have taught you how the entire chromosome pattern is replicated in each neohuman cell. Biomedical experts clone unique androids — ‘design’ them in a sense — to suit their prospective duties. Conditioning and electro-chemical programming tailors their personalities in accordance with the cerebro-emotional patterns necessary to perform designated functions.”

“We have no androids in Kraan. Why not?”

“The issue was decided long ago. Our high judiciary ruled that keeping androids was not a form of semi-slavery, per se, but de facto slavery. The Holy First Principle doesn’t specifically prohibit slaveholding, but every Lord First Advocate since the Revelation has preached violent opposition to the practice, and every succeeding High Court has upheld that position.”

The prince folded his arms. “Any notion what happens to androids when they’re too old to, uh . . . ? You know what I mean.”

Klavik pondered. “I hadn’t considered the matter. Perhaps they’re relegated to menial duties, culinary and maintenance tasks, cleaning chores, domestic services, something similar.”

“That’s terrible!” was Kewart’s uncompromising indictment. “I’d hate to think of Ramyn programmed to do chores.”

“Better hustle and dress now,” suggested Klavik. “We don’t want to keep Kurani waiting.”

“Grumpy old buzzard! Always in a big hurry, he is.” Kewart wore a thoughtful expression as he preceded Klavik indoors.

SEVEN

“Quiet on the set!” The assistant director’s bullhorn command reverberated across the breeze-swept beach.

Two dozen artificially dark-skinned android extras lounged apart from Bel Monde Holovision troupe’s neohuman cast and crew. Costumed as aborigines, the “natives” clad only in loincloths clutched prop spears, waiting with programmed patience for the ensuing take. The shooting script called for them to rush forward en masse loosing a chorus of blood-curdling howls, and take captive the luckless shipwreck victims.

“Scene forty-seven, take six.” The clapboard snapped shut, the holder stepped aside, concluding a manual backup to the electronically recorded scene insisted upon by the director.

His head jammed against the eyepiece cups of the huge, three-axis-stabilized holovision blimp, the cameraman called, “Speed.”

“Action!” Director Victor Chatham, a living legend in the holovision industry, perched in a saddle at the tip of the null-grav crane’s elevated boom, studied the unfolding scene through tinted glare goggles.

Moderately hung-over superstar Miles Matson staggered from the souging surf with limp femme fatale Cheryl Brooks cradled in his muscular arms. Plastered wetly to the actor’s high forehead, his hairpiece was slightly askew, making the director decide another take might be necessary. With the near-nude heroine flaccid in his arms, Matson lurched and fell to his knees in the sand, staggered erect and made halting, slack-kneed progress up the shingle. More than amply demonstrating the fact that he was in the last stages of exhaustion, Matson lifted his expressive blue eyes to the sky in a silent prayer of thanksgiving for their deliverance from the sea. He held the pose as the six-headed holovision blimp, supported by a null-grav sled compressing the glistening white sands beneath it, panned in for a medium close-up.

“No dice, Chatty,” sang the cameraman, raising his head from the eyepieces. He cursed in a fluid monotone. “No matter what angle we try, the damned crater always sneaks into a corner of the frame.”

“Cut!” cried Chatham, uttering a blasphemous oath as the assistant director’s bullhorn roar echoed his order: “Cut, cut!”

Megastar Miles Matson, AKA Milton Kantrowitz, the never-to-be-spoken name awarded at birth, unceremoniously dumped Cheryl Brooks on her beauteous bottom. He sagged to the sand beside her, clutched his throbbing head and groaned.

“Mother humping SOB!” Cheryl Brooks, AKA Shirley Blake, happened to be the megastar’s current legal spouse.

“No help for it, Luv.” Matson grimaced. “Damn head’s killing me.”

“If your hangover’s not up to the job, I’ll be glad to help things along.”

“Very funny!”

Bare-chested in the warm subtropical sun, the director pushed the glare goggles up over his forehead. Scorning the controls of the null-grav crane, he jumped down to the sand, landing gently, knees flexed, in Eden’s moderate gravity. “No sweat, kiddies,” he told the company at large. “We’ll shoot it again till we get it right. You’re doing fine, just fine.”

One major attribute, Chatham knew, had been acquired during his apprenticeship as assistant director, when he’d learned to ape a senior director’s artful way to stroke the ruffled egos of temperamental actors and key members of a troupe’s technical crew. Once again filming on location in Eden, he often felt the practice had turned into more of an avocation than an attribute. The acclaimed holovision auteur crunched across the strand to the bulbous null-grav blimp floating millimeters above the sand.

“Chatty,” groused the cameraman, “we’re goosing ghosts to stick with this dumb take. ‘Shoot around it,’ you say. Yeah, sure. But there the damned thing is, spang in the middle of all the nice background stuff our second unit gang put on holodisc. There *isn’t* any angle that’ll pick up the surf, players and that hilltop chateau without catching a corner of that damn hole in the roadway.”

Chatham knew better than to argue with, or question, his knowledgeable colleague’s statement. “We might be able to process out the crater back at the studio,” he said, aware of the other’s objection before he heard it.

The cameraman’s head wagged negatively. “You know as well as me how dicey blending or fudging propagated holograms can be. Not even the supercomputer in Bel Monde will scrub out the rough edges. We can do it, but the patchwork’ll show. Guaranteed.”

Disgusted, Chatham snatched the glare-goggles from his forehead, twirled them around an indignant forefinger. He turned around full circle, not simply looking at the vivid, sunlit beach scene, but inhaling it, letting it to ingrain itself in his consciousness.

Gulls, sharp-beaked curlews and other seabirds wheeled in a cloudless sky, their cries lending much-needed atmosphere to the seascape. The shining, near-perfect white beach diminished in perspective along the cove’s gentle curve, and terminated in ravined chalk cliffs topped by the rambling pink chateau. The backdrop, he decided for the tenth time, was letter-perfect for the scenes to follow, when the shipwrecked hero and heroine would be rescued from a gaggle of hostile indigenes by a mysterious local potentate dwelling in the cliff top chateau.

Bel Monde Holovision Studios had contracted for exclusive use of the chateau in order to fill in with continuity, close-ups and a half-page of dialogue, the gaps in priorly filmed exteriors and interiors. In ancient times, reflected Chatham bitterly, movies had been simpler to revise and augment by what had been termed “CGI” — computer graphic input. His current dilemma would have been no more than a minor annoyance then, but modern, full-color, theater-scale holographic images had transformed filmmaking into something entirely different. Pondering silently, he weighed the quandary, sorted among limited means and methods of overcoming the obstacle in the roadway, trading-off each prospective move against prohibitive cost and schedule overruns he could never explain were the locale to be scrapped in its entirety.

He was still debating the issue when Timmy, his key grip, interrupted the gloomy reverie. “Chatty, I think we’ve got company. The cripple’s here to rap with you.”

Chatham turned toward the road.

A classic black landau drawn by matched chestnut mares had halted on the graveled seaside lane, a single occupant visible behind the android driver.

“Well, kiss my rosy red patootie!” The cameraman sounded less than enthusiastic. “It’s himself, the guy in charge of this squirrel cage.”

“So the Great Man puts in an appearance,” declared Chatham with biting sarcasm. “I’m going over there with fire in my eyes to settle this screwed up mess once and for all. Steve,” he called to the assistant director, “let ‘em take ten.”

The bullhorn lifted. “Treat yourselves to a breaky break, boys and girls. But don’t stray far.”

* * *

Eden’s chief executive greeted the director with exaggerated deference. “Good morning, Mr. Chatham.”

“Can’t say there’s much good about it, Shatterhand. Ready to cover up that blasted hole?”

Shatterhand ignored the dig. “As we discussed on vidicom, Mr. Chatham, I promised to have the blemish removed at the earliest possible moment. I sincerely hope to make you understand why a brief delay will be unavoidable.”

“So much for your ‘pledge’.” Chatham suppressed an urge to drag Shatterhand from the carriage, throw him into his pet “blemish” and cover *him* up. Choosing diplomacy instead, even though to date the tactic had been ineffectual, he offered a compliment. “To we holovision folk, your gaudy world of make believe is a series if pluperfectly ideal standing sets. What’s more, the sets never get torn down, are never allowed to show wear and tear. In Eden, we can recreate damn near every blessed locale in the visited galaxy, not to mention a few inspired originals.

“That being the case,” added the holovision auteur, growing more strident, “can you please tell me why we’re able to put on disc wild animal adventures in your tropical island zoo, mountain climbing cliffhangers in your northern highlands, sophisticated comedies of manners in any of a dozen villages and spas, but cannot do *one* simple follow-up take on this fucking beach?”

Reclining at ease in the landau, his features expressionless, Shatterhand regarded the director with an air of maddening calm.

“Please tell me why,” pursued Chatham, angry with himself for growing hotter by the second, “we can digitally encode bucolic backgrounds in and around your agristations, film nautical and underwater adventures out there on the briny, shoot gambling teasers in the casinos, cops and robbers whodunits anywhere and everywhere, but not *here*? Pick a background at random; we can get it on disc in no time in the artsy-fartsy paradise you run. It costs a bundle and a half to film in Eden, but till now dragging a crew parsecs across space has been worth every centime of above-the-line cost. What the hell, Shatterhand! Even the weather’s tailored to suit our convenience.”

Outwardly unruffled, Shatterhand said, “Your kind appraisal of Eden is overwhelming, Mr. Chatham. I appreciate your objection to the delay, which I admit has grown pernicious. Let me assure you again; the crater will be erased as soon as —”

“No, no; hold it right there,” contradicted Chatham, accustomed to having things his own way. “You can’t appreciate my dilemma. Cannot!” Leaning forward aggressively, he emphasized

his rancor. “I don’t *object* to the delay, I scream about it. It’s gotten to the point where I see that bleeding hole in my sleep, dream about it.”

“Mr. Chatham, I realize how badly you —”

“Listen to me,” interrupted Chatham, bearing down in earnest, “Bel Monde Holovision spends a medium-to-large fortune each time we bring a crew here on location. When our legal eagles negotiated the present contract, you soft-soaped them as usual. You explained how your fat cat guests eat up the sideshow we put on, how they dote on standing by to watch production, how they love rubbing shoulders with the stars. Far as I can tell, even your stone-stupid androids get a kick out of doing walk-ons, crowd scenes and extra bits. What I can’t fathom,” he continued, on a roll, “is why in the name of the eternal you’ve fallen head-over-heels in love with that miserable, useless crater.”

“Mr. Chatham, I will gladly —”

“I defy anyone,” declared Chatham, “to roam the length and breadth of Eden and find a single ‘t’ uncrossed, one hair out of place. Yet there the damned thing is, roped off with yellow caution tape hung with red warning flags. Time after time, take after take, no matter how my cameraman frames a scene, the damned crater creeps into it and ruins the long-shot we simply *must* get on holodisc.”

Waiting with outward patience for the director to wear down, Shatterhand said, “I do sympathize with your predicament, Mr. Chatham. Now, if you will allow me to —”

“Sympathize, my ass!” Chatham wrenched open the landau’s door, leaned in until he was nose-to-nose with Shatterhand. “One trashed take after another costs the studio an arm, a leg, a foot and a hand. I’ll eagerly foot the bill for fixing the blasted hole out of my own pocket if that’s what it takes. I’ll happily pay some of your android grunts double-overtime, triple-time, whatever you say, if they’ll round up a few cubic meters of dirt, pack it into the hole and throw some gravel over it. What the hell! I’m willing to pick up a shovel myself, pitch in and help. It would be orders of magnitude cheaper than having my people burn themselves out wasting expensive, multiple holo-tracks on something absolutely useless. Our second unit team shot reams of beautiful background stuff here, and now I’m stuck with filling in continuity with the stars and cast. In plain language, holding the troupe together while we thumb-twiddle here on the beach is *killing* my holodrama.”

Blithely disregarding the director’s angry tirade, a recital of grievances, Shatterhand asked the director if he had ever heard of Kraan.

The abrupt change of topic gave Chatham pause. “Of who?”

“Kraan is not a ‘who,’ Mr. Chatham, but an ‘it’ — a distant world. Indulge me and step into the landau for a moment. Though extremely reluctant to do so, I am about to relate something you must hold in strictest confidence.”

Now less angry than puzzled, Chatham was intrigued as well. He clambered aboard the carriage, settled himself in the facing seat, his posture defensive. “Kraan, you say?”

“It isn’t surprising to learn the name is unfamiliar, Mr. Chatham, even to someone as sophisticated as yourself. A moment ago, you referred to the crater as a ‘blasted’ hole. To the immense distress of I myself, my colleagues and my . . . That is, to our superiors, that happens to be precisely what it is: a blasted hole.”

“Sorry, I don’t . . . follow.”

“Blasted, Mr. Chatham,” reiterated Shatterhand. “Since little choice remains, I’m forced to reveal an extremely tragic incident that portends grave, far-reaching consequences. Unfortunately, the ‘blasted’ incident took place here in Eden.”

“You inferring an explosive blast?”

“Precisely.” Shatterhand explained the crater as the only remaining evidence of a recent tragedy that had claimed the life of a distinguished guest, Kraan’s hereditary sovereign. “Until the investigators from Kraan have inspected the site, satisfied themselves and approved of its eradication, the unsightly crater must stay as pristine as it is.”

* * *

A number of successful holodramas credited to Victor Chatham’s production company had achieved enormous popularity due to their outré nature, outrageous violence, copious bloodshed, suspenseful action, and overtly erotic content. All ears, intuition announced that what he had just learned was grist for his mill. “A *royal* assassination? That’s a new one. I had no idea kings and queens were still in vogue here, there, anywhere.”

“Your surmise would be accurate throughout the visited galaxy, except for Kraan, where the hoary tradition persists. A constitutional monarch rules Kraan’s global society.”

“Be damned!” The director fertile imagination was working overtime. “That is one for the books. Any notion who was responsible for —?”

“No, none whatever.”

“Okay, I get the picture. Why the hell didn’t you say so in the first place? When are the people from . . . wherever due to show up?”

“Soon.” The planetary director’s eyes were hooded. “I’ve already told you far too much for comfort. I suggest strongly — very strongly indeed — “that this matter stay strictly between we two?”

“Sure, but I still need access to the beach before too long.”

“Here is how Eden plans to accommodate your requirement, Mr. Chatham. Bel Monde Holovision will be reimbursed for all expenses incurred to date here on the beach. You are already contracted to use the hilltop chateau for, if I remember correctly, only three periods. Arrangements have been made to switch tenancy dates with the current lessons, a rather expensive switch, I might add; the monies involved come from Eden’s discretionary fund. You will have access to the chateau in the morning.”

“Tomorrow?”

“At first light in the morning,” confirmed Shatterhand. “Conclude your business there, and you will be able to return here to the beach once roadway repairs have been effected. Is that solution satisfactory to Bel Monde?”

Chatham clapped his hands. “Sure is. We can do the topside stint at the chateau, then come back down and pull in the beach footage before packing it in and heading north to your big game island. I can never remember what it’s called.”

“The Veldt,” supplied Shatterhand. “The turnaround in your schedule here on the mainland should pose no more than a minor problem. I’m virtually certain the crater will be eradicated in another period, two at most. I’ll be happy to take care of necessary re-scheduling in the Veldt.”

“You mean the investigators from . . . wherever are here?”

“I didn’t say that, Mr. Chatham.” The executive wagged an admonitory forefinger. “It will be in your benefit to regard our conversation as something that never took place. Extremely serious consequences could obtain for divulging matters I’m not at liberty to discuss. Advise your people of the revised schedule, but please, I beg you, refrain from explaining the circumstance making made it necessary.”

“Deal,” Chatham said happily. He opened the landau’s door, stepped out and extended his hand to be shaken. “I appreciate what you’re doing, Shatterhand; it’ll help save my derriere. I promise to keep my lip zipped about the, uh, crater’s whys and wherefores. Thanks again; I owe you one.”

“Not in the slightest way, Mr. Chatham. As always, Eden remains in your debt. Thank you for being so patient.”

Wearing a pleased expression, Victor Chatham watched the landau turn and clop-clop back toward the Village before he rejoined the loafing assemblage of actors, technicians, crewmen and extras. He lifted the assistant director’s bullhorn and called, “Okay, kiddies, let’s pack it in for what’s left of the period. Roam around, have some fun. Hit the fleshpots and get it all out of your system. Bright and early in the ayem, we’ll be sweating our butts off up at yonder chateau. From here on in it’s going to be damned hard work, damned little frivolity.”

Scattered cheers erupted from the Bel Monde Holovision cast and crew.

EIGHT

At Shatterhand’s bidding, Operations Manager Buford and Ramyn met the trio of visitors from Kraan after breakfast, arriving at Petite Palais in the same open landau Shatterhand had used on an earlier visit to the holovision director. The carriage, drawn by a pair of large, docile animals Buford called “horses,” intrigued young Kewart. A handsome android footman helped him look the animals over. Leery of the horses due to their size, Kurani asked if the beasts were dangerous.

“Not at all, sir,” Ramyn told him. “They’re docile, and also behavior-programmed.”

The reassurance did nothing to improve Kurani’s disposition, nor was he pleased by Eden’s antiquarian transportation method. “Why,” he wanted to know, “must we rattle about the countryside in this outmoded contraption? In Kraan, primitive conveyances such as this are reserved for ceremonial occasions.”

The ops manager meant to be reassuring. “I think you’ll find the carriage quite comfortable, sir.”

A momentary flare of subliminal anxiety accompanued Buford’s response; it piqued Klavik’s interest.

“Perhaps,” said the PM, unsatisfied. “It still seems senseless.”

“The subsurface tube system offers efficient, convenient travel over a distance,” said Buford. “Trams are available in some of the villages and spas, but except for Mr. Shatterhand’s personal verticraft, emergency vehicles and the electric bush buggies we use in the Veldt are the only airborne or self-motorized conveyances in Eden.”

“Bush buggies in . . . where?”

“The Veldt, sir. An equatorial island, a game preserve, a hunter’s paradise.”

“A minor ‘paradise,’” remarked Kurani with an undertone of sarcasm, “lodged in the midst of an overall paradise. That what it is, Buford?”

“Er, something of that nature, sir.”

Supervised by the footman, Kewart giggled and fed slices of pulpy fruit to the horses. He petted the matched chestnut mares until Kurani politely but firmly told him to climb aboard the landau.

Klavik, the last to step up into the carriage, purposely chose the seat beside Buford. He soon found himself enjoying the ride. The open landau clopped along the Corniche, a broad white beach dotted with parti-colored umbrellas and pavilions on the right, a grassy parkway grown thick with stands of shore pines on the left. Paying guests began appearing and looked out of place: a tanned older couple strolling the esplanade arm-in-arm, two women holding parasols standing out like signposts in contrast to the youthful, delicate-featured androids attendants.

Klavik studied the passing scene, and realized the degree of wealth required to sojourn in Eden was seldom achieved by younger neohumans. Circumspectly listening to every word Ramyn uttered as she chatted with the prince, he could not help but admire how adroitly she playing the role of a social butterfly, between times replying succinctly and politely to Kurani’s questions, and pointing out items of interest along the way. The way she conscientiously avoided eye contact with he himself distantly amused Klavik.

What in the ever-changing universe, he wondered, had prompted Shatterhand to foist off an authentic neohuman woman as an android escort? It was a topic worthy of serious speculation. In an attempt to learn more about the android population, he thought to draw Buford into conversation, but the operations manager acted reticent about holding up his end of the dialogue. He complimented Buford’s trance-induced command of Kraant, in the next breath jolted the operations manager by inquiring if he had enjoyed much in the way of personal contact with His Omnipotence during the sovereign’s tragic holiday.

His reward was an emotional spike so sharp it almost made him flinch.

“Only for . . . a few minutes,” admitted Buford. “The king requested privacy, so we . . . Mr. Shatterhand and I allowed him to enjoy his leisure in any way he chose.”

“Your pardon, Mr. Buford, but the title ‘king’,” corrected Klavik, “is offensive in our culture. The proper term for our late monarch was ‘His Omnipotence’.”

“Uh, sorry. Forgive me.” Doubly flustered, Buford said, “His . . . Omnipotence was with us but a short time before the unfortunate . . . Before the tragedy occurred. Mr. Shatterhand gave him his exclusive personal attention, and after the, uh . . . accident, we were all so stricken that it was impossible to —”

“May I ask where you were when the ‘accident’ too place?” inquired Klavik.

“Where . . . ?” Buford tugged nervously at the wraparound collar of his tunic. “Working in Emil’s office. That is, I was with Mr. Shatterhand in the tower suite. We heard the explosion where we were, from clear across the Village.”

“It was audible indoors?”

“Oh, yes! It was a terrifying roll, like distant thunder. We’re coming to the spot now.”

The landau rolled another fifty meters or more, and the android driver reined in. The strand, wide and white as before, was now absent of pavilions, patrons or android attendants.

Overlooking the shoreline above sharply rising chalk cliffs, Klavik noted the roofline of a sprawling pink chateau pictured in stereographs bolstering Shatterhand's transmitted report. Waiting deferentially for the footman to jump down and hold the landau's door, he allowed the prince and PM to alight before stepping out himself, but did not join his charges. Buford and Ramyn elected to stay in the carriage.

Grave and pensive, Kewart walked slowly all around the ugly, roped-off crater sanctified by the blood of his beloved father. Staying outside the cordon of yellow tape warning away trespassers, Kurani followed the youth, circling the crater one slow step at a time, his expression woebegone, pensive.

"Eventually," Klavik heard the PM tell the prince, a break in his voice, "we shall erect a proper monument here."

A bleak nod was Kewart's only response.

Buford leaned from the carriage holding a sheaf of digital stereographs in his hand. "Perhaps you would like to refer to these, Mr. Klavik."

Klavik thanked the executive, crossed the lane. Joining his charges, he held up the stereographs one at a time, letting Kewart and Kurani compare the depicted blast area with the actual site.

"Nothing to learn by gawking at pictures," complained Kurani, half in anger, half in disgust.

Klavik kept his voice low. "Your pardon, sir. I think we may have already learned something of value. One aspect of the actual scene differs from the one depicted."

"How so?" Kurani was skeptical. "I see no difference."

"The difference is the crater itself."

"What about it?"

Klavik selected a stereograph, tapped it with his forefinger, and then gestured at the corresponding section of crater. "Notice if you will," he said, not letting his voice carry to the landau, "how the crater walls are moderately uniform all the way around. That feature was not apparent when we viewed the images in Kraan."

"Um, yes; see what you mean. What does that tell you?"

"It leads me to believe the carriage was booby-trapped with explosives, not the target of a missile as was suggested."

"What makes you think that?" demanded the prince.

"If, as Shatterhand's report postulated, a missile had been launched from up near the hilltop chateau, the crater would have to be moderately deformed in a direction opposite the missile's line-of-flight."

"By the holy First Principle!" exclaimed Kurani.

"Please, sir; not so loud."

"I don't get it," said Kewart.

"Our security chief knows his ordnance," commended the PM, only partially moderating his rumbling bass voice. "You're observant, and analytical as well, Klavik. Explosive force tends to coincide with a missile's vector. Had the filthy deed been done as the report described, the crater wall would be deformed higher in a direction coincident to the missile's line of flight. As we can see now, such is not the case. It's something that was not apparent in the pictures."

“A bomb . . . ?” said Kewart uncertainly. “Who could have rigged a bomb?”

Kurani smacked his lips. “That,” he declared, “is yet to be discovered. His Omnipotence and three android slaves, blown to shreds in the absence of witnesses. Missile or explosive charge, what does it matter? Either way, it’s damned little to go on.”

Klavik leaned closer to the PM. “Something else has come to my attention, a matter we should discuss in private.”

“What . . . ? Ah, yes; I see. Remind me later.” Saddened, his outrage resurrected by visiting the death site, Kurani asked his future sovereign gruffly if he’d seen enough. “Naught to accomplish here. The sooner we get shut of this wretched place the better. Gives me the bloody chills.”

Kewart’s solemn affirmative nod was slow in coming. The PM led the way back to the landau, allowed the footman hold the door for Kewart, and clambered in after him.

Klavik, standing rigidly in the graveled roadway, made no move to board the carriage. Something about his body language made Kurani ask, “What is it?”

“We have visitors, sir. Please stay in the carriage until I learn who they are, what they want.”

* * *

“Hallo-o-o,” hailed Victor Chatham. Wearing a hail-fellow-well-met expression meant to assure all present they were glad to see him, the renowned holovision auteur was accompanied by his cameraman and a tall, stocky young man. “I have high hopes,” he said in *Lingua Stella*, “that you’ll tell us this stinking hole is ready to be filled in.”

The reference to a “stinking hole” did not sit well with Klavik. He relaxed completely, hands limp at his sides, and regarded the trio of intruders with nulled features and a cool, uncompromising stare.

“Good morning, Mr. Chatham,” said Buford from the landau. “I see you’ve moved most of your people and equipment up to the chateau.”

“Ah, there you are, Buford.” Nodding cordially to the occupants of the carriage, he said, “It’s a temporary wrap here on the beach. We were on our way up to the chateau when you arrived. Are these gentlemen the investigators Shatterhand mentioned. He told me the crater would be . . .”

“Our presence and purpose need not concern you,” said Klavik.

“Excuse me, Mr. Klavik.” Buford was quick to intervene. “Mr. Chatham and his troupe are engaged in filming a holodrama. He only wishes to learn whether —”

“His wishes are of no consequence,” declared Klavik.

Victor Chatham eyed the tall, prepossessive stranger, his air jaunty. “There I beg to differ. I happen to believe my ‘wishes’ are of paramount consequence. It may interest you to learn that Bel Monde Holovision spends millions of stellars here in Eden. That aside, it’s my firm rule to never let anyone speak to me in such a —”

“Your business is not with us,” said Klavik. “I suggest you leave.”

Flushed, Chatham said, “Well, suggest and be damned!” Looking past Klavik at the landau, where the prince and prime minister sat statue-still opposite Eden’s embarrassed operations manager and a truly dazzling young woman, the director, made one of the snap judgments he was famous for, and turned his stern attention to Klavik. “Truth be told,” he

drawled, "I seldom deal with the hired help, and *never* with a snotty joker like you. I mean to pass a few words with your betters there in the carriage."

"I must insist that you leave now."

"Oh, now we're insisting, are we?" Chatham came forward an aggressive step. "Stand aside, Laddie."

Klavik did not move.

Caught up in the throes of anticipation, Kewart tensed as if making ready to bolt from the landau, take a stand at Klavik's side. Kurani's hairy hand restrained him. "Leave be," he admonished in colloquial Kraant. "Klavik will handle it."

"Fine!" said Chatham. "If you want your lesson the hard way, so be it. Steve, Timmy, be kind enough to remove this obstacle to the social amenities? You needn't be gentle about it."

"Sure thing, Chatty." His leer meant to be intimidating, the stocky youth came forward.

"Final warning, unfriendly one," said the director. "Step aside. My key grip is known far and wide as Rough 'n Tumble Timmy."

Robust and eager to please, the tall, muscular youngster stood a half-head shorter than Klavik. Grinning, he moved to Klavik's left. "Watch yourself, big fella."

Klavik eyed the youth with stony indifference.

The cameraman, obviously less sure of himself, edged to Klavik's right, and hung back uncertainly.

Seated in the landau, certain the would-be rapist was about to receive comeuppance, Ramyn's carmined lips parted in anticipation.

Klavik slumped laxly, his esthetic sense attuned to the feral intent emanating from the cock-sure, would-be assailant confronting him. He appreciated how simple it would be to topple the youth. A sudden thrust, the *hittsui geri*, to immobilize him, followed by a backsnap kick, the *ushiro-geri-kaegi*, to put him away.

"Bigger they are," said Chatham's key grip, "the harder they fall." He lunged.

Klavik's foot lashed out like a striking snake, a move almost too fluid to see. His fist simultaneously backhanded the youth, sent him sprawling in the graveled roadway. Timmy cried out hoarsely, clutched his damaged knee and lay there, writhing in pain.

Knowing any follow-up would be overkill, Klavik shifted his cold-eyed attention to the cameraman, who decided he wanted no part of it and backed away hastily.

"What the hell!" Chatham bent over his downed key grip. He went down on one knee beside "Rough 'n Tumble Timmy" and glared at Klavik. "Why, you arrogant son of a bitch!"

Standing impassively, Klavik awaited further developments.

"Buford," cried the director in a blind rage, "get Shatterhand on the horn. Do it! I want some android proctors out here to arrest this maniac."

"His knee will require medical attention," announced Klavik in the same way he would have described the weather. Opening the landau's door, he eased into the seat beside Buford. The operations executive cringed aside, fumbled to open his portable communicator and call for emergency assistance.

"You'll pay for this," threatened Chatham.

At Kurani's urging, the android driver snapped the reins, clucked to the horses. The carriage swung around in a half-circle and headed back toward the Village, leaving the director and his cameraman to fuss over the youth moaning in the roadway.

No one had much to say during the ride back to Petite Palais. Once or twice Klavik caught Ramyn shooting quick glances his way. He ignored her, totally preoccupied by analyzing a far more serious matter to pay any attention to Ramyn or anyone else.

In the wake of the brief scuffle, an unseen something had delicately touched his consciousness and not withdrawn.

Nibbling, tasting . . .

NINE

The landau clip-clopped to a halt on the cobblestones beneath the porte cochere entrance to Petite Palais. Eager to fill in the director with a first-hand account of the all too brief scuffle on the beach, Buford excused himself and rushed off in the direction of Shatterhand's tower aerie. Kewart pestered the PM, saying he wanted to spend the early afternoon hours on the beach. After a time, Kurani grudgingly acquiesced.

An hour later, prince and stunning, faux android "unit" were playing in the surf and sunning themselves. Clad in a skimpy halter and practically nonexistent swimming briefs, Ramyn turned heads among a few beachgoers and occasional passing guests on the esplanade.

Klavik and the PM took their ease in the dappled shade of a seaside pavilion. Keeping an eye on Kewart and Ramyn, Klavik was prepared to shoo away any guests or hovering android attendants who might wander too close to the frolicking pair. Ill at ease, his mood fractious in the wake of their visit to the death site, Kurani remarked at the problem posed by the "android siren." "We mustn't let the wench out of our sight. Can't blame the youngster for being starry-eyed; at his age, hormones erupt volcanically of their own accord. Besides, a man would have to be stone dead inside not to be affected by the likes of the lissome lass she is. We dare not allow His High . . . the youngster to fall under her corrupting influence. Have you learned anything about her? Emotionally, I mean?"

"I wonder if there's anything to learn," said Klavik, forced to dissemble if he was to learning Shatterhand's purpose for masterminding Ramyn's android pose. "I suppose programming inhibits any deeper feelings androids might have."

"By the thrice-blest First Principle!" muttered Kurani indignantly. "We've no need for a secondary hazard to loom fast on the heels of the first. Allowing the lad to court danger in this den of sybarites was an awesome blunder."

"There I disagree, sir." Klavik's objection earned a sharp look from the statesman. "To be realistic, the fact that Kewart should not be here is inarguable. But his mind was made up, he refused to be dissuaded. Yet it was more than a simple matter of being strong-willed. Kewart has been conditioned since childhood to regard vendetta as his birthright. The Lord Regent and his mother worked on him for hours. He refused to be budged."

"Aye, there is truth in what you say," conceded the PM. "The lad's cast in the same hardheaded mold as his noble sire, may His spirit rest peacefully. Once His Omnipotence took a

stand on any issue, large or small, he would not be gainsaid. Having Kewart underfoot is an awesome responsibility, a severe hindrance to what we must accomplish. If anything untoward were to occur between him and that android dazzler . . .” Kurani trailed off uncertainly.

“It will not happen, sir. You have my promise.”

Kurani measured the other, and evidently liking what he saw. “You had little difficulty discouraging that oaf on the beach. Rather like shooting fish in a bucket, wasn’t it?”

“The incident was . . . regrettable.”

“I daresay,” observed Kurani drily, “the husky youngster found his misjudgment most regrettable. You politely requested the holovision monkey to take himself and friends elsewhere. Shame he didn’t listen. Which brings to mind something that disturbed me. Shatterhand overstepped himself by revealing our presence. He may have gone so far as to relate our reason for being here, and if so I count it a serious breach of faith. I mean to confront the dapper cripple over his lapse.”

“Cautioning him does seem wise.”

“Oh, I mean to do more than utter a word of caution. Now then, a council of war is in order. We shall put our heads together, try and establish where we are, where we’re headed. And, oh yes; I nearly forgot. Back at the crater, you mentioned a need to discuss something in private.”

* * *

Klavik bent over and swirled sand with a forefinger. “Operations Manager Buford,” he said.

A contemptuous snort. “Aye, and a first-water lounge lizard he is if ever a one there was. What about him?”

“For whatever reason, he acts frightened to death of us. In the carriage, I tried to engage him in small talk and perhaps loosen his tongue before asking a few random questions. He seldom answered directly, and when he did avoided eye contact. I couldn’t reconcile his excessive nervousness with his short responses.”

Kurani’s dark eyes glistened moistly. “Used your talent, did you?”

Klavik nodded affirmatively. “When we first arrived, I wrote off Buford’s emotional turmoil as a reaction to the veiled threat posed by our starcruiser on-orbit, or a more focused fear that we were planning a reprisal for the regicide. This morning in the carriage he seemed even more emotionally unsettled. It may be inborn timidity, but I doubt it.”

“You suspect he’s hiding something?”

“Everyone has something to hide. It’s just that his general air of disquiet, plus Buford’s overt emotional reaction to questions I myself considered non-threatening struck me as illogical for an gentleman in his executive position.”

Kurani squinted against the glare, gazed across the sun-washed sands and watched the laughing prince splash through the shallows chasing Ramyn. “Should the impression you received prove accurate,” he said, “we shall drag the hoity-toity fellow aside, squeeze him till he burps.”

“It could come to that, but may I suggest an alternative?” Klavik hitched his beach chair around to face the PM squarely. “In the aftermath of the assassination, individually and collectively Kaolin and Kamala analysts picked Shatterhand’s report apart word by word, page

by page. Both factions subjected the pertinent data to computer analysis and independent ratiocinative examination, and then debated the mutually confusing results.”

“‘Confusing’ is an understatement, Klavik.” The PM’s growl was acid-laden. “Kaolin ‘experts’ definitely confirmed that we Kamala were the culprits, whereas our Orange specialists wasted no time identifying the Whites as regicides. Odd, isn’t it, how political polarity influences scientific deduction?”

“The neohuman element can never be overlooked,” said Klavik. “But bear with me, if you will. You’re aware of how, at first, the Lord Regent favored placing the blame on a hypothetical third party. After a meticulous review of admittedly inconclusive data, he discounted any suspicion he might have harbored about radical elements within either party. Despite the divisive contentions flying back and forth, he theorized that neither the White nor Orange nobility had anything much to gain from the crime, to me was an eminently reasonable conclusion. I myself can’t begin to imagine how the assassination advantaged either dissident element.”

“Nor I,” admitted Kurani, his craggy features creased in thought. “No one has suggested discounting the possibility of an offworld perpetrator. But who, Klavik? Our relations with neighboring societies have been placid for some time.”

“Our penultimate goal,” said Klavik, “will be to learn of a specific answer to that question. For the moment, all we can deal with is the here and now, and Buford seems a logical place to start. If we can convince him he’s above suspicion, mightn’t he grow careless enough to let slip relevant bits and pieces of information, perhaps provide a tangible lead?”

Kurani ruminated. “Get on his good side, then use your talent to capitalize on his laxity?”

“Something of that nature, assuming he has a good side. Emotionally, he’s exceptionally transparent.”

“Amazing, this talent of yours,” said Kurani. “Works something like a lie detector does it?”

“Actually, no,” said Klavik, hoping to deflect a further explanation of his nurtured capability. “Intangibles are difficult to categorize. Buford’s responses, when I manage to wring them from him, are colored. They swing like a weather vane in direct ratio to the emotional charge of a particular response. In time, a decipherable pattern may emerge, a specific direction.”

Kurani leaned back in the beach chair. “The notion of coseying up to a prancing weasel like Buford offends me. It’s simply isn’t our way, Klavik.”

“Again, permit me to differ, sir. We are involved in an extremely nebulous affair. Through necessity, any way at all is ‘our’ way. It’s vital to take advantage of every shred of concrete or circumstantial evidence we uncover. Worse, we’re also at a terrible disadvantage, three alarmingly vulnerable strangers hoping to pass ourselves off as anonymous guests in a planet staffed by androids pre-programmed to do their masters’ bidding without recourse or remorse. Yet if we were to hide behind the Royal Elite Guardsmen standing by aboard the pinnacle, we’d never learn much about Eden’s inner workings, and that may be the key.”

“I make that a valid assessment.” The PM pondered. “Do you suspect Shatterhand of complicity in the murder of our sovereign?”

“Every neohuman in Eden automatically comes under suspicion. Shatterhand is the most obvious candidate, perhaps a shade too obvious. He has a natural gift for emotional self-control. I’ve tried, and failed, to detect any sign of emotional fluctuation.”

“So you plan to concentrate on Buford, and the android wench?”

“Buford, definitely. Pulsing an android may be non-productive, but will it hurt to try?”

A sage nod. “In no way. I confess to being out of my depth when it comes to understanding your talent. I’ve only one question an experienced professional like you may find elementary. What do you pin your hopes on? What have you asked yourself in hoping to forward pursuit of the culprit responsible for the bloody outrage?”

“As I mentioned before leaving Kraan,” said Klavik without hesitation, “determining who stood most to gain by our sovereign’s demise should open a trail of sorts. You were correct, sir. Your question, elementary though it is, is the basis of criminal investigation since long before the Diaspora.”

“Yes, I like it,” said the PM. “A logical approach withal. Somehow we must find a way to shine light on one or more miscreants gloating over the dreadful deed, then seize them by the throat. Where has that approach taken you thus far?”

“Practically nowhere, but that’s to be expected. As yet, we haven’t scratched the surface here in Eden. The prime potential sources of information are equally suspect: Shatterhand, and his operations manager, and then a raft of unknown elements, including the exotic Parvons Syndicate owners. Adhering to the logical approach, fourth and fifth candidates must also be considered.”

“And they are . . . ?”

“It pains me to say, but wouldn’t it be foolish to dismiss the possibility of involvement by radical elements within the Kaolin or Kamala nobility?”

The PM flinched. “*My* party? I didn’t hear that, Klavik.”

“Eliminating suspects a priori would be an egregious error, sir.” Knowing he trod thin ice, Klavik tried to soften the blow. “Until each area of suspicion has been investigated and ruled out, letting personal or political affiliations influence the investigative process is a disaster to be avoided. Think about it. That may be exactly what the perpetrators are counting on us to do.”

“Perpetrators, plural?”

“An assumption, to my way of thinking? Ask yourself this: is it reasonable to assume a lone individual could have engineered and consummated the deed.”

“Um, see what you mean.” Intimating suspicion by members of his own political affiliation had stung Kurani to the quick. He hawked and spat into the sand, slowly and deliberately dabbed his lips with a tissue. “Once again, you have the right of it, Klavik. The stakes are too high for personal prejudices. Carry on. You’ve my endorsement to do precisely as you see fit.”

Klavik said, “Kewart and the android are coming back.”

“So I see.”

Voluptuous android “unit” and beaming adolescent prince came tripping across the sands. Klavik and Kurani rose as one, but did not bow, fearful that a show of deference might reveal Kewart’s true status to casual observers.

* * *

“What have you learned?” demanded Shatterhand. “Quickly, I don’t wish to be late for the dinner party.”

Ramyn ignored the urging. She settled herself in a lounge, regarding the man in the geriatric chair with thinly veiled contempt. “The boy kept pestering me to go back in the surf. I caught only snatches of their conversation.”

“And overheard . . . ?”

“I was too far away for that. My Kraant is none to perfect, and I have little faith in my lip-reading ability.”

“Come, Ramyn! Stop beating the bush to death.”

She explained tersely how Kurani had voiced concern about the danger of her ‘corrupting’ the Prince, whatever that meant. “They discussed who might have benefited most from the assassination. The usual suspects include you yourself, all your associates, the Parvon Syndicate, and others belonging to what I assumed was a faction or whatever in Kraan. The PM made one odd reference, hinting that the would-be rapist I’m so fond of is endowed with some mysterious talent.”

“What sort of talent?”

Ramyn shrugged. “I’m fairly certain he used the Kraant equivalent of that term. Also, Klavik believes Buford is hiding something. He means to exercise his talent, whatever it is, on Bufie, and in a secondary, left-handed way . . . on me.”

“On *you*?” His fixed gaze unnerving, Shatterhand eased forward in the geriatric chair. “What possible motive,” he asked, more or less thinking aloud, “could he have for suspecting the complicity of an android? And for that matter, why target Buford?”

“Get real, Emil!” she chided. “Bufie’s a first-class wimp. He’s been antsy as a scalded cat ever since they arrived, so jumpy he’d make anyone suspicious, whether or not he has anything to hide. Does he have something to hide?”

Shatterhand endured the woman’s scrutiny in expressionless silence. “I wish we could be sure,” he said at length. “If Buford is implicated, which I find to incredible for belief, he’s covered his tracks adroitly. He adequately performs his duties, but is too shallow to be considered clever. Be that as it may, any suspicion falling on Buford automatically reflects upon my good offices. Buford may be deficient in character, but a trusted friend and colleague of long standing. Best, I suppose, if he were to be called away on business.”

Ramyn appraised the director candidly. “Emil,” she drawled, “if I didn’t know you better I’d probably buy the paternalistic hogwash you’re peddling. You have no friends or colleagues, zero; just underlings. You’d sell Buford, me, your own mother or anyone else if the price was right.”

His eyes half-closed in thought, Shatterhand said, “A flattering critique, I must say. But this is not an occasion for frivolity. Stay close to Klavik this evening. Entertain him while the four of us are dining. Afterward, should an opportunity should present itself, I want you to take him aside and —”

“*Entertain* him!” Ramyn choked on the term. “After what happened on the Petite Palais terrace, you dare ask me to *entertain* that muscle-bound clod?”

“Attend me, Ramyn!” Shatterhand’s imperative grated harshly. “I want no petty maunderings about dodging this Klavik person’s amorous advances. Your cycles as an ingenue

are over and done. We're both involved in something of major consequence, and it will be crucial to provide a shoulder-to-shoulder stance concerning our innocence. Manage that, and our friends from Kraan will eventually tire of chasing shadows and return to their benighted homeworld. Then it will be business as usual."

"*Our* innocence . . . ?" the woman said indignantly. "I have no problem with my innocence, Emil. Do you?"

Shatterhand was unequivocal. "None whatsoever."

Ramyn grimaced. "You love to sit in your mobile throne and play Mr. Wisdom, don't you? What is it about this mess that makes you so insufferably confident about how it will turn out?"

"Shall we say Mr. Wisdom is eminently qualified to be insufferably confident, and let it go at that. Now then, about this evening's dinner party. You and Klavik have been invited to attend the postprandial get together, where your task, dear one, will be to keep Prince Charming occupied. Use your feminine wiles to lure the youngster into the bed-sitting chamber of Kurani's suite while Buford and I suffer through the inquisition certain to follow dinner. Judging from what you reported, I can't see Klavik passing up an opportunity to prod Buford. This time, however, I'll be there to deflect the more sensitive questions. Buford hasn't been told yet, but this will be the ruffian's last opportunity to quiz him." A quick glance at the wall chronometer. "It's late; you'd better run along."

"Why the rush? Dinner isn't till the eighth hour."

"No argument, if you please. There's something I must do before leaving."

Ramyn rose gracefully, paused as if intending to say something else, thought better of it and flounced out of the office.

TEN

The instant the portal slid closed behind his former mistress, Shatterhand guided the geriatric chair across the high-ceilinged chamber. He commanded the portrait of his younger self to slide to one side, opened the wall safe and depressed the concealed stud. "There is something important we should discuss," he said. "Shall I come down?"

The affirmative response was delivered in a terse monotone.

The geriatric chair glided into a shallow alcove in the office's inner wall. A muraled section of wall rolled up on command, exposing a small lift compartment, its existence known only to Shatterhand and the team of androids programmed to do the work. The chair backed into the compartment with only decimeters to spare on either side. The lift plummeted downward, juddered to a stop with a brutal surge of deceleration.

The lift doors parted, and the blinding, blue-white glare automatically dimmed. Shatterhand guided the geriatric chair into a jackhammer-scored granite cavern deep within Eden's terraformed crust. The humidity was stultifying, the air suffocating, breathable but so dense it was almost gluey, and corrupted by an acrid stench. In the center of the subterranean gallery, a transparent membrane covered a circular well filled with clear fluid. Immersed in the

well, an iridescent, vermiculate creature the size of a tall neohuman undulated with rippling restlessness, its writhings never ceasing.

The exotic's reproduced electronic voice echoed hollowly in the stark chamber. "This poor creature intuits a development worthy of our rapt attention."

Speaking unhurriedly, Shatterhand tolled the recent events aboveground. He left out nothing, neither amplifying nor offering editorial comment on the facts as he knew them. He described Ramyn's spotty interpretation of the discussion between Kraan's chief of state and the third visitor from Kraan called Klavik, referring to him as 'a guardian.' In conclusion, he cited Ramyn's description of Buford as the prime target of inquiry, and in passing mentioned Klavik's supposed talent.

"Ah, talent withal." The hollow-voiced remark echoed from the granite walls. "Transliterated into the vernacular, talent is a loose term with several shades of meaning. This poor creature will strive to ascertain the nature and degree of the guardian's so-called talent, a feat that should not demand an inordinate degree of effort. However, dealing with undefined neohuman characteristics can be debilitating, especially when this poor creature is subjected to continuous physical discomfort."

"Can anything be done," asked Shatterhand, "to make your stay more pleasant?"

"Alas, in truth it cannot. We became marginally aware of the guardian's hypothetical talent upon surreptitiously making brief rapport with all three visitors from Kraan. The eldest and youngest are of superior yet commonplace intellect; not so he charged with their guardianship. A classic neohuman species apparently flourishes in Kraan. The one possessing postulated talent demonstrates a modicum of mental bona fides, perhaps a mind of considerable strength. That in itself is disturbing. It is incommensurate with the present state of galactic neohuman evolutionary development. During a delicate, stealthy intrusion we were no less than amazed to learn the talented one actually sensed our brief contact — an inordinately surprising feat. Dealing with this prize specimen could become a matter of consequence.

"As for your administrative assistant," continued the exotic, "this wretched creature concurs with your suggestion, Shatterhand. You may distance him from the inquisition, or eliminate him altogether. Either option should suffice."

"I'll send him away," said Shatterhand.

"Simple solutions are often optimum solutions. And yet, at this nexus a diversion seems to be in order. Perhaps a redirection would be semantically more accurate. We envision an untoward event, an unsuspected happening specifically designed to sidetrack our visitors, lead them astray into meaningless pathways, an extraneous, nonlinear event designed to amply illustrate the danger they joust with, and certain to induce serious contemplation on their part. Go now and receive instruction."

Shatterhand did not question the directive. The geriatric chair rotated, glided to a gray console recessed in the granite chamber's wall. The planetary executive slipped a metallic headband over his shock of platinum hair, tightened it across his forehead. Reposing in the geriatric chair with outward nonchalance, he watched a gauntlet extend from the console and inserted his left hand into the metal glove. He accepted the low-voltage spike accompanied by an injection without flinching. The process completed, the geriatric chair back to the lift

compartment's double doors, where he paused to inquire if such an overt ruse might not enhance rather than allay the visitors' suspicions.

"A false trail leading nowhere," replied the exotic, "will suffice for the nonce.

"Is there sufficient time to program the units?"

"Time," announced the alien's unmodulated voice, "is a fragile yet useful commodity. Time aplenty if you make haste."

Harsh actinic brilliance blazed in the chamber with painful intensity. Shatterhand closed his eyes tightly until the doors slid together, chopping off the awesome glare.

* * *

The lift compartment shot upward, came to a sudden stop, and the doors parted. Shatterhand found his operations manager waiting in the office suite.

Acting more distraught than usual, Buford rattled on about nothing in particular while Shatterhand guided the chair to his desk. He depressed a switch, activating a recorder. "Tell me what you make of this, Buford."

Buford listened apprehensively to a playback of his superior's recent conversation with Ramyn. When the dialogue ceased, he stuttered, "M-me . . . ? Why target *me*? What is this, uh . . . ? What does Klavik's talent amount to, Emil?"

"I have no idea." Shatterhand evaluated his colleague's distress. "Let me apologize in advance for asking a blunt, rather embarrassing question. Are you in any way implicated in the sordid assassination?"

Buford paled. "Certainly not! How can you *suggest* such a thing?"

"I suggested nothing, and merely posed an indelicate question." The executive's gaze was penetrating. "No, don't go on about it," he said, preempting a flood of defensive protestations. "I don't believe you have anything to hide, but I had to ask. We've worked together too long for you to be deceptive about anything so important."

"Emil, I . . ." Buford hesitated. "It's as unpleasant for me as it was for you, but I have to ask the same question. Are you connected in some way with their ruler's death?"

A dry chuckle. "Have I also come under suspicion? Is that why you've been so agitated ever since they arrived?"

"I, no . . . Not you personally. But the, uh . . . As you said, I had to ask."

"To the best of my knowledge," declared Shatterhand, "the Syndicate had absolutely no part in the demise of their monarch. Parvons are extremely intelligent, and every bit as exceedingly strange and unfathomable as they are intelligent. What conceivable motive could the Parvon Syndicate have for enraging a bellicose society like that dwelling in Kraan? Entrepreneurial geniuses that they are, the Parvons wouldn't dream of shooting themselves in the foot business-wise by engaging in such a risky, potentially dangerous enterprise?"

"Dangerous?" questioned Buford.

"Very much so," emphasized the director. "Kraan can be pictured as the homeworld of a backward, barbarous neohuman strain, and perhaps that's precisely what it is. Yet barbarous or civilized, their collective military strength and aggressive nature is unquestioned. If I were to hold anything in the universe sacred, I would swear a solemn oath to the effect that Eden's absentee ownership is entirely blameless in the affair. You and I were here in the tower when the incident took place? How did you imagine I could be involved?"

Buford's sheepish nod gave away his feeling of embarrassed humility.

The geriatric chair rotated soundlessly. "Now then, those ghosts have been successfully laid to rest. Enough, Buford. There is one task you must attend to at once."

"Oh, the dinner party. I wanted to speak to you about that, Emil. Must I go?"

"Absolutely. Tendering an acceptable excuse at this late hour would benefit no one, and might be considered symptomatic of having something to hide. Down a stiff tranquilizer, then rest for a while and compose yourself before we join our visitors."

"I will, Emil."

"Now pay attention. Here is what you must undertake." Shatterhand gave explicit, detailed instructions.

Buford quailed. "But, that's . . . It's idiotic! What purpose will it serve?"

"Twofold objectives. It will disperse a smoke screen thick enough to occupy their attention for a time, and dramatically point up their frightful vulnerability."

Buford blinked. "Frightful, I agree; I'm sure it will do that. But, why . . . ?"

"Don't quibble. Time is short. You will follow my instructions to the letter."

Buford glanced at the wall chronometer. "Not sure I can program the units in time."

"Leave now, and there will be no problem. I've arranged for Ramyn to lure young Prince Charming into the prime minister's bed-sitting chamber. Target the units there."

Displaying a degree of reticence, Buford sighed. "I'll take care of it, Emil. Can I ask what can be done to learn about Klavik's . . . talent?"

"Don't concern yourself with that now. By the time our friends get back on track, you will be gone."

Elated, Buford said, "Where?"

"The Veldt," said Shatterhand, referring to the equatorial island where cloned big game, gigantic saurians and lesser forms of wildlife roved. "The small hunting lodge atop the escarpment is an ideal hideaway. You won't have a long stay, I promise. Think of it as a leisurely holiday that will improve your outlook."

Buford's delight at the prospect of escaping scrutiny faded. "Emil, have you considered what those savages might do to her?"

"Do we care a jot," said Shatterhand, "what happens to fair Ramyn?"

"N-no," faltered Buford's with slight shudder. "Not really."

ELEVEN

Ramyn was having difficulty clinging to her demure android persona. "Sir," she said tentatively, "something puzzles me."

"What might that be?"

"You seem like a different person this evening."

"I already apologized for my rudeness."

"That's what puzzles me. No guest ever apologizes to someone like myself."

"Oh? Why not? I was told," dissembled Klavik, "that the deeper feelings of androids were sublimated until their programming begins to wear off."

Ramyn's sidelong glance spoke volumes. *Klavik's perfectly composed features certainly did not make him handsome in the classic sense*, she thought. But he was so tall, so large-boned and athletic that he fairly radiated virility. At first she had considered him totally unattractive, had wished the worst for him during the encounter with that tough looking youngster from the holovision troupe. Now, for some reason, he exuded overpowering masculinity. She said lightly, "If I didn't know better, sir, I would think you were teasing me."

"Do androids dislike being teased?"

"You can't be serious, sir."

Standing beside her in the Petite Palais lift compartment, he smiled. "Concentrate on being unobtrusive, Ramyn. I know how difficult that must be, even if it is one of your programmed specialties."

Her smile was slow in coming, but lingered.

In the hallway leading to Kurani's suite, a pair of aging android servants wheeled away the debris from a lavish banquet. Klavik used his electromagnetic key to gain entry. Kurani and Buford reposed in separate lounges opposite Shatterhand's geriatric chair. Sprawled on a settee, the prince bounded to his feet at sight of Ramyn.

"Ah, Klavik; there you are," hailed the PM. In an expansive mood, Kurani raised his brandy snifter in salute. "Come sample this magic elixir. It compares favorably with the best brew from our own vineyards."

Making it a point to choose the seat next to Buford, Klavik took part in the small talk, interjecting an innocuous comment from time to time. Ramyn was quietly chitchatting with Kewart across the suite's riparian chamber, so-called because of a softly tinkling fountain in every suite. After a moment, they rose and slipped into the PM's bed-sitting chamber. As the door slid shut, the prince sent a sly, over-the-shoulder grin Klavik's way.

For some reason, Klavik found it easier to converse with Buford than on previous occasions. Lolling comfortably on the divan, he listened to the ops manager anecdote concerning the notable foibles and eccentricities of Eden's parade of monied guests. Shatterhand in turn followed with an explanation of how the Parvon Syndicate kept raising the cost of a holiday sojourn in Eden due to the fabulous overhead expense of maintaining and operating the pleasure world.

At a lag in conversation, Klavik asked Buford how many outworld neohumans lived and worked in Eden.

"Staff . . . ?" Buford revolved the query. "Offhand, roughly ninety thousand. Not all are outworlders, however. A few, the children of employees and former staffers born and bred in Eden, elected to stay and make careers for themselves."

"Interesting," said Klavik, "to learn of neohumans native to Eden. I assume they're educated elsewhere?"

"The specialists, of course. All things considered, we employ an encyclopedic cadre of ecologists, engineers, technicians, safari leaders, marine biologists, and specialists in other disciplines. The list runs the gamut of expertise, including esoteric gaming, water sports and so forth."

Klavik said in the same casual vein, "Considering the planet's size, I would have imagined a much larger staff. Quite a few employees must be required just to service and program the android population."

"Fewer than you might think, Mr. Klavik." Like most professionals, Buford was eager to talk about his specialty. "The androids are programmed in local centers using formulas and microvoltages computer-standardized once the units reach stable maturity."

"Ingenious," remarked Klavik. "Don't you think so, sir?"

Having sensed where the questions were leading, Kurani was the picture of wide-eyed innocence. "Why, yes. It sounds very efficient."

"May I ask," inquired Klavik, "if you program Ramyn personally?"

Buford tried to field the question on the first bounce, but the emotional spike it generated jarred Klavik. "Not . . . personally," denied the operations manager. "She, uh . . . Ramyn is classified as a professional companion programmed as an adept in the social graces. She was drawn from the Village labor pool, programmed there."

"She's exquisite," remarked Klavik.

Shatterhand seized the opening. "If you're inclined to use that particular unit, Mr. Klavik, you have only to say so. I'll be happy to have her programmed accordingly."

Klavik frowned. "Use . . . ?" he said as if testing the word.

"Forgive me; it's an insider term. I suggest it only because you seem taken by her. On the other hand, have you looked over our bevy of courtesans? Most female units are not only younger than Ramyn, but comelier."

"I find that hard to believe."

"It's not an exaggeration, I assure you."

"I'm certain they're everything you say, but . . ." Klavik hesitated. "There's something special about Ramyn. Let me think about it."

"Gladly."

Klavik returned his attention to the operations manager. "Getting back to what we were discussing, approximately how many neohuman technicians are required to service and program the android population?"

Buford conspicuously avoided eye contact with the questioner. "I would estimate between fifteen and twenty thousand, though quite a few double at other specialties."

"Do you recall offhand," asked Klavik, "who programmed the androids assigned to attend His Omnipotence during the fatal carriage ride?"

While by no means caught off balance by the query, it shook Buford. Klavik all but winced at the bubble of naked alarm expanding from the man's mind. The bubble burst. Buford shot a stricken glance at his superior.

Nonchalantly sipping brandy, Shatterhand did not react.

"If I, uh . . . remember correctly," stumbled Buford, "it was Emil who programmed those units."

Kurani's chuckle was meant to ease the sudden tension, but it had the opposite effect. "Don't let Klavik's one-track mind alarm you," the PM said dismissively. "A professional criminalist, he's afflicted with tunnel vision when it comes to the purpose of our investigation. When taken to view the tragic scene there on the roadway, Klavik judged the carriage His

Omnipotence rode in had not been the target of a missile launched from atop the cliffs. He believes the conveyance was booby-trapped with explosives.”

“Oh?” Shatterhand’s head turned slowly. “An interesting speculation, Mr. Klavik. What evidence prompted that postulate?”

Busy evaluating pulses of emotional distress radiating from Buford, Klavik described in very few words the crater’s symmetrical, undeformed topology as the basic rationale.

A thoughtful nod by Shatterhand. “Your thesis does sound convincing. But I must protest your veiled implication that by programming the androids I had some connection with the hideous crime. Implying complicity in the terrible tragedy is unwarranted and unfair, Mr. Klavik. Some time ago, the n-space message requesting a reservation for your sovereign explicitly stated that his identity was not to be compromised. If not for that requisite, the Village’s presidential suite, an honor guard, and the preferential treatment Eden normally accords guests of the highest caliber would have been made available. As a function of ensuring his anonymity, I gave His Omnipotence my personal attention during his all too brief stay, including the selection and programming of units assigned to his service.”

Realizing he’d touched a raw nerve ending, Klavik had strained throughout the executive’s disclaimer, trying to apprehend a vestige of emotional perturbation. He was not only disappointed, but mildly disconcerted. The other’s emotional self-control had remained uncannily intact. “Please accept my apologies, Mr. Shatterhand. No such implication was intended. I only wished to shed light on what is to us a matter of grave concern. Our debt of honor to the peoples of Kraan demands that we learn how many potential suspects exist before commencing a vigorous investigation. At of now, culpability is totally enigmatic, but an enigma we are committed to solve. Any individual or group among Eden’s tens of thousands of neohuman employees could be responsible, or some way involved. A possibility, or perhaps a likelihood, also exists that some offworld culprit might have slipped into Eden in order to commit the crime.”

“Allow me to correct that impression,” said Shatterhand. “It would be literally impossible for a stranger to ‘slip’ into Eden unnoticed.”

There! Klavik thought he discerned a flicker of semi-tangible emotional unrest, but quickly grew less certain it had been there. Had the transient spike originated from Shatterhand, or his operations manager; it wasn’t clear. “Let me again beg your indulgence, Mr. Shatterhand. Civility is difficult to sustain while working in total darkness; it make our investigative efforts terribly frustrating. Excuse my rude, insensitive questions and shoddy manners, if you will. It’s just that we must cover all bases, look under every bush, chase down every lead. In order to do that, we are in desperate need of your assistance if we’re to learn everything possible about the internal workings of Eden, specifically details pertaining to the neohuman staffers.”

Shatterhand thawed slightly. “It is I who should apologize, Mr. Klavik. You can’t begin to guess how deeply we sympathize with your loss and present predicament. As I promised, every conceivable effort will be made to aid your investigation.”

* * *

Shatterhand paused, then added, “If candor is the spirit of the moment, let me mention a collateral problem. Holovision Director Victor Chatham has lodged numerous, strenuous complaints about the injury to a member of his troupe.”

“That topic,” put in Kurani, his bonhomie sloughing away “leads me to voice a collateral problem, Shatterhand.” The PM’s stentorian basso voice rose full-flower from the depths of his chest, making him sound more aggressive than he might have intended. In so many words, he demanded to know why Shatterhand had broken faith and informed the holovision director who they were, the purpose of their visit to Eden.

His composure outwardly unruffled by the outburst from a different quarter, Shatterhand said, “I did not betray a confidence, Mr. Prime Minister. Since not long after the tragedy, I have been forced to fend off Mr. Chatham’s entreaties to eradicate the crater obstructing his filming process. Without divulging any particulars, I simply explained that investigators from your world would arrive shortly and, subsequently, the unsightly blemish would be eliminated. In the meantime, Eden has been expensively reimbursing Mr. Chatham for lost time and effort.”

“You mean the holovision fellow has no idea who we are?”

“Not an inkling. Will it be acceptable to fill in the crater now that you’ve inspected it?”

“Not quite yet,” said Klavik. “I want to take some measurements, collect a few soil samples for qualitative analysis. Learning the constituents of the explosive used may provide a clue to its provenance.”

Shatterhand had no choice but to acquiesce, and requested that Klavik do so at his earliest convenience. “You must appreciate my position. Bel Monde Holovision contracted for the use of a pristine setting, and to fulfill that contract we must accommodate our obligation. You would never believe the astronomical cost involved in bringing a holovision cast and crew here on location. Much as I regret the necessity of paying Mr. Chatham for his troupe’s lost time and effort, a second factor is of equal concern: the monies must come from Eden’s discretionary fund, a matter of paramount interest to Parvo’s accountants.”

“I’ll take care of it first thing in the morning,” declared Klavik.

“Eden will be so grateful.” The geriatric chair drifted backward. “It’s growing late, Mr. Prime Minister. Let me offer our sincere appreciation for your gracious hospitality. It has been a thoroughly enjoyable evening. Please convey the best regards of Mr. Buford and myself to His Royal Highness.”

Mentioning Kewart evoked a sharp emotional blip in Buford. Klavik wondered what had inspired his seemingly unwarranted reaction.

“Good to have you, Shatterhand.” The PM rose from the lounge. “We’ll get together and discuss matters sometime soon, eh?”

“I’ll look forward to it, Mr. Prime Minister.”

Nodding a polite farewell, Buford followed his superior’s gliding chair. He looked back at the portal, offered a grimace intended as a farewell smile.

Shatterhand and Klavik crossed glances just as the portal slid closed. There was no enmity in the exchange, only a measure of reciprocal distrust.

“By the revered First Principle!”

Klavik whirled, shocked by the soaring tide of emotional turbulence emanating from Kurani. His features livid, the PM stood ramrod stiff in the doorway to his suite’s bed-sitting chamber.

Klavik bounded to his side.

In a lip-quivering rage, Kurani said, “Lend me your dagger. I must kill something.”

Their limbs entwined ecstatically, naked Prince and nude android “unit” lay enfolded in one another’s arms on the hydraulic bed.

TWELVE

“**W**hy keep the truth from me?” bellowed Kurani. “*Why*, Klavik?”

“I’ve already explained, sir.” Hoping to keep their conversation private, Klavik had persuaded the PM to accompany him outdoors on the balcony terrace. “I viewed the deception as an opportunity to swing Shatterhand’s subterfuge to our advantage. Holding back the fact of Ramyn’s android pose seemed a valid reason to —”

“A spy!” His distended features livid, the veins at Kurani’s temple bulged like soda straws.

“Please keep it down, sir. Through Ramyn, we may be able to gain entrée into Eden’s inner circle. I believe we should do everything we can to convince her that we —”

“*Convince* a filthy spy? I didn’t hear that. I mean to have the crippled bastard’s head on a platter for this outrage.”

Klavik had been waiting for the storm blew over, but the PM’s angry rant persisted. Furious to the point of not bothering to pause for breath, Kurani libeled Shatterhand and his “sewer of a pleasure world,” using pejoratives that would make a veteran spacehand blush. Nor did the tirade subside by many decibels when he stormed back inside the suite and prowled about in a fit of temper, castigating Eden and every neohuman in it, denigrating their miscegenous antecedents, poor-mouthing their potential descendants. Minutes passed before he wore down enough to ask after the prince.

“He’s young, resilient,” said Klavik. “A sedative must’ve been administered. The medic said he was groggy, but also sure Kewart would be himself in the morning.”

“Is *Kolodaan*’s flight surgeon still with him?”

“No, he’s attending the woman.”

“Woman, hah!”

Klavik had summoned the medic via a secure uplink to the starcruiser in a parking orbit, and then alerted the legate commanding the battle-ready maniple of Royal Elite Guardsmen stationed aboard *Kolodaan*’s pinnacle at the southern hemisphere space terminal.

Leaving the unconscious prince while he attended to him, he had hustled Ramyn away to distance her from the PM’s wrath. He had carried the nude, semi-conscious woman into his own suite had with a catch in his throat; flaccid in his arms, she’d been flawless ivory, pink-tipped and warm, indescribably lovely. After fumbling to cover her nakedness, he had revived her with a minimum of shakings and jostlings. Apathetic, thoroughly confused, she had mumbled a confession having to do with only a fuzzy recollection of events in the bed-sitting chamber. Prodding her memory had been useless; she’d been unable to give a coherent account of what had taken place.

After making her comfortable, he had searched the three interconnected penthouse suites of Petite Palais, finding nothing amiss, nothing out of place or at all suspicious. Somehow, one or more individuals had surreptitiously gained entrance to the PM’s bed-sitting chamber,

administered soporifics or whatever, then callously disrobed the royal youth and Ramyn before even more callously posing them atop the hydraulic bed in the most compromising manner imaginable.

But how had the intruder, or intruders, managed to get inside the bed-sitting chamber without being seen?

Upon returning to his suite, Ramyn was more or less herself. Still moderately dazed and confused, but for some reason not contrite, she'd sustained the android pose to the best of her ability. After sending the starcruiser's flight surgeon back to the space terminal, he had tried to pacify the former grand marshal — no simple task under the circumstances. The victim of blind, vengeful ire, Kurani had twice ordered him to dispatch the corrupting android "unit," and had gone ballistic when Klavik gingerly disclosed her true status.

* * *

Hours later, Kewart was prone on a lounge, deep in drug-enhanced sleep. Klavik listened to the PM grumble fussily preparing for bed.

"Why," demanded Kurani, "insist that we doss down here in your chambers? One room in this chrome-plated bordello is much like another. Where's the bleeding difference?"

Klavik dragged a heavy armchair across the lush carpeting, pushed it firmly against the connecting door. "Someone slip into your suite and set up Kewart and the . . . And Ramyn. How was it done, sir? I checked the glass wall; it was locked from inside. You've assured me more than once no one came past you and the others before or after you were table."

"Um, quite so." The older man halted in the act of pulling a nightshirt over his head to revolve the gravity of Klavik's declaration. "Worried, aren't you?"

"With good reason. We've naively underestimated the nature of the opposition, whoever and whatever it is, and then compounded the error by underestimating our vulnerability. From this moment on I mean to sleep with one eye open. The safest course would be to either post Royal Elite Guardsmen here in Petite Palais, or spend our nights aboard *Kolodaan's* pinnacle at the space terminal."

"Negative!" declared Kurani, rankled by the mention of a "safest course." "Let the smooth-talking cripple play the hand he's dealt out. We'll not cower behind guardsmen against this riff-raff. Do you really believe Shatterhand would dare try anything tonight?"

Klavik weighed his response. "I'm inclined to wonder if he hasn't already dared. We've little to go on. It might be an egregious error to arbitrarily ascribe the blame to Shatterhand. Who knows? The opposition has already dared to 'try something,' as you put it. Yet in doing so it has also tipped its hand."

"What makes you think that?"

"Call it guesswork, intuition, localized suspicion. I know how absurd that may sound, but I credit my —"

"Your talent," supplied Kurani. "No, absurd it is not, not at all. Shortly after I assumed office, His Omnipotence urged your mentors to brief me on their star pupil. I learned how many arrests credited to your security organization had naught to do with deductive or inductive reasoning, nor for that matter were they attributed to ordinary gumshoe sleuthing. I don't profess to understand your . . . talent, Klavik, or do I have the slightest understanding of its mechanics. But mightn't what you label 'intuition' be a facet of this sixth sense, if that's the proper term?"

I'm convinced that what you refer to as guesswork has served Kraan far better than you yourself realize, and will no doubt continue doing so. If the sly cripple *is* behind the devious, stage-managed business in my suite, we'll dig and keep on digging until the truth surfaces."

"That we shall, sir. Despite Shatterhand's professional veneer and continuing offer of cooperation, his assistance thus far has been null and void. By far the most self-contained individual I have ever encountered, he keeps his emotions tightly bottled. That disadvantage aside, we've no choice but to discover what he and the other neohuman staff personnel know, especially Buford. The man rides an emotional roller coaster hardly ever at rest, arousing suspicion each time we meet. He may be implicated in the assassination, or maybe not. What dismays me is that he's just one thousands making up Eden's neohuman staff, any or all of whom are potential suspects. I was glad to hear you veto the notion of hiding behind guardsmen. With armed men underfoot, the likelihood of learning anything worthwhile strikes me as close to zero. This way, despite the danger to His . . . to Kewart, we'll stay on our toes, await the opposition's next move."

"As you said earlier, sleep with one eye open."

"And both wide open while awake." Far from satisfied with the impromptu barricades he had erected against unwarranted entry, Klavik reviewed his defenses. Circling the spacious bed-sitting chamber, he rearranged chairs and a second settee, then draped a coverlet over the sleeping prince.

In the act of bedding down, Kurani's brief monologue continued. He endorsed the effectiveness of their defenses, yawned expansively and clambered into the hydraulic bed. "Night, Klavik."

"Rest well, sir." Assuring himself the sliding, floor-to-ceiling glass wall actuator was in "lock" position, Klavik spread cushions beside semi-translucent draperies shrouding it. Stretching out on the makeshift pallet, he verbally commanded a pair of table lamps to switch off. In darkness, he slipped the dirk out of a sheath strapped inside his left thigh, drew a delicately balanced throwing knife from a longer underarm sheath, and placed the blades within reach. Hoping the makeshift security provisions would suffice, he willed himself to relax completely and was asleep in seconds.

* * *

Parting from Buford after the dinner party, Shatterhand guided the geriatric chair across the plaza to his tower. Sophisticated audiovisual surveillance devices, all but invisible nanotechnology products, had been installed as integral parts of quietly sumptuous décor items in Petite Palais and every other VIP suite in Eden. Android proctors, and on occasion Shatterhand in person, monitored the real-time or recorded activities of important guests.

Outwardly nonplused, he reached his office suite, halted the geriatric chair as his desk and watched Klavik separate Prince Kewart from the purported android woman. He fast-forwarded, listened stoically to Kurani's enraged diatribe. Amazed to see Ramyn treated with more than token compassion, his interest peaked when Kurani's refused to summon armed protection from the space terminal.

Satisfied that the visitors had retired, he spent a moment deliberating, and opened the audio channel. "Shall I come down?"

“Aside from inconveniencing this poor creature,” replied the dead electronic voice, “doing so would be of marginal benefit. Informing us of what transpired should suffice.”

Shatterhand recounted the evening’s events, as well as the upshot, and played back a portion of the recorded audio.

“Failing to dispose of the female miscreant piques our curiosity. It is wholly inconsistent with our previous appraisal of the collective Kraan psyche.”

“It confused me as well,” admitted Shatterhand. “Ramyn was ministered to gently, and sent on her way as if nothing untoward had occurred. The obvious inference is that her android pose has been penetrated.”

“You believe our savage visitors sufficiently accomplished to penetrate her facade?”

“I believe it highly unlikely other than by inference. Yet this fellow Klavik’s talent may have —”

“Ah, his talent,” interrupted the colorless voice. “Talent will out in the end; that is in the nature of things. Allowing the supposed corrupter of their prince ling to survive fails to correlate with the predictability curve plotted by this poor creature. But for the nonce we shan’t concern ourselves with that. This wretched creature means to evaluate the development with a view toward a possible change in policy. Where our endeavor is concerned, we now consider the talented far less simplistic than estimated. He could become more than a nuisance, perhaps a genuine factor in the overall equation.”

Seconds of silence ensued. “Here is what shall be done.” The exotic gave explicit instructions.

“You consider that a wise move?” Shatterhand’s manner underwent a subtle shift.

“Violence forever begets violence. At this juncture, we wish to see if a degree of artfully scripted violence will test and possibly degrade the guardian’s mettle, and may also aid this poor creature in further defining the scope and direction of his so-called talent. The talented one amply demonstrated his affinity for violence when dealing with a minion of the entertainment company whose revenue accumulates in the coffers of our beloved Syndicate. Controlled, abortive violence should stoke the fires of self-doubt sure to be burning brightly within our guests. Of equal importance, it should encourage them to scurry about in search of non-existent villains.”

“It might even frighten them away,” suggested Shatterhand.

“An extremely remote probability. In any event, heed a solemn warning,” cautioned the exotic. “Exquisite care must be taken to denigrate the effectiveness of the units chosen. You shall incorporate precisely the designated degree of clumsiness in their programming. Our goal will be to throw a scare — is that the proper neohuman idiom? — into the princeling and chief of state, not to cause either the slightest degree of bodily harm. We wish only to unsettle them, cloud their primitive ratiocinative processes with deep-seated dread over the safety threat to both royal heir and statesman. You must take exaggerated pains to ensure that absolutely no chance exists for injury to either of those worthies.”

“And Klavik as well?” asked Shatterhand.

“The fate of their violence-prone guardian is of infinitely less consequence. We plan to subject him to further study, hence a non-fatal wound would be acceptable. But if the slightest scratch is inflicted upon either important personage, we foresee a fleet of superior military

strength descending upon this, our beloved Syndicate's lucrative enterprise. No idle warning is that. Does comprehension sit with you?"

"It shall be done precisely per your wishes," replied the executive.

"This poor creature is gratified. We warm to the unfolding sleight-of-hand theatrics while growing ever wearier of the gross discomfort visited upon us through incarceration in this inhospitable dungeon. We pine for home and hive, for yearnings suppressed, endeavors neglected. A swift, satisfactory conclusion to the Kraan affair is therefore essential."

A faint pop sounded as the exotic broke the audio connection.

Driven by the urgency of his master's command, Shatterhand closed the safe, had the portrait slide back in place. Guiding the chair to his desk, he used the vidicom terminal to call the Village labor pool and order three AV-134609, Type M, Class II-G male android units dispatched to his tower suite.

Switching off without awaiting a reply, he busied himself roughing out the calculations, and constructed three complex electro-chemical formulae designed to exactly fulfill the exotic's verbal instructions.

* * *

Klavik came awake all at once, a knife in either hand. Roused by the faint clink of metal striking metal, lying perfectly still, he rhythmically tensed and relaxed, tensed and relaxed, listening intently, then very slowly rolled his head to the left.

Amorphous shapes loomed as patches of darkness blending into the deeper darkness. Rain on the terrace announced the impending dawn, pattering in counterpoint to Kurani's bubbling snores from the hydraulic bed across the chamber from the lounge where Prince Kewart slept. His straining mental probe elicited no hint of the nervous excitement an intruder should have exhibited.

Unless, came the chilling thought, an android was nervelessly going about a pre-programmed assignment.

Holding himself motionless while evaluating the notion, he perceived movement near Kewart's lounge, and a second stealthily moving shape. Someone was creeping across the floor between his pallet next to the glass wall and the PM's bed.

Learning there were two of them made him breathe shallowly, open-mouthed for silence. Rejecting the groundswell of panic rising to batter against his shield of self-discipline, he silently cursing his lack of foresight for leaving the holstered laser weapon atop a nearby bureau. Slowly shifting the throwing knife across his chest to his right hand, he used the point of the dirk to slip off the coverlet a few millimeters at a time.

The instant he sat up, he'd be silhouetted against the draped glass wall limned in the sky glow of impending dawn. Yet exposing his presence was immaterial; what mattered was haste, and light. Light was essential; throwing at a nebulous target across the darkened chamber might squander what could well be his one and only chance.

He dared not activate the lights vocally; it would prematurely alert the intruders to his whereabouts. No, it had to be done the hard way, the common sense way.

He let himself go completely limp, very slowly gathered his knees under him, kicked off the coverlet and rolled toward the wall switch in one swift, fluid movement. He elbowed the

flush-mounted switch on the rise, eyes slitted against the sudden blaze of matched table lamps, and roared out his lungs in a yell designed to rouse Kurani.

The intruder nearest him squinted and charged, the second stranger sprang toward Kewart's couch.

Klavik stepped to one side, loosed the blade with a sweeping, underhand motion and heard a faint, satisfying *chun-n-n-k!* as the razor-sharp weapon found its mark. Bowled against the wall by his assailant, they went down together in a grunting heap.

A quick, burning sensation along his rib cage made Klavik twist away. A knee pinned his left arm and dirk. The assailant drew back to strike again, then hesitated for some reason. Klavik seized the knife wrist, absorbed a roundhouse cuff on the ear as he and his adversary tussled for advantage. They rolled over and over, coming up short against a bulky armchair.

Strong, gouging fingers probed for Klavik's eyes. Holding the assailant's wrist in a vise grip, he clamped his eyes tightly shut and thrust upward with the dirk.

Uttering a low-pitched, gurgling cry, the attacker slumped limply. Klavik shoved him away and scrambled to his feet, eyes watering.

A sizzling hiss, a pencil-thin flash of brilliance blinded him. He knuckled his eyes savagely.

Kurani sat cross-legged on the hydraulic bed, a hand laser in his hairy fist. Just inside the glass wall, a third intruder lay entangled in fallen draperies, his torso chopped half in two, a knife had fallen to the carpet from his outstretched hand. The acrid odor of ozone, mingled with the gagging stench of burnt flesh, pervaded the bed-sitting chamber.

Kurani created a minor tsunami bouncing awkwardly across the hydraulic mattress. He nudged the lasered android with a bare toe. "Sent a backup to make sure of us. You all of a piece, Klavik?"

Clutching his rib cage, Klavik discovered his tunic was wringing with blood. "No damage a few stitches won't cure."

In his post-drugged state, Kewart had slept through the incident. Like the other pair, the assassin who had wounded Klavik was young, and looked fit; a small trefoil stigma disfigured his left cheekbone, his lips were frothed with carmine. The android groaned, clawed weakly at his blood-soaked tunic where the haft of Klavik's dirk protruded.

Kurani dropped to one knee. "This one's done. A shame; I would've liked to question the bastard, learn who programmed him."

"It would be time wasted," said Klavik. "I'd wager his programming proscribed the telling tales."

"How the devil did they get in?" demanded the PM.

Klavik pointed to the far wall, where a narrow section of paneling had sprung free. Within the opening, when he went to it, pulled the paneling fully open, was a monk's hole, a cramped spiral stair leading downward into blackness. He pushed the section of paneling closed with a punctuating click.

"Backstabbing vermin!" Kurani tore into the interconnecting door's furniture barricade. "If the gloves are off, so be it. But here, you look woozy. I'll call the space terminal, get *Kolodaan's* flight surgeon back here on the double. Sit yourself down and mind your wound till I return."

Klavik gratefully did as he was told.

THIRTEEN

Two hours later, Kolodaan's flight surgeon, a middle-aged physician with a military mindset, left Petite Palais in an unhappy frame of mind, grossly offended by Klavik's stubborn refusal to be taken up to the starcruiser's sickbay where he could receive "proper treatment" for what the doctor called "a potentially serious wound."

His torso bandaged, left arm in a neat sling, Klavik had ignored the medic's protestations. After seeing the flight surgeon out, he had gone to look after his charges. Despite the supposedly soundproofed suite, snatches of Kurani's bass bellow were audible in the hallway. Klavik rang the chime, received no response, and knocked loudly. Still there was no break in the harsh language issuing from inside. Groping one-handedly in the slash pocket of his tunic, he used his electromagnetic master key to let himself in.

Shatterhand's gleaming geriatric chair floated at the center of the expansive riparian chamber, its back to the fountain, its occupant at bay. Marching to and fro, head thrust forward belligerently, his leathern features distended, the PM was using extremely colorful language to excoriate the planetary chief executive. An enraged glance at the new arrival caused him to break off in mid-sentence.

"Klavik, we're brazenly told what took place in the night was Buford's doing. He said the slimy cur has conveniently run off somewhere."

"An unexpected turn of events, sir." His enhanced sense of esthesis fully attuned, Klavik probed for inner turmoil in Satterhand. Waves of red rage mixed and righteous indignation emanated from Kurani, effectively blanketed all other emotions.

"You must believe me," pleaded Emil Shatterhand. "An attack of this nature has never before taken place in Eden. It leaves me in a state of profound shock. I would never have believed it of Buford."

Klavik regarded the executive coolly. "Judging from my impression of Mr. Buford, I judge it highly unlikely that he would have, or could have, engineered the assault on his own initiative."

"I share that view," said Shatterhand. "Buford and I have been business associates for a number of cycles, and mutually enjoyed a working relationship. I know the man thoroughly, know him as a trusted colleague, a confidant. Implicating him in a murderous attack on your persons is . . . Frankly, it's inconsistent with his personality. Having him disappear makes me wonder if perhaps he's been abducted, or come to harm in another way."

Klavik swallowed the bait willingly. "Should either of those postulates prove true, I'm afraid it broadens the list of suspects by an order of magnitude?"

"How so, may I ask?"

"Despite your earlier disclaimer, it infers that one or more outsiders have infiltrated Eden."

A reluctant nod. "It's impossible to imagine how such a thing could have been accomplished, yet I'm forced to admit the remote possibility. Our superbly efficient android

proctors have at their disposal round-the-clock aerial and orbital surveillance systems. But the false paneling, the hidden stair leading up to this suite leaves me at a total loss. When first informed of the incident, I reviewed the architectural records of Petite Palais. No such hidden access existed when the building was constructed.”

“Forgive me for being indelicate,” Klavik hastened to say before Kurani could interject an acid comment, “but you told us no stranger could ever slip into Eden covertly. Apparently someone did. If so, wouldn’t he or she have masquerade as a staff member, an android, but not a guest?”

In a musing tone, Shatterhand said, “Entering Eden on the sly would pose extraordinary, inordinate difficulties.”

A deft sidestep thought Klavik.

“What was that you said?” rasped Kurani, his ire once again blossoming. “Last night, you said it would be an absolute impossibility —your exact words, Shatterhand. Now you’re weasel-wording your way around that statement, telling us sneaking into your plush bagnio would pose ‘inordinate difficulties.’”

“Mr. Prime Minister, Eden isn’t a large world per se.” Exhibiting what to Klavik was unnatural calmness, the executive added, “Even so, the land masses, islands and undersea habitats offer myriad hiding places. Air traffic, except for my personal verticraft and a number of emergency vehicles, is totally prohibited, and all ground-to-orbit shuttlecraft are monitored in multiple venues. But universal surveillance does not entirely preclude unwarranted entry by someone willing to risk apprehension and incarceration.”

Before Klavik could pose a question, Kurani demanded an immediate check on all guests, staff members and androids.

“Guests and staff, of course,” said the director without hesitation. “I have already issued orders to that effect. But it would be a waste of time and energy to screen the android population.”

“Oh?”

“Androids are programmed on a rotational basis at assigned service centers. The computer would instantly flag any unit that failed to appear.”

Kurani’s indignant snort evidenced his opinion of not just androids, but their masters as well. “I take it ‘unit’ designates a single, faceless member of your livestock herd.”

“That is hardly how we think of androids, Mr. Prime Minister.”

“Think of them any way you damn well please! Wouldn’t it be relatively simple,” demanded Klavik, “for a neohuman intruder to fake a beauty mark and lose himself or herself among the android population?”

“Briefly, perhaps,” admitted Shatterhand. “Android activities are continuously monitored, recorded and reviewed.”

“Yet considering the planet’s overall area,” said Klavik, adding a second objection, “and a relatively small staff compared to the android population, I assume the monitoring systems are manned by androids.”

“Well . . . yes.”

Klavik’s thin smile was a parody of amusement. “And who has been set to watch over those selfsame watchers, Mr. Shatterhand?”

“Touché, Mr. Prime Minister. Very well, it will be done as you suggest. Every current guest, staffer and android unit will be cataloged, subjected to verification and an examination of their recorded movements. Authenticating every individual on the planet is no overnight task, however. A report will be available for several standard periods.”

A pregnant silence ensued, and threatened to drag on indefinitely. The geriatric chair pivoted soundlessly toward the entry.

“Gentlemen,” said Shatterhand in parting, “this attack on your persons impugns my good offices. It is inconceivable and horrifying to think some unknown agency may have penetrated Eden and is operating in such a despicable manner. Should that prove true, I more than anyone have a desperate need to expose the perpetrator. To say I’m devastated by what has occurred may sound pallid, but I assure you that we will continue to assist your investigation in every way. Allow me to tender a sincere apology on behalf of —”

“Save your sorry,” Kurani said heatedly. “What’s being done to find this Buford fellow?”

“As a fugitive, it won’t be possible for him to hide more than a period or two.”

“Ah, now we’re into *another* ‘impossibility,’ said Kurani, his sarcasm unalloyed.

Shatterhand ignored the rebuke. “Gentlemen, you have my solemn promise: Buford will be found if he is still among the living. When told of the incident, I immediately dispatched squads of android proctors to interdict the space terminals in either hemisphere. The tube transit system linking all planetary sites has also been under continuous audiovisual surveillance, and house-to-house searches have been instituted in every village, spa, ranch, casino, agristation and undersea habitat worldwide. You have my guarantee that Buford will be located. I ‘m giving the on-going search operation my undivided personal attention.”

A caustic grunt was Kurani’s only retort.

* * *

The portal’s halves slid closed behind the geriatric chair, and the prime minister wagged his head disgustedly. “If that cripple ever tells the truth by accident, he’d quickly tell a lie to cover up the slip.”

Klavik put a finger to his lips. Taking the PM’s elbow with untoward familiarity, he commanded the glass wall to slide open and ushered Kurani out on the sunwashed balcony-terrace. “Our chambers,” he whispered, his lips decimeters from the other’s ear, “are bugged, sir. From this moment on, say nothing indoors you don’t wish overheard.”

“Bugged?” The PM flushed. “Are you certain?”

“Positive. I carefully inspected all three of our suites. Nanotechnology surveillance devices are either integral within fixtures, craftily embedded in the wainscot paneling, or the walls of each room, including the autolaves.”

“And you failed to mention it to me until *now*.”

“There is such a tactic as giving the opposition enough rope, sir. I believe there might be a way of turning the eavesdropping to our advantage.”

“The gall of that crippled swine! Klavik, you’ve developed the atrociously bad habit of keeping things from me. I won’t have it, will not *stand* for it.”

“I regret the necessity, but thought it wise to set the hook firmly before trying to reel in the fish.

“An advantage, what advantage? Please tell me if you don’t plan on hold back further information?”

“I believe it time to plant a few seeds of doubt, then wait to see what sprouts, and perhaps learn something useful from the opposition.”

His cheeks still rouged with anger, doubt written large in the drooping corners of his mouth, Kurani eyed the security director sternly. “Point taken,” he conceded. “And our next move?”

“Kewart’s drowsiness,” said Klavik, “is persisting beyond what the flight surgeon felt to be acceptable. He suggested that we keep His . . . our young companion under observation aboard *Kolodaan* for a period or two. Ramyn and I are going back to the crater this morning, where I’ll take measurements, collect soil samples. Afterward, if you’re agreeable, we can return to the starcruiser in the pinnace, send Kewart to sickbay, submit the soil samples to the lab, and stay aboard until the analysis results are in.”

Kurani eyes narrowed as he weighed the proposal. “Scheming, aren’t you, playing each hand we’re dealt close to the vest. I like that scenario; it makes sense. Shuttling up to *Kolodaan* will also give me a chance to get on ultraband and pulse the Lord Regent about current conditions at home. As you foretold before departure, I’m beginning to feel skittish about staying away too long. Done, Klavik! Get on with your business at the crater, and we’ll leave this beauteous hellhole of brothel behind us for a spell.”

* * *

“Cut!” The assistant director’s bullhorn echoed Chatham’s command. Adhering to filmmaking tradition of long standing, the director called, “Print it,” although there was nothing to print. Googols of digital bits and bytes comprising a sequence of laser-driven holographic images were stored in immutable arrays on ultra-expensive holodiscs.

“Topnotch job, kiddies,” the director cried, voicing a standard cliché that complimented the cast and crew. “Okay, it’s a wrap here. Let’s hustle all props over to the east wing terrace chop-chop. The light will begin to go in another hour.”

Adding a few obligatory remarks, Chatham stroked the substantial egos of his stars, enthused by the leading lady’s performance during a just concluded, ultra-passionate love scene. “You were smashing, Shirley. The light in your eyes was like moonlight.”

Shirley Matson, known to interstellar holovision audiences as Cheryl Brooks, fixed her co-starring legal spouse with a deadpan stare. “Thanks a bunch, Chatty. That makes me an even better actress than my agent says I am.”

“Stuff it, Shirl!” Megastar Miles Matson returned her deadpan stare with usurious interest. The Perfect Profile turned and high-stepped over a splay of armored cables snaking away from the grounded holovision blimp. He acknowledged with a mocking tip of his hairpiece the accolade of a pretty script girl, had his broad, muscular back figuratively patted by a writer of additional dialogue. Loose-limbed, he slouched toward his portable dressing room, blinked upon encountering a brilliant wash of sunlight on the hilltop chateau’s flagstone terrace.

Before going into his dressing room, a null-grav trailer parked at the far end of the terrace, Matson paused at the balustrade to survey the beach below. Spotting movement in the seaside lane, he called, “Hey, Genius! Come here and see what I see.”

Chatham appeared in the doorway. “What . . . ?”

“Someone down there’s poking around your favorite crater.”

“Oh?” The director came to lean beside the actor on the balustrade and squinted myopically. “Are those handy-dandy binocs in your dressing room?”

“Yeah.” Miles dodged inside, plucked the binoculars from a table. When Chatham held out his hand, the actor pulled back. “Don’t get grabby, Genius.” Resting his elbows on the balustrade, Matson adjusted the wiggle-waggle electronic focus, keyed a button to boost magnification. “Well hul-lo there!” he said with sudden interest.

“Is it him?” asked Chatham.

“Beats the merde out of me.” The megastar’s classic features twisted in a lascivious grin. “There’s a ‘him’ down there right enough, but it’s the ‘her’ who beggars description. Here, have a peek.”

“Your brain dangles between your legs,” accused Chatham. He lifted the instrument to his eyes, made a minor adjustment. “I’ll be damned! It *is* him.”

“Tall galoot with his arm in a sling?”

“The same, in the flesh. He’s the hunk who took out Timmy, my key grip. Believe I’ll stroll down, pay him a visit and see if I can pass a few words with the monster without getting trashed.”

“Count me in, Genius. I’d wouldn’t mind a dolly-in closeup of the femme.”

Chatham regarded his superstar with a speculative air. “Miles, you’re welcome to tag along,” he said, handing back the binoculars, “only if you promise to heed some extra-sincere advice.”

“Such as. . . ?”

“Be very, very extra-polite to that overlarge specimen.”

“Polite,” scoffed the actor, arrogantly proud of his filmatic physical prowess. “How much fuss can he make with one wing kaput?”

“One might be enough,” Chatham said knowingly. “Listen, I’ve seen no-holds-barred scuffles in one watering hole or another, a dozen street brawls, and one or two serious dust-ups where only one participant walked away. I’ve coached ballsy stuntmen who cared zip about whether school kept or not. In short, I’ve seen or supervised every kind of hand-to-hand fracas, but I have never — accent on *never* — seen another neohuman move like that monster did.”

“Do tell.” Matson grinned. “Let me dump the binocs, and we’ll shuffle downhill.”

* * *

Aided by Ramyn’s thumb-fingered assistance, Klavik had taped the crater’s gross width and depth dimensions. At one point, holding the end of the tape, he had called, “What are you reading?”

Her reply had caused him to laugh aloud: “Sixteen meters, and, uh . . . four big marks, and three little ones.”

Busy one-handedly collecting soil samples from random points inside the pit’s sandy circumference, he was startled when someone said, “Hello, there,” in *Lingua Stella*.

“Damn!” added a sulky baritone voice. “Should’ve known the five-star dolly was a friggin’ android.”

Klavik recognized Victor Chatham, but not the stranger with him — a tanned, muscular, extravagantly handsome man clad vermillion swimming briefs and fancy, hand-crafted sandals. The pair stood on the crater's lip, looking down and studying him with frank curiosity.

"May I ask your name, sir?" Chatham's query was delivered with exaggerated politeness. "Klavik."

"A pleasure to meet you under more pleasant circumstances, Mr. Klavik. At the risk of giving offense, may I ask when we can hope to have this eyesore filled in?"

Klavik dipped sand into a small glass vial, capped the tube and slipped it into the slash pocket of his tunic, where it clinked loosely against others. He took his time clambering dexterously out of the shallow crater. "We're finished here. I'll let Shatterhand know he can have it filled, the roadway resurfaced."

"You don't know how delighted I am to hear you say that, Mr. Klavik." A warm smile. "I daresay you've recognized Miles Matson, the star of our epic."

Klavik looked Matson over coolly. "I regret never having seen his work."

The megastar blinked, miffed by Klavik's indifference. "I guess," he drawled, "holovision hasn't yet made an appearance in . . . wherever the hell you're from."

"Holovision entertainment is very popular at home," said Klavik. "I seldom find time to enjoy it."

"Speaking of entertainment," the actor said, leering meaningfully, his head tilted toward Ramyn, "if you can spare the use of your . . . assistant for a while, how about having her programmed my way?"

As an 'android,' Ramyn had not been introduced. She stood apart, eyes downcast, a faint spot of color blossoming on either cheek.

Promising himself to exact punishment for the callous remark, Klavik pretended to consider the proposal. "I'm afraid not," he said in an offhand manner. "Private stock."

Miles Matson snickered. "That part I believe. I'll get down on my knees and beg Shatterhand to open the special bin she came out of."

"Mr. Klavik," said Chatham, "have you ever done any acting?"

"Pardon me?"

"Acting, Mr. Klavik. I've earned a reputation of sorts," explained Chatham, "by doing a number of rooting, tooting shoot-'em-up features loaded with action galore. A man of parts like yourself could earn a small fortune in holovision."

"You're not serious, Mr. Chatham."

"Perfectly serious, Mr. Klavik. We could do a quickie test, see if the holovision blimp likes what it sees as much as I'm sure it will. What do you say?"

"I'm no actor," Klavik said stiffly. "Nor am I for hire."

Chatham shrugged off the response. "No actor? I've spent my adult life working with actors, wondering what a strict definition might be." He turned to the megastar. "What exactly would you say an actor is, Miles?"

"Ancient wisdom," said Matson, continuing to undress Ramyn from behind the glare goggles that shielded his eyes, "says it's remembering your lines and taking care not to bump into the other actors."

Chatham said more earnestly, "Mr. Klavik, I have a strong suspicion that you possess a rare quality money can't buy. It's called presence. When an actor who happens to be blessed with it is 'on,' the audience watches and listens only to him or her, as if no one else in the scene existed."

"You must excuse me now," said Klavik. "I'm rather busy."

"Please take no offense," said the director in a manner so supplicating it amazed Miles Matson, who had never before heard anything like it come out of Chatham's mouth. "If you should happen to change your mind, please look me up. We'll be shooting down near the equator in the big game preserve for several standard weeks. I'd dearly love to fudge you into our pic as the Great White Hunter. Do it in a finger snap if the test pans out and you're willing to sign a short-term contract. Will you think about it?"

In lieu of the brusque dismissal on to his lips, Klavik seized on Chatham's invitation as the quickest way to be rid of him and his companion.

"Thank you, Mr. Chatham. I'll certainly consider it."

"Great!" The director clapped his hands. "Once this hole in the roadway's erased, we're going to move back down here for a short spell, then head for the island. You will tell Shatterhand it's okay to do the fix?"

"The instant we return to the Village, Mr. Chatham."

"Appreciate it, I really do. Hope the arm feels better soon. And please keep my offer in mind?"

"Some dazzler, that one," remarked Matson. He made a final, lewd appraisal of the "android unit" and trudged off through the sand at Chatham's heels.

* * *

Hazel eyes frosted, her carmine lips a taut, uncompromising line, and Ramyn stared after the retreating figures.

If looks could kill, thought Klavik, his enhanced empathic sense absorbing the shockwave of her anger. "No point," he said quietly, "carrying out the pretense any longer, Ramyn. Not when we're alone."

She started as if she'd been pinched. "Excuse me, sir?"

"Relax, be yourself. Your secret is safe with me."

Her sharply indrawn breath was the only sign of comprehension. "I don't understand, sir."

"Give it up," he said, maintaining a neutral tone of voice. "Leave playacting to the self-centered pig who couldn't stop ogling you."

Her features flushed, eyes downcast, Ramyn mussed sand with the toe of her sandal. At length she said, "Emil will be disappointed. I suppose I gave myself away the other night when you dressed me."

"No, it happened that first evening on the terrace. May I ask a favor?"

"So that's why you . . ." She stopped, met his gaze squarely, unhappily. "What kind of favor?"

"Would you mind carrying on with the android charade a while longer?"

"Why bother? I'll explain to Emil how you . . ."

“Please don’t. Not yet,” he urged. “It’s important for Shatterhand to think my companions and I swallowed your performance whole, that we’ve never thought to question what you pretend to be.”

Ramyn looked even more troubled. “Why is it important?”

“I’ll fill you in later.”

“You don’t really believe Emil had anything to do with the assassination.”

“I really don’t know, one way or the other. Everyone in this peculiar world is automatically suspect. My friends and I have been fighting ghosts, waging an uphill battle against stupendous odds, and we aren’t even close to locating the battlefield, let alone the opposing forces.”

“I understand, but —”

“No, I seriously doubt whether you do. Come with me to the space terminal, Ramyn.” He reached down, casually took her hand. “The prince and prime minister are already aboard our ship, and the pinnacle is standing by to lift off again. His Royal Highness would love to show you the starcruiser while these soil samples are being analyzed. Come with me. You’ll enjoy yourself.”

Ramyn thought it over. She suddenly flashed a dazzling smile. “Why not?”

Klavik helped her climb aboard the sloop and cued the expressionless android driver. The small carriage turned around in the lane, heading back toward the Village.

Ramyn did not withdraw her hand from his.

FOURTEEN

Orchestrated by the muted thunder of thrusters, the pinnacle jockeyed to match vector and velocity with the orbiting starcruiser. A faint *clum-m-mp!* conducted through the hull, seconds later the soft insufflation of adjusting air pressures, announced docking.

Prince Kewart had been eagerly waiting to greet them at the midships airlock. The outer hatch sealed automatically; the umbilical tube bridging the gap between the *Kolodaan* and co-orbiting pinnacle was unshipped, stowed. Kewart glowed with surprise and delight when the airlock’s inner hatch cycled open. Ramyn was standing beside Klavik in the warship’s pseudo-gravity field.

Kurani had been welcomed back aboard by an old crony, the Royal Aerospace Forces marshal in command of the starcruiser. They went to the captain’s quarters to resume a private conference.

After asking how Kewart was feeling, Klavik left Ramyn with the grinning prince and rode the elevator below decks. He dropped off the crater measurements and soil specimens in the ship’s lab, then visited the surgery to undergo additional disinfecting irradiation, and had the bandage changed on the knife wound. Refreshing himself in his compartment, he donned a clean tunic and sat down to dissect and sort out the “knowns” pertaining to the investigation’s progress.

Rather the lack of it came the glum thought.

In a querulous frame of mind, he felt stymied when searching for a rationale that might explain the previous night’s violent turn of events. Deeply concerned by the difficulty of

protecting his charges in an unfamiliar environment teeming with conscienceless potential malefactors, he thought about it for a half-hour, came to no conclusions, rose and went up to the conning deck.

Exhibiting a proprietary air, Kewart and the lovely 'android' were seated in the astrogator's lounge abaft the conning bridge. The prince hailed Klavik. "How's the wound? Stiff and sore, I bet."

Klavik bowed to his future sovereign, a mildly dizzying experience under the *Kolodaan's* pseudo-gravity field. "Healing nicely, Your Royal Highness. Have you been showing the ship to Ramyn?"

The youth beamed. "Sure, we poked around, made nuisances of ourselves. Didn't we?"

"Indeed, Highness." Ramyn was careful to sustain her pose of android formality. "It's a huge vessel, so businesslike and efficient. The crewmen were considerate; they showed us everything there was to see."

"This is Ramyn's first time in space," informed Kewart.

"Really?" Klavik fielded a bemused glance from Ramyn. "Did you find your first plunge into vacuum interesting?"

"At first, it made me feel slightly queasy, sir. But after a moment . . ." A klaxon's earnest honking shredded the conning bridge, drowning Ramyn's words. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"It's the zero-gee warning," Kewart told her. "We're going irrational so old Fussbudget can use the ultraband communicator. Better grab on to something, Ramyn. A restraint harness is under the cushions if you think you need it."

"I don't understand. Are we leaving Eden?"

Kewart chuckled. "No," he told her, "the ship's not going anywhere. Ultraband only works in n-space. We have to transition so Kurani can talk to the Lord Regent back in the homeworld. He asked me to get on the horn with him. I said I had more important things to do."

Furiously excited whorls of semi-vacuum within the ship's dual fusion chambers generated terawatts of power. A flutter in Klavik's bowels, a brief pang of coriolis-induced vertigo, announced transposition of the starcruiser's thousands of deadweight metric tonnes from the normal continuum into the multidimensional neverland of n-space, where the ship's pseudo-gravity field was inoperative.

Ramyn clutched the arm of the lounge. "I feel . . . strange."

Brimming with adolescent sophistication, Kewart said, "Relax. It'll pass quickly."

With the ship under microgravity, Klavik saw a pair of *Kolodaan's* officers swim along the freefall safety lines to the entrance of the astrogator's lounge. Floating topsy-turvy above the deck matting, they eyed Klavik in a silent yet meaningful summons. He excused himself, locked Velcro-shod boots to the deck matting and motioned for the officers to precede him to a deserted section of the conning deck.

* * *

"What have you learned, gentlemen?"

"Your guess was on the mark, sir." Hesitating as if reluctant to continue, the science officer cleared his throat self-consciously. "Analysis of trace elements and the breakdown

compounds confirm the explosive as an ordinary type of gelignite. However, we have some disturbing spectrographic comparator printouts to show you.”

“Disturbing?”

“Aye, Mr. Klavik.” The armaments officer unsnapped an elastic band, unrolled a sheaf of flimsy sheets and held the printouts flat on a plot table. To Klavik, the sets of hen scratches representing brush recorder squiggles meant next to nothing.

“Look at this particular trace if you will, sir. Compare it to the others.”

To Klavik’s unpracticed eye, the traces were all but identical. He told the armaments legate so.

“Exactly, sir; that’s the stinger disturbing us. During my career, I’ve dealt with every type of explosive plastique. Gelignite differs subtly from source to source, depending on the purity of recognizable trace contaminants, each of which tend to validate a specimen, providing positive identification in much the same way as neohuman iris patterns. I’m, uh . . . I hate to come right out and say it, but what showed up in the soil samples you brought up is familiar.”

“Familiar in what way?”

“Unless someone convinces me otherwise,” said the armaments officer, “I judge the explosive mixture used in the assassination to be a product of Kraan.”

A chill crawled between Klavik’s shoulder blades, worked its way down his spine. “Are you certain?”

“Negative, sir. Not one hundred percent certain,” hedged the other. “Establishing evidentiary proof would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. But I’d stake my commission on the fact that the basic constituents either came from Kraan, or a planet with an all but identical crustal composition of roughly equivalent epicyclic age, and similar esoterica.”

Klavik looked meaningfully from one officer to the other. The expressions of both officers was neutral, but the apprehension in their minds read plainly. “You were correct; the allegation is extremely disturbing. I’m sure you both realize how serious the consequences of this discovery could be.” He paused, reflected briefly. “I’ll tell the prime minister at once. Since I’m certain he will invoke the officer’s code of silence, I’ll speak for him until he reinforces the directive. Forget these findings, disclose them to no one, discuss them with no one. Is that understood?”

The officers, both career professionals, readily agreed.

“Secondly, I want all remaining soil samples and analytical printouts committed to the ship’s fusion furnace. It should be obvious why that is necessary.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“My compliments, gentlemen. Good job well done.”

* * *

His thoughts gyrating wildly, his mind alive with dark foreboding, Klavik stayed where he was for some time, deliberating, revolving the potential ramifications of the disquieting revelation. The klaxon began honking again, surprising him. After no more than fifteen minutes in n-space, the starcruiser was preparing to retransition into the relativistic continuum. Grasping the freefall safety line, he tugged himself back into the astrogation lounge.

Kewart seemed equally surprised. “Old Fussbudget didn’t jawbone the Lord Regent long, did he? Hang on, Ramyn; going back to normal sometimes makes for a bumpy ride.”

A pronounced tremor ran through *Kolodaan*, rattling a few loose objects on the conning bridge. After a second surge of minor dizziness, a feeling of general disquietude, Klavik felt himself grow heavier. He sank into a lounge across from Kewart and the woman, knowing it would be inappropriate to break the news in Ramyn's presence.

"Klavik!" The PM urgently beckoned him.

* * *

Scowling, Kurani did not think about what he did when taking the security director's immobilized arm, drawing him aside.

Klavik winced.

"Oh, dreadfully sorry. Dull of me not to remember your injury."

"It's nothing, sir." Klavik's sense of esthesis warned him of the other's roiling emotions. "Trouble at home?"

"What? No, no, nothing of the sort. The Lord Regent reassured me things were on an even course in Kraan. It's something else entirely, Klavik. I was in the midst of relating the quagmire we've been foundering in dealing with Eden's nest of jaded degenerates, when the watch officer reported scanning a strange ship orbiting in nearby n-space."

"*Sustaining* irrationality," said Klavik in disbelief.

"Aye, so it would seem. The vessel could have arrived shortly before we transitioned into n-space. *Kolodaan's* master believes otherwise."

"Maintaining irrationality over a long period when not in transit requires an exorbitant degree of power consumption, sir."

"Exorbitant," said Kurani, "is too pale a term. Which is what makes the ship's presence so puzzling. N-space sensors are traditionally unreliable when it comes to transducing irrational objects. Untrustworthy sensors notwithstanding, the stranger scans as a very large spherical vessel. Viewed the distorted backscatter image in the imaging radar tank myself; It wavered, danced in and out, grew knobs that distended, then collapsed and changed form like a living creature."

"Has its proximity been determined, sir?"

"Not with a degree of accuracy. Estimating range is also a catch-as-catch-can proposition in n-space."

"Was any attempt made to hail the ship?"

"Several, repeatedly, so the comm officer tells me. He ordered a rating to try every commonly used n-space frequency, with negative results. After retransition, I had them pulse Shatterhand's orbital traffic control satellite. The mealy-mouthed chief controller reported no knowledge of an n-space vehicle in Eden's vicinity. He promised to transition the ultraband comm module and do a search scan."

"Was the traffic controller an android, sir?"

"What? Not sure; I could distinguished no mark on his cheek, if that proves anything in this deranged hall of mirrors."

"May I offer a suggestion, sir?"

"Speak your mind always. Never hold back."

"You might order *Kolodaan* to re-transition every six or eight standard hours to keep an intermittent watch on the vessel."

“Hmm-m-m, good notion. I’ll issue instructions.”

“Repeated transitions will mean excessive energy consumption by *Kolodaan*,” said Klavik, “but seem like a wise moves, sir. When we return groundside, you might also ask Shatterhand if he’s aware of the strange ship’s presence.”

“Getting anything that resembles a straight answer from the conniving cripple is most unlikely,” said Kurani, his mood souring further. “I’ve despaired of hearing anything but skewed, misleading frivolity from the bastard.”

“Another important issue has apparently been settled, sir.” Klavik glanced about the compartment, making sure no ship’s personnel were within earshot. “Soil sample qualitative analysis brought to light a major problem.” Lowering his voice, he related the findings confirmed by the ship’s science and armament officers.

“Whaa-a-at?” exploded the statesman.

“Softly, please; let’s not attract attention.”

“Are you telling me analysis fingers *Kraan* as the explosive’s source? By the sacred First Principle, I knew it! I’ve known all along those backbiting, white-robed renegades were behind the sorry affair.”

“Leaping to that conclusion,” soothed Klavik, “could prove disastrous. It may be exactly what the opposition wants us to think.”

“Explain.”

“Covertly acquiring plastique manufactured in *Kraan*,” said Klavik, “would be relatively simple for anyone who slipped a few stellars into the right wrong pockets. It could be a plant, a red herring pointing us toward another false trail.”

“*Another* false trail . . . ?”

“I was thinking of Buford’s sudden disappearance after last night’s attack.”

“Um, yes. Of course.” The PM’s head toss gave evidence of his intense frustration. He said bitterly, “Subterfuge piled upon subterfuge enmeshed in an opaque veil, as if we were not already wallowing in morass of illusion and deceit. And your surmise is that inciting suspicion of the Kaolin high mucky-mucks, having us bite hard on the bait, could be a form of trap set by the opposition?”

“It’s one of several possibilities, sir. Dragging bait that smelly across our path could be intended to not only lull our suspicions, but redirect them toward other areas.”

“Aye, logical is as logical does.” The PM screwed his features into an improbable grimace. “By ‘other areas’ I assume you postulate that guilt could be ascribed to an unknown someone, or someones, in Shatterhand’s semi-human livestock pen.”

“Or a member of the Parvon Syndicate,” said Klavik, “or some offworld third party whose involvement hasn’t come into the light.”

“Or, or, or . . . !” The PM groaned. “Such as it is, our so-called ‘investigation’ has sunken deeper in speculative quicksand with every step taken. Deviousness is simply not my cup of tea, Klavik. We’re damned fortunate to have an investigator of your stripe to lean on. What’s next?”

“I’m still convinced Ramyn could be a key factor, sir. If not, she may lead us to an authentic key. I hope to chase down whatever presents itself through her.”

“Do you, indeed? How can Shatterhand’s spy possibly —?”

“Sir,” declared Klavik, cutting short the other’s objection, “to the best of my knowledge, only we two, in addition to Shatterhand and Buford, are aware of Ramyn’s true status. By now, Shatterhand may have surmised that we’ve learned the truth, but if so he’s concealed it well. I hope to turn the subterfuge of using Ramyn back on him, use her for our own purposes.”

“Hoist the conniving cripple by his own petard?”

“Something of that nature, yes. May I suggest a change of plans?”

“By all means.”

“I think you and His Highness should spend a few more watches aboard the *Kolodaan* while I —”

“Negative,” Kurani said quickly. “We’re a team, came up as a team, and shall go back down as a team.”

“Hear me out, if you will, sir. Until now I’ve been severely inhibited, handicapped actually, and have grown every bit as frustrated as you, maybe more so. I desperately need a few degrees of freedom to deal with the investigation in my own way, on my own terms. Ensuring the safety of you and His Highness requires too much psychic and physical energy for me to do much of anything else.

“Reflect if you will, sir,” Klavik said earnestly, “on the happenings to date. Kewart and Ramyn were drugged and compromised in your private suite that just happened to be rigged with a secret entrance. Last night, an armed attack on our persons took place, again in Petite Palais. I’ve lain awake pondering both incidents, and the second rings every bit as false as the first. The assault by a trio of androids struck me as being stamped with the identical purpose as the attempt to convince us that Ramyn had corrupted His Highness.”

Kurani frowned. “Not sure I follow.”

“Prime Minister, marionette strings are being pulled by some hidden puppeteer. Had a trio of mature, able-bodied androids been pre-programmed to dispatch us with only that objective in mind, I seriously doubt if we’d be talking together now.”

Kurani’s frown increased in severity. “Isn’t it possible you might be giving yourself too little credit, Klavik? If not for your alertness, your accuracy with a blade, we might well be —”

“With all due respect,” interrupted Klavik, “you’ve made my point for me. After much thought, I concluded that in the long run my alertness and knife work were . . . well, not really immaterial, but only partly necessary. Outright murder was not — could not have been — what the androids were programmed to accomplish. The unit I scuffled with had my knife arm pinned and was prepared to put an end to me, and then held back for no apparent reason, allowing me to recover and nail him. In retrospect, I’ve come to think of the attack as an extremely unsubtle warning, quite possibly an attempt to frighten us enough to abort the investigation and run for home.”

Kurani tugged his dewlap in thought. “More wheels within wheels,” he muttered. “You bring out potentialities I could never have imagined existed.” The PM glowered at the deck matting beneath his boots, then abruptly straightened. “Very well, so it shall be. You’ve more than earned a chance to have things your own way for a time. Go with my blessings, Klavik. His Royal Highness and I will take our ease aboard the *Kolodaan* for two or three more standard periods, but no longer mind you.”

“You won’t regret it, sir.”

“We shall see. But by the sacred First Principle’s enduring precepts, while sleuthing about on your own you’d best come up with something tangible, something we can sink our teeth into, chew and spit out.”

“I hope to do exactly that, sir.”

“Moreover,” cautioned the statesman, “while playing lone wolf I insist that you spend more than a dollop of conserved energy ensuring your own continued well-being.”

“There, Prime Minister, we are in total and complete accord.”

FIFTEEN

For some reason Ramyn seemed more animated than usual. She led Klavik with quick steps into the transit alcove a short stroll from Petite Palais, not far beyond the plaza.

“Why so hyper all of a sudden?” he inquired.

“I suppose it’s because I love gaming,” she said, scanning the directory. “Level four is what we want.”

They stepped off the descending slideramp into an artificially skylighted concourse. The tube station was deserted except for omnipresent android attendants. Bright-hued perennials in sculpted, one-of-a-kind stone jardinières painted vivid splashes of yellow, crimson, and blue. Lacy-leaved miniature bonsai trees and cushioned benches lent the long gallery an air of convivial warmth.

Ramyn chattered happily about the coming gaming venture until musical chimes warned of an arriving train. Doors rolled upward silently in a series of hitherto seamless panoramic photomurals, exposing a chain of tubular, windowless four-passenger modules. Klavik ushered Ramyn across the nearest flush threshold. Seconds later, an attention-commanding buzz warned of imminent departure. Hermetic doors rolled down, sealed with a faint, sibilant hiss.

Mild pressure on the seat of his pants pressed Klavik into the cushioned seat, easing off as the train accelerated down the involute section of tube. Their gimbaled passenger seats self-aligned themselves with the computer-controlled axis of acceleration, a force that counteracted the gravitational nulling effect of falling down the semi-evacuated tube’s descending pendulum arc. He assumed deceleration at the far terminus would be auto-compensated in an equal but opposite way.

Ramyn assessed his interest. “What do you think of Eden’s deluxe transit system?”

“Impressive,” he said, meaning it. “Efficient, tucked neatly out of sight sub-surface, and smooth; my friends and I took it from the space terminal to the Village. How does it work? Oh, I realize the cars are pneumatically driven. I mean how does the system operate? The nitty-gritty mechanics?”

“I believe,” she said with less than assurance, “nearly all air is continuously sucked out of the side-by-side tubes, letting outside air whoosh in behind the train and . . . shove it. The tubes are called, uh, ‘gravity-compensated involutes,’ something like that — point-to-point subterranean loops. Magnetics keep the cars riding above a road of . . . shells.”

“Magnetic levitation,” Klavik said dril. “My, you’re a well-informed android.”

She regarded him warily. “Klavik, in a super-solemn way of your own, you can be a dreadful tease?”

“How long are the intercontinental runs?” he inquired.

“Hmm-m-m, not sure. I think the train dives down a tube like this one, and at the bottom curves into a straight line.”

“Makes sense; a descending involute blending into a straight-line chord section, probably with an ascending involute at the terminus. But a long distance point-to-point chord has to cut deeply into Eden’s crust. I imagine the longer runs require added boost.”

“Boost . . . ?”

“Propulsive force.”

Ramyn thought it over. “I have no idea. Maybe long runs use both magnetic propulsion and levitation.”

“You,” he said jocularly, “are a *remarkably* astute android.”

Ramyn’s put a manicured forefinger to his lips. “If I were you,” she whispered, “I’d think seriously about dropping the ‘android’ bit. In Eden, you never know who’s watching, listening.”

“We surely couldn’t be monitored down here?”

“Unlikely,” she said in a stage-whisper, “but management plays the game by management’s rules. Emil likes to keep a finger on the planet’s pulse. Don’t count on privacy anywhere in Eden.”

“I’ll remember that,” said Klavik, as mild deceleration forced him deeper into the cushioned seat. “We can’t be coming in yet. You told me the nearest casino was a quarter-thousand clicks from the Village.”

“That,” she said smugly, “is why it’s called a rapid transit system.”

* * *

The car decelerated smoothly, slowed further and came to a full stop, and the hermetic doors rolled up. His arm immobilized by the sling, Klavik allowed Ramyn to precede him, emerging into a duplicate of the concourse beneath the Village that varied only in décor.

Assuming audio surveillance would be difficult, or at minimum erratic in the open concourse, he took Ramyn’s arm, held her back until a handful of fellow travelers reached the ascending slideramp beyond earshot.

“Mind if I ask a question?”

“You just did,” she said, and grinned.

“What exactly is Shatterhand’s hold on you? What sort of leverage did he use to encourage your cooperation in the android charade?”

“I knew sooner or later you’d get around to that,” she said, sounding wistful. “I’m not proud of it, but it’s no a secret. Emil and I were once . . . well, close. You couldn’t call it love, just sort of a . . . Well, with me it was a case of too much, too soon, and too easy. I developed expensive tastes in this super-expensive place, let myself go and never put on the brakes.”

Fully occupied by analyzing her emotional tenor, Klavik said, “No need to apologize.”

“I’m not at all apologetic, just answering your question. Emil was once an entirely different person. We met more than a standard decade ago, before he lost the use of his legs.”

“How did that come about?”

“No one knows. Rumor has it that he was called offworld, a mysterious errand to Syndicate headquarters. You probably know all about the Parvon homeworld.”

“No one except Parvons,” he told her, “know ‘all about’ Parvo. Before our sovereign’s first visit to Eden, galactographers and a team of other experts researched the exotics milieu and came up practically empty. Parvo is a hydrosphere, and the remote system’s primary is a blue-white star thousands of parsecs from Eden. Aside from widespread commercial enterprises, Parvons apparently need or want little to do with neohumans. Any idea long Shatterhand was offworld?”

“Oh, maybe half a standard cycle. Whatever happened, he came back in that ghastly chair, looking as if he’d aged thirty cycles. He refused to discuss it. Still does.”

“Did Buford administer Eden during his absence?”

“Yes, jointly — Bufie and another senior executive who’s since moved on to bigger and better things. How did you know?”

“I guessed,” Klavik told her. “Has Shatterhand let slip any hint of Buford’s whereabouts?”

“Not in my presence.”

Klavik speculated. “A worn-out liaison with Shatterhand strikes me as a feeble excuse for having you go along with the —”

“— android charade,” supplied Ramyn contritely. “There’s more to it. I ended up owing a few stellars here and there. Emil has my markers in his safe.”

“How few, if you don’t mind telling me?”

“Several hundred thousand, plus change.”

“Whew! An indecently large ‘few.’ All of it gambling debt?”

A slow affirmative nod.

“You must have worked very hard indeed,” he said, a burr of irritation sharpening his diction, “to lose such a fortune.”

“I did.”

“Mind if I try to find out how hard?”

Not relishing the turn of conversation, Ramyn said, “Fine! Let’s go in.”

* * *

Strolling into the plush gaming hall, Klavik’s enhanced sense of esthesis alerted him to a fresh surge of nervous excitement in Ramyn. His experience as security director had made him acutely conscious of the miseries frequently caused by gambling addiction. Had the sealed, confidential security files been accessible to Kraan’s general public, the data would have amply illustrated how many valuable lives had been shattered, or destroyed, by gaming fever. He had often marveled at the way strong-willed, nominally intelligent neohumans became obsessed by a patently futile pursuit like gambling.

“My favorite’s roulette,” said Ramyn. “Let’s buy in, give it a whirl?”

“Whirl away,” he told her. “I’m going to walk around, get a feel for the place.”

Ramyn smiled and went to purchase a tray of chips.

The spacious, high-ceilinged hall’s décor had been lifted part and parcel from Old Earth’s legendary Wild West. Red-flocked walls and simulated gaslights formed a backdrop for wasp-waisted android waitresses clad in chintz and crinoline. Mustashioed croupiers, dealers and pit

bosses wore string ties and black vests. Relatively uncrowded at the moment, the casino was alive with a murmur of voices. Now and then a winner's triumphant shriek punctuated the subdued hubbub. Square-jawed and virile, Klavik thought the virile, square-jawed android croupier at a nearby roulette table bore a strong resemblance to a display mannequin in the window of a boutique not far from his office in Kraan's capital. Judging from the fawning attentions of a middle-aged woman guest unable to take her eyes off the croupier, he surmised that the android was programmed to engage in more intimate duties during off-hours.

Ramyn came to stand at Klavik's shoulder. "I like to play my lucky numbers, seven and fourteen."

"Luck . . ? Yes, I know what you mean. In a sense, the vagaries of good and ill fortune do exist. But after watching the little white ball bounce around this wheel several times it's no wonder you lost a fortune."

Ramyn glanced at him sharply. "Don't tell me you think the house cheats."

Klavik chuckled. "Cheating would not only be pointless, but the height of idiocy. With all banking games like roulette, the house enjoys a phenomenal edge. No casino manager would dream of endangering an immortal golden goose in absolutely no danger of dying."

Not certain where he was going, Ramyn shrugged. "Hitting a specific number," she said, "pays thirty-five-to-one."

"Odds," said Klavik with conviction, "the bank can afford from now till doomsday, and beyond. On the other hand, have you weighed the odds *against* hitting a specific number?"

"Sure, one in thirty-six. There are thirty-six chances on the board, so —"

"No, no." Klavik wagged his head. "An elementary arithmetic lesson may be of benefit. Look at the wheel, thirty-nine compartments, not the usual thirty-seven or -eight in more conservative establishments. Is this casino much like the others in Eden?"

"Identical, discounting the trappings. I should know; I've tried them all."

"In that case, the roulette bank enjoys a steady income of seven-point-seven percent of cumulative wagers."

"Seven-point . . . Sorry, you've lost me."

"Of the thirty-nine compartments, thirty-six are alternately red and black, numbered consecutively. But," he added, "the final three are a zero, double-zero, and an additional fools' trap marked with a six-gun symbol. See it? Hit any of the three and the house sweeps the board."

"I know, but that doesn't mean —"

"It means," said Klavik firmly, "the bank's advantage consists of three parts in thirty-nine. On each spin, the house garners a steady seven-point-seven percent income, plus whatever it rakes in from losing colors, numbers and multi-bets. Why bother with a dishonest wheel when a soft touch like that running forever?"

"Seven-point-seven . . . So much?"

Klavik closed his eyes. "Seven-point-six-nine-two-three percent, to be precise."

"Show off!" Ramyn's nose wrinkled attractively. "All right, you've convinced me. What do you suggest instead of roulette?"

"I suggest you cash in your chips. We'll jump in the tube, zip back to The Village."

Ramyn pouted. "As well as a show-off, you're a killjoy *and* a spoilsport. Now and then guests do hit it big, you know. I've seen people strike it rich."

Klavik looked down at her, amusement in his dark eyes. “Didn’t it ever occurred to you,” he asked gently, “that each and every guest had to ‘strike it rich’ beforehand to afford a holiday in Eden?”

“Spoilsport!”

“That’s me, killjoy, spoilsport and educator. On second thought, I’ll amend that: *pragmatic* killjoy, spoilsport and educator.” He took her elbow with his free hand, guided Ramyn away from the roulette table. “Play long enough,” he said, “and you lose. It’s that simple.”

“Wait, we can’t go yet,” she protested. “Let’s at least have a drink, and look around? There are plenty of games other than roulette, including gadgety contraptions even a killjoy and spoilsport like you might find interesting.”

“Doubtful.”

“Oh, come on. I want to hear you calculate the odds on some really weird mechanical monsters.”

“Odds, no,” he told her. “Odds are man made; professional gamblers deal in percentages.”

Ramyn groaned softly. “All right, calculate the bleeding percentages.”

A petite, crinolined android waitress served Ramyn a rainbow-layered concoction in a tall, double-curved glass with a tiny parasol stuck in it. Klavik ordered brandy. Finishing their drinks, they wandered about the hall, stopping before one game of chance or another.

Ramyn’s spirits lifted when Klavik became intrigued by a contrivance featuring sixteen multi-curved, semi-evacuated, transparent tubes. Spheres in pastel colors simultaneously released at the top of each chute plummeted downward and struck the finish line’s tissue-thin membrane. Wagering was similar to bets at a racetrack, minus parimutual odds. Players selected colored spheres they hoped would strike the membrane in win, place and show positions. The magnified results of each game were played back via slo-mo in a large holovision tank.

Advertised as being of identical size, mass, density and surface finish, spheres running in the money enjoyed margins of victory in the nanosecond range. To the naked eye, all descended at an identical rate, and all simultaneously broke the plane of the finish.

“At least a win on this gewgaw,” said Klavik with a twinkle, “depends partially on pure chance. But I wouldn’t bet on it.”

Amused, Ramyn said, “Go on! Take your life in your hands, give it a try?”

“I believe not. The variables affecting each sphere, while no doubt infinitesimal, make selection a winner totally imponderable — drag, surface finish, abrasive wear, minute differences in mass, uniformity, so forth and so on. Let’s hit the transit tube. There’s something I want to discuss in private.”

“Another interrogation?”

“Later,” he said, “in private.”

* * *

Escorting Ramyn to the exit, Klavik threaded the way between tables, conscious of the stares of guests attracted by the woman on his arm despite the android stigma marring her left cheekbone.

They passed a boisterous gathering that parted to make way for megastar Miles Matson. The actor weaved through the press, leaving the noisy crowd gathered around a gaming table.

Laughter and vigorous applause saluted the megastar as he held aloft a wide-brimmed sombrero half-filled with black hundred-stellar chips.

The actor stopped short, his watery gaze locked on Ramyn. Even half-seas over, he was sufficiently aware of his surroundings to recognize pedestrian acquaintances. Oozing ribald bonhomie, he directed a knowing look Klavik's way. "Well, if it isn't the Crater Man himself. Still keeping company with this razzle-dazzler from your private stock?"

"Good evening." Klavik made as if to lead Ramyn past the star.

"Whoa, don't beat a hasty retreat, Crater Man." Grinning his patented leading man grin, Matson made a fumble-fingered project of dumping the hatful of gaming chips into the slash pockets of his beautifully tailored, cream-colored jumpsuit. Spilling a few chips he didn't bother to bend and pick them up, he whooped loudly and sailed the sombrero into the gaggle of grinning fans, turned back and placed a restraining hand on Klavik's chest while leering at Ramyn. "Listen, ol' Buddy, I'm waltzing out of this dice parlor with a bundle in my kick. It's yours, sum total, if you let me tap into your private stock. What d'you say?"

Klavik dipped his chin toward his chest. "What do you have to say," he asked in a monotone, "about retaining the further use of your hand?"

"Aw, don't be so damn stuffy," complained Matson, accustomed to having everyone jump whenever he snapped his fingers. The notion of a clod like "The Crater Man" daring to refuse the modest request never crossed his mind.

"You'll excuse us now." Klavik lifted the actor's wrist, gave it back to him.

Adopting the most intimidating glare in his repertoire, Matson reached into his bag of stagecraft legerdemain, dredging forth a gem of tough-guy dialogue. "Know something, Sport. You are one snotty sumbitch. Keeping this five-star piece of toast to yourself is conspicuous consumption, 'specially while walking around with a busted wing. Admit it, you couldn't do justice to this juicy plum if you wanted to. Name your price and she's mine for the evening. Go on, name a figure. Sky's the limit."

Klavik did not reply. Gently tugging Ramyn's hand, he turned away.

Matson reached out with clumsy haste, his wobbly intention to grab Klavik's good arm, spin him around and punch him out in the style of all the macho performances earning raves in a dozen holovision dramas.

The actor's flying fist was captured in midair by a larger, much stronger five-finger vise. With one arm immobilized by the sling, Klavik's vise contracted inexorably on the actor's balled fingers until his knuckles cracked under the pressure. Miles bleated with pain, sank to his knees.

"You've made an error judgment," admonished Klavik, ignoring a pair of hulking android bouncers who appeared from nowhere and looked ready to interfere. "In the future, you'd be wise to restrict your offensive behavior to dramatic efforts. It's foolish to irritate people native to massive worlds sustaining a higher gravitational constant than your own. Congratulations on your winnings," he told the groveling megastar. "I hope the morning finds you in better spirits."

* * *

Riding the tube back to The Village, Klavik wrapped himself in a shell of silence. His frozen, mask like features discouraged conversation. He did he loosen up until he and Ramyn

disembarked. On the ascending slideramp, he said without preamble, “You mentioned undergoing trance conditioning in conversational Kraant.”

Startled to hear him speak, Ramyn said, “Learning your language was a part of the . . . charade Emil forced me to —”

“How many trance tapes you assimilate altogether?”

“I’m not . . . Quite a few; I don’t recall. Why do you ask?”

“I suspect Shatterhand has had you conditioned to a state of gaming dependency.”

The woman slowed her pace. “Is that possible?”

“More than possible, a virtual certainty.”

“Why, damn Emil!”

“Come upstairs with me,” he invited. “We’ll see what can be learned.”

Neither of Eden’s dual moons was above the horizon. Alone in flower-perfumed starlight atop the Petite Palais roofpark, he had Ramyn recline in a chaise lounge. “Look up,” he instructed, “and find the brightest star you can see. Focus on it. Don’t strain trying to see it clearly, let it sink into your consciousness without effort.”

He sat beside her, speaking in a low, sonorous drone. “Tense yourself limb by limb, Ramyn, then let yourself go completely limp. Do it over and over again. You are becoming drowsy. Everything is fine, nothing is troubling you. You feel wonderfully at ease, dreamlike and relaxed, content.”

Ramyn offered no resistance to hypnosis, proving herself an excellent subject. At the session’s conclusion, having found out what he wanted to know, Klavik snapped his fingers and said a few words to bring her around. He reassured her, telling her she felt fine and rested, completely at ease.

Ramyn reclined indolently, her classic features softened by starlight.

Battered by a sudden, unexpected emotional wave of his own, Klavik’s senses reeled under the impact. Strongly attracted to the woman himself, he fought briefly against his own cresting emotions. His psyche buffeted by wavefront after wavefront of erotic excitement, he explained haltingly that her gaming fever was broken. The worst was over, the monkey on her back had been exiled.

But even while speaking he felt himself slipping, inundated under the torrent of physical yearning reflected in Ramyn’s dimly seen hazel eyes, a physical complement to the ardent sensuality radiating from her.

Looking at him in a way no man who called himself a man could misconstrue, she came into his arms with a rush, soft and eager, her supple body pressed hard against his.

Klavik completely lost touch with himself, and abandoned rationality in favor of the sudden, desperate need driving him to give in to the electricity flowing between them.

Lifting her easily, without apparent effort despite the sling supporting his arm and sore rib cage, he carried her downstairs to his suite, excusing his behavior to himself with the comforting though hypocritical rationalization that it was in no way a conquest, only a concession to the inevitable.

SIXTEEN

The secret lift compartment plummeted downward with visceral abandon that drew an involuntary gasp from Shatterhand. It grounded, the reinforced doors separated, triggering automatic cutoff of the blinding actinic glare vital to the exotic's existence. The geriatric chair floated slowly into the steamy hothouse atmosphere, its polychrome metal frame throwing back dull highlights in the granite chamber's crepuscular illumination. Although perspiration erupted from every pore, Shatterhand displayed neither distaste nor affinity for the stultifying humidity. Hunched in the chair beside the pool of clear liquid, he gazed down with stoic indifference at the undulant, iridescent Parvon writhing ceaselessly in the methane pool.

The chill, artificial voice tendered a plaintive greeting. "We bid you welcome to our ghastly prison."

"My apologies for the delay. I returned from The Veldt moments ago and found your summons."

"How does it fare with your esteemed colleague? Did he rebel at being sequestered like this poor creature in a place of unseemly confinement?"

"Not at all. Buford is delighted to be there." Shatterhand offered gratuitous sympathy. "It is your discomfort that causes me concern. Can something be done to alleviate these conditions, make your stay more comfortable?"

"Alas, I fear not," denied the uninflected voice. "Now then, what of our savage visitors? What recent follies have they perpetrated?"

"They aren't easily discouraged, I will say that for them. Despite our efforts, their obstinacy and perseverance show no signs of slackening."

A thoughtful interlude ensued. "In truth, this poor creature presumed that to be the case. What we formerly considered serendipitous, brash foolhardiness on their part for allowing the princeling and chief of state to accompany their guardian is now perceived as a superlatively conceived opening gambit."

"I . . . don't understand."

"Think, Shatterhand. A dispassionate examination of their erstwhile rash behavior led us to a less than totally accurate conclusion. Both highly placed personages, and the guardian as well, have in essence rendered themselves inviolate. The situation has altered, and not for the better; it has degenerated rather than improved. Each passing hour ensures the game becoming fraught with additional anxiety."

"I still do not understand."

"Ah, but you should," admonished the lackluster artificial voice. "If their hitherto fruitless visit turns fruitful to even a minor degree, or should harm come to any member of their party, the grisly repercussions are painful to contemplate. Violence, as you are aware, begets naught but violence. Unfortunately, violence happens to be Kraan's forte."

"Are suggesting," said Shatterhand, "Kraan might dare a military reprisal for the assassination?"

"Dare indeed; how else? Were some misadventure to accidentally befall Kraan's princeling or chief of state, their bellicose homeworld would not hesitate to dispatch its vaunted military forces in order to loose violence upon fragile, defenseless Eden."

“It could never come to that,” scoffed Shatterhand. “Not with numbers of wealthy, prestigious guests among us. In the larger sense, our guests are unwitting hostages to fortune. Lex Galacticum proscribes atrocities such as you picture. Harsh sanctions would be imposed if Kraan’s leadership were to —”

“You argue,” accused the Parvon, “with yourself. Upon closer examination, Lex Galacticum is but an ill-defined codification of neohuman ‘laws’ more a traditional than institutional, in addition to a listing of seldom upheld clichés known as statutes. Neohumans tout Lex Galacticum as the body of interstellar justice, but if Eden were to be ravaged we cannot believe the flimsy code would be enforced, and even if it were, by whom? Neohuman societies run true to form. The issue would be propagandized and debated hotly, ad nauseum, yet in the end nothing would be done.

“Let us now,” continued the exotic, more or less thinking aloud, “assume the worst-on-worst, and extrapolate therefrom. The decimation of Eden would disrupt our beloved Syndicate’s economic growth projections for an unacceptable number of standard cycles; secondarily, our governing swarm waxes apprehensive about the likelihood of direct action against the homeworld itself. As we foresaw, our visitors have detected the presence of the vehicle awaiting us in hyperspace. Ergo, for them to intimate the presence of the wretched creature you see beneath you is inevitable.”

“Granted,” said Shatterhand, “but would they —?”

“More than once,” pursued the exotic, “have our friends been subjected to feints and lures designed to deflect them from their quest, misdirect their energies, perhaps go so far as to frighten them into a hasty departure. On each occasion, their tenacity and aggressiveness thwarted our chess moves. Then continue to display unforeseen obduracy, an intransigent will to prevail. At this juncture, we are certain they have determined the venue of the explosive compound employed on the killing ground, yet whether that misleading slice of bait has been swallowed whole remains unclear.

“In any event, finer minds than ours,” pursued the monotonal voice, “deem he of the purported talent our de facto opposition, not the royal youth or warrior statesman. Klavik effectively countered our original gambit, and overcame the second in a manner too facile to be pleasing, both the accomplishments our peers pronounce as the workings of a substantial intellect. Our visitors regard their quest as a duty, a concomitant function of the ‘code of honor’ they espouse, whatever that may be. They champ at the bit, to borrow an obscure neohuman euphemism, eager to earn the self-esteem that will derive from what in their juvenile minds is termed ‘vengeance.’”

Having listened closely, Shatterhand nodded.

“Ah, but the best-laid schemes . . .” mused the Parvon. “The aim of our sojourn in this wretched hive of dimness and poisonous oxygen was to literally and figuratively stay well below the horizon. We had hoped to act as an observer, a consultant if you will, and nothing more, with no intention whatever of becoming an active participant. It is frightfully enervating to realize how mandatory it is to now ‘take a hand’ in the lugubrious affair, if you will overlook the tasteless pun of this poor handless creature. Yet it follows as dawn the dusk that a need for direct intervention outweighs all else, including our personal comfort. Events obviously cannot be allowed to progress along the present line, which makes it imperative for this poor creature to

attune fully with the talented one and discover his true oeuvre. Only then shall we be able to adopt proper action-decisions aimed at bringing the entire ill-considered affair to a proper, wholesome conclusion.”

“Would what you suggest be wise?” asked Shatterhand.

“Who can foretell? Wisdom, like many other attributes, is relative. We shall ponder long and hard until a firm decision is reached. Go quickly to the console now. The frigidity and Stygian gloom made necessary by your presence are severely debilitating.”

The geriatric chair glided across the stark chamber. Shatterhand submitted to the anticipated ritual, his thin lips tightening ever so slightly at the injection. Knowing his alien master was impatient to be rid of him, he guided the chair directly into the lift compartment. The massive doors rumbled together, but before closing completely a blast of intolerable blue-white incandescence made him clamp his eyes tightly shut to chop off the mind-numbing glare.

Riding up to his office suite, Emil Shatterhand breathed a profound sigh of relief.

* * *

Klavik awoke to the furtive, shuffling sounds of someone moving about. Still in the first flush of awareness, he groped instinctively for his throwing knife and dirk. Neither weapon was at hand.

He sat upright, creating waves in the gel-filled mattress, and reoriented himself in space and time. The previous evening’s events crowded back in a rush — the casino, the encounter with the drunken holovision actor, the magic in Ramyn’s eyes in the wake of the hypnotic trance induced to dispel her artificially inspired gaming fever.

He exhaled and lay back, conscious of the lingering, provocative trace of Ramyn’s scent on the other pillow.

“I see you’ve revived.” Ramyn slouched in the doorway, with Klavik’s robe a blue tent wrapped around her twice. “I’ve no idea what you like for breakfast. I ordered juice, sweet rolls and coffee.”

“You look ridiculous,” he told her.

“Really? I feel marvelous.” Her smile washed over him. “What will the powers that be say about our —”

She broke off when Klavik rolled nakedly from beneath the coverlet. Trim waisted and muscular, with a boxer’s sloped-shouldered stance and a massive breadth of chest, he folded her in his arms. “Say nothing,” he whispered close to her ear, “you don’t wish overheard. Every room in Petite Palais is bugged.”

“Sorry, lost my head,” was her whispered response. She tipped back and ran a pensive forefinger over his bronzed torso. The angry, half-healed knife wound was a red welt on his rib cage. “Klavik, there isn’t a gram of fat on you anywhere.”

“I try to stay fit.”

“Fit!” She exclaimed. “The understatement of the millennium. But I have serious doubts about you. The only thing holding you together seems to be scar tissue.”

He kissed her lightly. “Occupational hazards.”

“Old wounds,” she said, touching him here and there, “new wounds, middle-aged wounds.”

“Goes with the territory,” he said self-consciously. “Me for the autolave. Have you bathed?”

“Not yet. I’ll wait for the breakfast delivery, then join you.”

Over breakfast, they conversed in romantic commonplaces and non-sequiturs for the benefit of prying eyes and ears. Eager for the privacy afforded outdoors, Klavik suggested a stroll on the beach.

The morning was balmy, bright in the sunlight, the sand still damp from the diurnal predawn shower. *Programmed like everything else in Eden*, thought Klavik, *to be balmy and sunny*. Other than a few ubiquitous android attendants, the strand and its parti-colored pavilions were deserted at this early hour. Barefoot, they walked hand-in-hand along the line of surf, dipping their toes in the tepid tropical water.

To a casual observer, Klavik knew they would be taken for lovers. Even if the term were apropos, he thought it ridiculous to label their newfound relationship in hackneyed terms.

Ramyn stared across the water as though searching for something along the sea girt horizon. “We’re alone,” she said, “You can start picking my brain when ready.”

“Just because you’re paranoid,” he said lightly, “don’t think we’re not out to get you.”

Ramyn feigned appreciation for the levity, then sobered quickly. “Jokes aside, information is what you’re after. It’s why you seduced me last night?”

“Did I seduce you?”

“Well, didn’t you?”

He gently squeezed her hand. “Opposite polarities attract, a law of nature.”

“What a silly, unromantic thing to say. You make our coming together sound like a chemistry experiment.”

“Be fair, Ramyn. You’re the most woman I’ve ever known, or seen. From my viewpoint, I suppose I think of our . . . coming together, as you put it, as unavoidable.”

“That’s even *worse*,” she said on a note of exasperation. “Now you make it sound foreordained, as if fate overwhelmed us. I don’t believe in fate. Our ‘coming together’ wasn’t kismet, and you damn well know it. You could have ordered up far more delicious fruit than little old me. I wasn’t fibbing about the android courtesans being more attractive than I could ever hope to be.”

“‘Using’ android bedmates, to borrow Shatterhand’s term, would be self-serving, or perhaps . . . I think the word I’m searching for is artificial. Cavorting with a total stranger, no matter how attractive, has an appeal less than zero. Your intelligence and spirit light your beauty in a way I find irresistible. I know how stiff that may sound, but a world of difference exists between animal rutting and what we in Kraan call sharing.”

“Sharing, not lovemaking?”

“I’ve never considered ‘love’ to be a trustworthy label. The word has too many shades of meaning to be meaningful.”

“My,” she said with mild sarcasm, “he talks in riddles and lives on an extremely high plane of integrity.”

Klavik blinked uncomfortably. “Last night was . . . I sensed that you wanted me as much as I wanted you.”

“Maybe more,” she said, a curious light in her eyes. “What made you able to ‘sense’ how I felt about you?”

He reflected on how to deal with the leading question. “Let’s just say it was obvious, let it go at that?”

“We could, but I don’t think I will. I’m beginning to picture you, my newest, nearest and dearest, as a world-class artful dodger.”

Klavik ignore the byplay. “I have one more favor to ask, Ramyn.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Will it be possible for you to keep our relationship from Kewart? He’s fallen deeply under your spell. He’d never be able to understand our . . . coming together, and would be terribly hurt, furious with me. Can you manage to show indifference to me, and still carry on as an android?”

“I hadn’t planned to put out a news bulletin.” She strolled along the beach a few more paces, then turned to face him squarely. “Tell me, was how I felt about you that obviously obvious, or does it have something to do with your mysterious talent?” Noting the sudden flicker of frost in his dark eyes, she said quickly, “Oh, forget it. I don’t really care one way or the other, but for whatever reason Emil will be delighted to learn you’ve finally bedded me.”

“Why would your news release be of interest Shatterhand?”

“Because I’m part of his grand scheme to distract you.”

“You have my permission to tell Shatterhand,” said Klavik, “his grand scheme is working to perfection. On the other hand, your scheme to remain unobtrusive didn’t pan out, did it?”

Klavik was rewarded was a dazzling smile. He sat down in the sand, tugged Ramyn down beside him. “Face the briny,” he said. “That way no one who isn’t snorkeling or surfing out there can read our lips.”

“It sounds to me,” she said teasingly, “as if you’ve been smitten by the paranoia epidemic.”

“Even paranoids,” he said, “have enemies.”

* * *

Klavik’s demeanor changed. “Seriously,” he said, “try putting yourself in my shoes. I’m trying to chase down whoever is guilty of regicide while stumbling around in the dark in a bizarre world under peculiar circumstances. Wouldn’t you feel a touch paranoid? My companions and I have been desperately attempting to learn who and what we’re up against, and we’ve gotten next to nowhere.”

“Who you’re up against should be fairly obvious?” she said, falling in with his vein of seriousness. “You’re up against a whole damned planet governed by distant, alien monsters, and administered by an amoral genius.”

“Is that how you think of Shatterhand?”

“How else?”

“Do you believe he’s in any way involved in the assassination?”

“I knew you’d ask that. I have no idea, none,” she said. “But your ruler was murdered here, and Emil boast that absolutely nothing happens in Eden without his knowledge and consent.”

“I had to assume he spoke the truth.” Klavik pursed his lips. “My worry is that the trail, if one exists, grows colder with each passing period. What you just said confirms my original conclusion: the trailhead *has* to be here in Eden. But, where . . . ? By the way, what traits made you describe Shatterhand as totally amoral?”

Ramyn’s hazel eyes clouded. “Emil is off the scale; moral considerations simply do not apply. He’d do anything to ensure his position, underscore anything.”

“Does ‘anything’ include aiding and abetting the assassination of our sovereign?”

“A loaded question. Who can say? His lifetime goals,” she added, “are twofold: protecting the niche he’s carved for himself by helping the Parvon Syndicate earn enormous, endless profit, and secondly a waning interest in his android harem. That’s it, sum total. Rumor has it that he rakes in a thin slice of Eden’s revenue — a tiny percentage of the gross, but still a very respectable figure. Notoriously tight with a stellar, the Syndicate never spends a minim without expecting a whopping profit in return.”

“How much do you know about the Parvon Syndicate?”

She shrugged. “Zilch, or very close to it. Hearsay accounts for most of what little I do know. No one knows anything specific because the Parvons conscientiously stay out of the limelight, well below the radar, and quietly pull the strings of their economic empire.”

Combers broke on the sandy shingle, receded with a hiss of foam. Klavik reluctantly broached another topic. “You gave away a grisly tidbit last night under hypnosis.”

“Oh?” She avoided his gaze. “About Emil, and . . . me?”

He nodded. “You mumbled something pretty raw, something about his sexual proclivities.”

She flinched. “Excesses, not proclivities. You mean the way he likes to . . . hurt women.”

A frown transformed Klavik’s features into an unpleasant mask. “A touchy subject. During your past acquaintanceship, did he ever —?”

“Harm me?” supplied Ramyn with a shudder. “No, that started later, after his legs atrophied. He glibly tosses off remarks about ‘using’ android bedmates, but I learned that on occasion it might be more accurate to say ‘using up.’”

Klavik’s eyes were brooding slits. “It goes that far?”

“So I was told.” She looked up, searching his eyes. “What would you have done if my answer had been . . . affirmative?”

“I would make certain it doesn’t happen again.”

Ramyn tried unsuccessfully to make light of his flat, unemotional response. “Lucky me! Brawn, brains and chivalry rolled up in one giant masculine package.”

“Brains I will not answer to, and chivalry is an absurd concept. But neither two-legged nor multi-legged predators can be allowed to run rampant. Not with anyone, certainly not with android ‘units’ unable to protest or defend themselves.”

Ramyn rose quickly, brushed sand from her pert derriere. “This conversation’s taken a morbid turn.”

Klavik reached for her hand. “I do intend to ‘use’ one particular android,” he said in a different voice.

Ramyn shaded her eyes, peered up at him, her expression insouciant. “You mean, as you did last night, sir?” she asked, theatrically reprising her android role. “Your carnal wish is my command, sir.”

“Don’t try to be cute.”

She grinned impishly. “Klavik! Are you blushing?”

“You know perfectly well what I meant,” he said. “What I’d like very much for you to do is bait your reports to Shatterhand with a few tidbits of disinformation. Is that a reasonable request?”

“I suppose so. But it could also be . . . dangerous. I know Emil. If he ever suspects my android pose went sour and I’m in league with the other side, so to speak, he’ll retaliate. I don’t want to think about how he might retaliate.”

Klavik revolved the statement. “I admit hazard could be involved, and yet —”

“Oh, I’ll do it,” she said hastily.

“Not,” he said, “unless you’re sure you can pull it off. Solving the assassination riddle is our problem, not yours.”

“Count me in,” she said, smiling to break the thin web of tension that had grown between them. “How about a refreshing dip? The surf’s better than perfect. Come on, bend a little, splash with me.”

“We brought along no swimming briefs.”

Her laugh tinkled merrily. “Get serious! This is Eden. What you choose to wear, if anything, is a matter of personal preference. Come on, indulge me.”

He watched her disrobe, unable to stifle a convulsive intake of breath. Wondering if he’d gotten himself into something he might have difficulty getting out of, he swallowed any further objections along with a sudden lump in his throat, hurriedly peeled down and churned into the surf after Ramyn.

SEVENTEEN

In a thoroughly foul mood, Prime Minister Kurani cried, “You’ve been skylarking, not sleuthing. You’ve proved a grave disappointment to me, frolicking in lowlife gambling dens, disporting yourself with the gaudy siren. It won’t *begin* to get the job done. Tell me, have you enjoyed the free and frivolous holiday you pleaded for earnestly?”

“I hope appreciate my motive, sir. I mentioned gaining entree into Eden’s internal affairs through Ramyn.”

“So you did.” Kurani fixed the security director with a baleful glance. “But by the glorious First Principle you didn’t see fit to explain you’d go about it by ‘gaining entrée’ into the wench herself. Ah, well; in all fairness, you’re blameless on that score. A truly splendid morsel she is. Yet relative to the bottom that’s small comfort. Your lollygagging has earned us nothing in the way of information, useful or otherwise. Is that a true statement?”

“Not an iota of useful information, no. But I believe it will in time.”

“Hah! Klavik, we’re *precisely* where we were upon first setting foot in this android menagerie, still camped dead center on square one. We haven’t budged one millimeter.”

Grounding in company with the prince after the agreed upon respite aboard *Kolodaan*, Kurani remained severely nettled by Klavik's report of minimal progress. Chafing unhappily, he crunched gravel beneath his boots walking along a seaside footpath winding through stands of shore pines. At length he said, "When last we spoke on ultraband, the Lord Regent again urged me to call it quits, encouraged me to bring His Highness home. Frankly, I've given serious thought to adopting that course. Yet the onus of ducking for cover, tail 'tween our legs, smacks of arrant cowardice. Most of our fellow Crown subjects would let themselves be disemboweled before admitting to an egregious fault like cowardice. However that may be, all too soon I may be forced to trade-off an unproductive, tail chasing venture against the probability of exacerbating the danger to young Kewart."

"In my view," said Klavik, "that is exactly the path the perpetrator is proactively trying to force us to take."

An unhappy nod. "Aye, there's likely a grain of truth in that argument. On the other hand, staying on in this bagnio is worry making. That you can't deny."

"Sir, have you considered returning to Kraan with His Highness, and letting me stay to forward the investigation?"

Kurani said, "I did in fact discuss that option with the Lord Regent, but have thus far resisted it. While not as loaded with bitter root as would be the case if we three were to concede the field to whatever breed of vermin consummated the loathsome deed, abandoning you here feels worse." Kurani looked up, following the flight of wheeling gulls. "In my mind, it would be counterproductive, not to mention tending to lessen your life expectancy."

"Allow me worry about that, sir."

"No bravado, if you please," admonished Kurani. "I've come to know you under trying circumstances, and perhaps understand you better than do you yourself. Were the youngster and I to depart, it would be akin to throwing you to the wolves. No, don't argue; I make that an out and out concession to the opposition, and strongly suspect you'd vanish without a trace. Perhaps the safe passage of Kewart and I constitutes an obscure form of insurance, a guarantee of your safety in addition to our own. Do you take my drift?"

"Your theory may not be groundless, sir. But despite that, I do know myself, and feel competent to ensure my own . . . life expectancy."

"You'll get no rebuttal on that score," said the PM. "You've demonstrated such capability more than once. Yet in our blithe state of ignorance concerning this accursed 'paradise,' we've consistently under evaluated the odds stacked against us. Before leaving Kraan, I could not have imagined the scope of the near-hopeless set before us. The alien demons responsible for Eden and their neohuman minions, hold all of the cards in a marked and stacked deck. No, Klavik; leaving you to pursue the investigation on your own would be like bucking a royal flush with two lowly pair."

"Not to my way of thinking, sir,"

"Say no more," insisted the PM. "My mind's made up. Allowing you to work alone in this fancy hellhole would be tantamount to encouraging premeditated suicide. No, we shall stay the course. We'll run Shatterhand's twist and turn gamut as a team, even if none of us departs upright, still breathing. There, you've had my last word on the topic."

Klavik strolled onward. "May I ask what else the Lord Regent had to report?"

“Nothing world-shaking,” the said other dismissively. “We spoke of the ironic change in temperament wrought by the tragedy. Strange it may sound, losing His Omnipotence has apparently poured soothing balm on the homeworld’s troubled waters. Our blessed sovereign’s tragic end seems to have united His people through common adversity. The Lord Regent said civil strife and controversy have tapered off to next to nothing.

“Yet however shiny the coin’s obverse,” added Kurani, “the reverse has taken on a darker hue. The cry for vengeance is more strident than ever. A news leak concerning the gelignite’s likely provenance has inspired a parliamentary committee to convene in concert with your deputy security director, and investigative methods are being round-tabled, with all past and present Kamala and Kaolin activities diligently searched for any association with the gelignite, or the prior theft of weapons grade thorium isotope.”

“Hopefully with some success,” said Klavik, certain such an investigation would prove fruitless.

“Hopefully, aye. To date they’ve drawn an absolute blank.” Kurani smacked his lips. “Adopting your investigative tack, they’ve sought to identify who in the homeworld, or elsewhere, stood most to gain by committing the infamous crime. They’ve unearthed no hint of how the assassination might have advantaged any individual, group, or society here, there, anywhere.”

“Is the unknown vessel,” asked Klavik, “still holding in n-space?”

“That it is. There’s been no shift of orbit, nor any response to conventional ultraband hails. While the lad and I were aboard, time and again *Kolodaan* went irrational briefly, and there it was. Were the stranger orbiting in the normal continuum, I’d believe it a derelict. The phenomenal energy expenditure required to maintain n-space excitation in a vessel that size is not far short of awesome.”

* * *

Kurani halted on the pathway, his train of thought derailed by his own words. “By the way, one minor incident all but slipped my mind. While you were disporting yourself groundside, orbital surveillance spotted a flight undertaken by Shatterhand’s private verticraft. It departed the Village and flew northward. No telling whether the scheming cripple was aboard.”

Klavik placed a hand on the PM’s arm, bringing the older man to a halt. “Was the verticraft’s destination recorded?”

“Oh, yes; I watched the playback. The vector was northward, toward the equatorial big game island of theirs. ‘Big game,’ hah! Letting fat cat guests slay programmed sitting ducks would be more like it.” Kurani waited expectantly, intrigued by the way Klavik’s brows had contracted. “What is it? Does Shatterhand’s excursion strike you as significant?”

Klavik’s responded with a softly spoken name: “Buford.”

A look of surprise transformed Kurani’s seamed features. “By the sacred First Principle! I failed to make the connection. The notion escaped me entirely. Routine orbital surveillance aboard *Kolodaan* defines the vehicle’s flight path, but even at full magnification it would be impossible to identify the occupants.”

“Can you have a holographic record of the flight transmitted down to us, sir?”

“I’ll attend to it at once,” said Kurani. “Would it be worthwhile, do you suppose, to visit the island menagerie, whatever it’s called?”

“The Veldt,” supplied Klavik absently, his thoughts elsewhere.

“Yes, yes; the Veldt. Perhaps we’ll concoct an excuse to go there.”

“One already exists, sir. Something other than cloned wildlife is shot in the Veldt.”

“What do you mean?”

“Holovision dramas, sir. The director we met, Chatham, mentioned that the island would be the next stop for his film troupe.”

“Oh, of course; the self-important gentleman who accosted us on the beach. But how would a theatrical troupe filming fairy tales offer a pretext for journeying to the island?”

“Mr. Chatham offered me a job, sir.”

“He *what*? You’re joshing . . . You’re not? Why, the insolent, cheek bastard! A job doing what?”

“Acting in his holodrama, sir. He invited me to play the part of a safari leader.”

“What in the name of . . . whatever you called it is that?”

Klavik explained, choosing his words carefully.

Kurani guffawed. “Are you saying you’ve an urge to take the fellow up on his idiotic proposition?”

“If it will help us locate and question Buford, it could be an invaluable move. After we review the flight record of Shatterhand’s verticraft, confirm the destination, I may call Chatham, see if the invitation still stands.”

The PM reflected briefly. He shrugged. “What can it hurt? I’ll have the data sent down to the space terminal, have the pinnace patch in through to our fancy quarters. Better yet, we can hop aboard the tube, scoot out to the terminal and view it first-hand.”

“I’d readily agree, sir, except for the waste of time. Would you mind if I put you off for an hour or two? I’d like to walk on the beach a while, and think.”

“By all means think; I’m beginning to appreciate it’s what you do best. The surveillance data will be available in my suite when you return. Until then, Klavik . . .”

The PM’s long military strides carried him back toward the Village.

* * *

Crossing the traffic less Grand Corniche, Klavik descended to the beach and slowly made his way along the strand. Gazing out across the Southern Sea past slow-rolling combers, he stopped once or twice deep in thought, idly skipping flat pebbles across the flooding, ebbing, foam-flecked surf.

The current situation disturbed him more intuitively rather than overtly. Recent developments had come hard and fast, in a way far too pat and scripted. He mulled the concatenation of events serially. Was Shatterhand responsible for, or at minimum cognizant of, either scare tactic employed against them? Prince Kewart had been sexually compromised in company with an exceptionally lovely neohuman woman forced by Shatterhand to pose as an android “unit.” Secondly, hard on the heels of that artfully staged assignation, had been a peculiar, lackadaisical attack by three genuine androids. Ramyn had libeled Emil Shatterhand as “totally amoral,” a tag very much in character if indeed he was behind either move, both of which struck Klavik as well conceived and deftly implemented. Yet if that proved true, Eden’s director had received an unsolicited education in the makeup of Kraan character, specifically a

surety that scare tactics were ineffective when it came to swaying the single-minded determination of he and his charges.

Then had come the abrupt disappearance of Eden's operations manager, an individual he himself considered much more than a subject of interest, and in fact a prime target for interrogation. Buford had worn his emotions on his sleeve, and upon being subjected to leading questions had either removed himself from further contact, or been removed.

Capping the extraordinary sequence of happenings, out of the blue a prominent holovision director — an interstellar celebrity in his own right — had for reasons known only to himself offered an unknown quantity a speaking role in the major, extravagantly expensive melodrama in production, doing so, he had lamely explained because of a nebulous, inherent quality called "presence" on the part of he himself. Klavik wondered if the invitation to "act" had to do with the way he'd handled during a brief skirmish on the beach with the overgrown bumpkin Chatham employed.

Which in turn raised other pertinent questions. Had the invitation originated with Chatham, or was it another Shatterhand-inspired ploy within a ploy, possibly at the suggestion of Eden's alien masters? Was there a probability that Shatterhand had approached the filmmaker and urged him, or perhaps bribed him to tender the invitation as a means of inducing he and his charges to chase rainbows in *The Veldt*, while Buford, a potential key to the puzzle, took his ease in some other obscure sanctuary?

And then, either accidentally or on purpose, during the lull when he had freed himself from watching over his charges in order to coddle information from Ramyn, Shatterhand had used his private verticraft to steal away from his tower sanctum in plain remote sensing view of the *Kolodaan*, still in a geosynchronous parking orbit directly above the Village.

Judging by what he had viewed in the index of planetary activities and settings, the jungle big game island had a certain appeal as an out of the way place in which to sequester Buford. But was the nervous ops manager actually holed up somewhere in the Veldt, or were he and his charges being lured away from the Village simply because of having sniffed out the scent of something revelatory?

Yet another worrisome possibility injected itself. If Shatterhand knew Ramyn's android pose had been penetrated, was he planning something drastic, something designed to knock her out of the game?

This last supposition caused Klavik to make a mental note to stay close to Ramyn. There was, he thought wryly, with a warm feeling, more than one reason for doing so.

Yet *another* consideration occurred to him, something so radical that it brought his mental processes to a standstill. Did Shatterhand *want* him to find and question Buford? It would be wishful thinking to picture the man in the geriatric chair as naïve; he simply had to have realized a first-line Kraan starcruiser would employ sophisticated remote sensing systems. He would have had to know that with planetwide air traffic all but nonexistent, the flight of his private verticraft would raise red flags.

Still and all, the official's aerial foray might well have been nothing more sinister than a routine business errand on the equatorial island, or perhaps eventually somewhere beyond. Then again, the flight could have been a subtle tease, a fresh red herring dragged across the torturous path he and his charges were attempting to tread. He himself had become semi-convinced that

had been the case with the death-dealing explosives analysis that revealed the gelignite's source had to be either Kraan itself, or a world all but environmentally identical. He doubted whether it would turn out to be an authentic lead, but on the other hand . . .

The whirlpool of suppositions, likelihoods and potential avenues hopefully leading toward solutions spun faster in his mind. He paused on the beach and deliberated at length, examining postulates, revolving theories, weighing alternative courses of action, turning pieces of puzzle every which way and trying to fit them into gaping blank lacunae, and then one by one taking them out again, attempting to fit them in elsewhere.

Something nagged him in a distant way, a scrap of information lurking half-remembered in his subconscious. Was it some potentially important datum he had overlooked? Whatever it was, it had to be something pertinent, something buried within the labyrinth. Step by step, he systematically reviewed every obscure item of fact and fancy, and tried to be all-inclusive.

Eventually he dredged it up, let it bob to the surface. In dropping his bombshell, the *Kolodaan's* armaments officer had described with virtual certainty the origin of the gelignite used in the assassination, the homeworld. It was extremely difficult to believe some agent or agency in Kraan had conspired to . . .

Wait! Had an assassination actually taken place? His thoughts roiling, he took a knee in the glistening white sand and, head bowed, allowed the startling notion to run to a conclusion of some kind. Coincident with the soil samples taken from the crater, the lab report had also cited "evidence of partially decomposed mammalian tissue." The grisly image that formed in his mind made Klavik wince. But mammalian tissue was, after all, mammalian tissue. To the best of his knowledge, no DNA comparison had been performed aboard the starcruiser. Could it be that only the three androids had been torn to shreds by the explosion, that His Omnipotence had been kidnapped, or worse, with the shredded remnants of the carriage and its occupants staged to cover up the much greater crime?

Or had Kraan's sovereign himself staged an apparent assassination in order to vanish? If so, *why* so? Fanciful as that might seem, His Omnipotence had been unwell for some time before his alleged murder. But had he been sufficiently unwell to give up and abandon his world and his people, perhaps his life? Thus far only hearsay evidence existed that Kewart ab Kraan, Esemplastos, His Omnipotence Twenty-fourth, had in fact been *aboard* the carriage when it disintegrated. Even more importantly, the credibility of the "hear sayers" — Shatterhand and his nervous, excitable operations manager — made him speculate that *their* version of the assassination could be doubly suspect.

After stewing about it, he decided to table the possibility for further assessment. In the absence of any form of verification, any hard evidence to support the odd thesis, he knew mentioning such an outrageous concept to Kurani would invite violent disbelief, and it cost him any chance to prove or disprove the shocking postulate.

Rising, he walked onward, brushing sand from his bare knee, agonizing over the hazy, multiple forks branching in various directions from the nexus of the so-called investigation, Emil Shatterhand. The section of roadway where the death crater had once spoiled Victor Chatham's filming efforts came in view, now an unbroken expanse of graveled lane that stretched onward around the cove's gentle curve, ending in the chalk cliffs topped by the palatial pink chateau.

Feeling frustrated, he slumped laxly to the sand, his mood sullen, self-deprecatory. He sat there contemplating the seascape, torn between unnerving doubts and the driving thrust of his instincts, consumed by gnawing uncertainty. Were he and his charges the victims of subtle manipulation, or the unwitting dupes of antagonists busily baiting hook after hook, pulling invisible strings, constantly shifting the scenery at will.

Or, came the intriguing thought, had the door to vital information opened the merest crack? Reposing on the deserted beach, he clutched his knees, his unfocused gaze roving along the watery horizon.

A strong, unnatural sense of dread abruptly enveloped him.

His first reaction was to search for whatever had inspired the onslaught of fearfulness. He looked in vain for whatever had caused the oppressive, brooding sensation to come over him. Something had sparked the wave of anxious foreboding. But , what . . ? He shook his head as if to clear it.

An even more menacing distillation of naked terror washed through him. He stiffened as the nameless, mounting terror blossomed synergistically, feeding upon itself ballooning into a sense of immediate danger. The anxiety attack, if that's what it was, grew stronger, ever stronger until it gnawed at his psyche, build to a crescendo of fear, and then incredibly redoubled in intensity. He felt his pulse rate jump in alarming fashion.

A realization that he had no idea what was happening electrified Klavik. Something unseen, a *presque vu* presence that defied perception, yet was totally obscene, nibbled at the limbic edges of his reason.

Unable to halt or mitigate the tsunami of fearfulness, he writhed as the subliminal yet all too real sensation segued into an overt bout of stark terror all but physical in its intensity.

Clutching his temples, Klavik moaned.

It went on for endless seconds, gradually ebbed, subsided still further, and disappeared.

Trembling uncontrollably in ever limb, he cradled his splitting head in his hands, gasped and struggled to rise from the sand. He lurched back toward the Village in the manner of a drunken man.

EIGHTEEN

Klavik's original attempts to contact the renowned holovision director met with zero success. On both occasions he had been told by one truculent, nameless aide or another that Chatham was filming in the bush, and far too busy to take a call from some stranger. Each time he had left a verbal message, but the word must not have been passed along.

The third call netted instant results. Victor Chatham, returning Klavik's call in less than ten minutes, listened to him explain what he had in mind. The director's eyes grew large in the image displayed in the vidicom tank. "Do you mean it?"

"I think it might be an enjoyable experience," lied Klavik.

"Fabulous!" enthused the director. "You must be psychic, Mr. Klavik. It's by no stretch a featured role, but fortunately — or unfortunately from my perspective — the Great White Hunter, while no character of major importance, is integral to the story line. The android I'm

using has been sleep-walking through the part, making a few scenes almost as exciting as stale bread. We'll have to rewrite, do some script changes, add a few lines of additional dialogue. But what the hell!"

"Whatever you think will work best, Mr. Chatham. But I warn you about becoming uncomfortable with the fact that I'm no actor. Not even an amateur."

"I hear you, but that just might be the beauty of it." Chatham turned businesslike. "I promise you won't have to do a minim's worth of acting. All I'll want are standard reactions to various happenings, maybe a few terse lines of short-bitten dialogue. You'll be reacting to whatever is said and done in the way you might react in your own skin, wearing your own persona." The director's elation waned. "Does mean we'll have to backtrack a few hairs, re-shoot several key scenes and a few minor ones. Let me sweat out the seamy details. You don't know it yet, but you could be saving my derriere. I've gotten nothing but plastic going-through-the-motions crap from the android who's mucking up the part."

"You spoke of . . . I think you called it a test."

"Yeah, I remember," said Chatham. "Scratch that. I go with my instincts, always have. When can you jump over here to the island? Fairly soon, I hope."

"Will tomorrow morning be acceptable, Mr. Chatham?"

"Better and ever better!" exclaimed the director. "Please call me Chatty; everyone else does. Tomorrow, ouch! Doesn't give us a lot of time to doctor the script and reschedule . . . Never mind; we'll manage. Now about compensation, I'll bend a rule or three and tag on a bonus that'll slip you in slightly above scale, almost what a featured player would get. But keep mum about that, okay? If some backbiting showbiz prima donna gets wind of it, the news could leak to the Guild big-wigs in Terra Nova and my arse would be in a sling full of itch powder."

"Mr. Chat . . . uh, Chatty," said Klavik, "I'm doing this for personal reasons, not profit." To shade the prevarication a trifle, he added, "I think it's smart to let yourself go now and then, try something new and different. How long will my services be required?"

"Oh, a standard week, ten periods max. You coming alone?"

"We'll be a party of four: myself, the other two gentlemen from Kraan, and our android escort. My friends will want to look over the game preserve, perhaps watch a few scenes being filmed."

"No problem there. I'll reserve rooms for you at the hunting lodge, arrange a wildlife tour for the youngster and your friend. But warn them, Mr. Klavik; the accommodations here in the bush are damned Spartan compared to what you get there in the Village. The Veldt is Eden's gimmicky try at making you think you're roughing for real here in the boonies."

"I have only one question, Chatty."

"Fire away."

"You may recall the young man who was with us in the carriage that unfortunate morning at the crater?"

"Yeah, know who you mean. Tall, good-looking teenager."

"His name is Kewart. He's the son of . . . someone very close to me who, sad to say, is no longer with us. His main interest will be seeing the island wildlife you mentioned."

"He'll get his fill, no worry there," assured Chatham. "All sorts of fee-rocious beasties and lesser critters run loose here in Shatterhand's artsy-fartsy jungle."

“Kewart will be delighted to hear that. My concern is for his safety. The older gentleman in our party is Kewart’s legal guardian. He’s worried about exposing the youngster to danger.”

Chatham’s eyes crinkled pleasantly. “Danger, in Eden? That’s a laugh ‘n a half. The hairiest ‘danger’ your young friend is liable to encounter would be to stub his toe on a snoozing carnivore. Every ‘wild’ animal’s a cloned specimen, large, small and medium-sized. The critters do exactly as programmed, nothing less, nothing more. Controlled wildlife is what makes this equatorial sweat box the only site in the visited galaxy suitable for filming certain action-adventure epics. Think about it, Mr. Klavik: would the studio dream of letting megastellar talents like Miles or Cheryl go near genuine predators, venomous reptiles, or the huge saurians roaming and roaring across the island in the marshlands?”

“No, I imagine not.”

“Never! Hey, you’ve made one terrific decision, Mr. Klavik. I’m beside myself with joy and gladness. I’ll ring off now, get my lazy wordsmith humping on rewrites. We’ll look for you bright and early in the ayem.”

“Until then, Chatty.” Klavik switched off. Grinning at his charges, who were off to one side, out of the vidicom scan area, he said, “Does that ease your mind, sir?”

* * *

His affirmative nod at odds with the uncompromising set of his jaw, the PM wore a doubtful expression, cueing Klavik to the fact that his “agreement” was less than wholehearted. “Programmed beasts,” muttered Kurani. “Aye, but programmed by whom, to do what?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t ‘sir’ me,” the old warrior said tartly. “You know damn well what I mean. The holovision monkey’s neat, facile disclaimer could have a thorny underside. What if whoever turns out to be working against us in Shatterhand’s oh-so-pretty playpen decides to program a nasty surprise in the form of a bad-tempered predator sporting fangs and claws.”

“Oh,” scoffed the prince, “don’t be such a nervous fuddy-duddy.”

Kurani cocked a virtuous eye at his future sovereign. “Dear boy,” he said acerbically, but with chiding overtones, “It’s hardly proper for a sprout like you to call your chief of state a ‘nervous fuddy-duddy.’ Were it not for your exalted station, I’d take you by the scruff, shake you hard enough to rattle your teeth.”

“No you won’t,” said Kewart, but with a degree of uncertainty.

“Sure of that? Not here in what passes for civilization, but on the morrow, after traipsing over to Shatterhand’s synthetic zoo as anonymous pedestrians, my reticence to administer long-overdue chastisement could sag markedly.”

An infectious grin in evidence, the prince said, “Have I your permission to cry myself to sleep worrying about that?”

Kurani made as if to grumble, then grinned indulgently.

“How about lunch?” suggested the youth. “Ramyn said she’d meet us in the dining room.”

“Kewart, before we go,” said Klavik, “will you listen to a word of caution? Your patience will be taxed in The Veldt. You must continually remind yourself of the circumstances.”

“What do you mean?”

“It might be difficult to pass yourself off as a commoner.”

“Oh, I can handle it.”

“I’m sure you can under ordinary circumstances. But from what I’ve seen, and overheard, these holovision people are accustomed to casual informality — free and easy working relationships. Don’t give yourself away by taking umbrage if you’re exposed to less deference than your deserve. Take extra care not to appear insulted when someone addresses you as I did, by your given name.”

A shrug. “Not to worry, Klavik.”

Kurani forgot himself and said, “I’m certain His Royal Highness will carry it off with flying colors.”

“Naturally,” said Klavik with a twinkle, “until the first time either of us addresses him in that manner.”

Kewart laughed at the PM’s discomfiture.

His amusement abruptly curdling, Klavik staggered backward, recoiled from the miasma of sourceless dread flooding his consciousness. The brooding sensation swelled until it became an unseen pressure that compressed his ego in a foretaste of doom. Charged with hidden menace, the air around him seemed to grow heavy, freighted with an overpowering sense of impending disaster.

He stiffened, teeth gritted, waiting for the mind-numbing fearfulness to pass. Subliminally dissipating even as it formed, he sensed a fleeting, less distinct *presque vu* image lurking somewhere beyond the threshold of neohuman experience, a flashing impression of a formless something swimming in dazzling brilliance.

Klavik realized in some unknown, disgusting, thoroughly alarming fashion that his mind had again been invaded.

Kurani seized his arm. “What is it? Are you unwell?”

“It’s . . . nothing, sir. A twinge of . . . indigestion. I may decide to skip lunch.”

The PM’s doubt-laden, analytical gaze was penetrating.

“With your . . . permission, Kewart,” faltered Klavik, “I’d like to lie down for a while.”

“Go ahead, Klavik. Hope you feel better soon.”

Aware that his feeble attempt at dissembling hadn’t fooled Kurani, he fled to his suite. He had lain awake during much of the previous night, examining, reflecting upon and re-examining the waves of naked terror that had numbed his sensibility on the deserted beach. He recognized what had twice taken place for what it actually was, a deliberate assault on his consciousness, an insidious form of, well . . . mind rape.

The most recent intrusion, an all-pervasive perception of nameless dread, had persisted for endless seconds despite every straining effort he’d made to block it out. He explored his inner self, combing his superego for cracks and crevices that might allow entry, wondering, imagining, searching reflexively for the door through which something had battered its way into his consciousness. The truly frightening aspect of either ordeal had been his reaction, a terrible fear of being afraid, a fear of fear itself.

During this latest, more intensely disturbing intrusion, surges of fearfulness had tugged and pushed and pulled him willy-nilly in one direction, then another, thrusting him toward the brink of abject terror, beyond which loomed the bottomless abyss of panic. Jaws clenched, weaponless against the intrusion, he’d sought desperately for some means of fighting back

against the hidden source of near-panic shoving him irresistibly toward a never-to-be-violated threshold, the line of demarcation separating sanity from . . . something else.

It was a threshold Klavik willed himself never to cross.

* * *

With Ramyn and Kewart leading the way, chattering like sophomores on a school outing, they had arrived in the Veldt not long after sunrise. Riding the ascending slideramp, with android “natives” clad in a couturier’s notion of aboriginal garb toting their luggage, they emerged from the sublevel tube transit station into the brilliant sunlight of a windless morning, the air warm and humid, raucous with cheeps and cries and shrill birdsong.

The hunting lodge, a rustic sprawl of fieldstone and rough-hewn timbers, occupied the brow of a hill lushly overgrown with tropical foliage. Below the lodge, a broad equatorial savanna stretched to the distant rim of jungle. A curling, whitewater river foamed downhill from a waterfall thundering over the brink of a lofty escarpment that separated the steamy lowlands from a high plateau. On the far side of the river, scattered wildlife herds could be seen grazing across the grassy plain.

With both ill-mated megastars in tow, Victor Chatham greeted the newcomers warmly on the lodge’s broad verandah ultrasonically screened against flying and crawling insects. Introductions were made all around. Elated by the unexpected manner in which Klavik’s services had been acquired, the holovision director ushered the party to a large, round table decked in snowy linen. A pair of tanned androids wearing obligatory bush jackets served coffee, fresh-squeezed citrus juice, and trays of fluffy pastry.

Her android stigma signifying her non-person, Ramyn was ignored by everyone other than megastar Miles Matson, who continually shot glances her way, but behaved with exaggerated decorum toward Klavik. The actor gave no indication of having taken umbrage over the previous confrontation in the casino.

Chatham tended to look through the gorgeous android “unit” in a way virtually denying her existence. But the tall, extravagantly handsome leading man, Klavik noted wryly, made no attempt to hide his captivation with “the android dazzler,” as he’d called her. His glances eventually turned into prolonged stares.

Idly pulsing the low-key emotional tenor of Chatham and his stars, Klavik became aware of Cheryl’s indifference to her legal spouse’s fascination with Ramyn. She smiled at Klavik, spoke to him more often than politeness dictated.

The director eventually swung the conversation away from small talk. Leaning toward Klavik, he briefly outlined several upcoming scenes slated for imminent filming. “It may interest you to know Shatterhand called me late last evening. And an odd conversation it was; I never learned what he wanted to discuss, except that he seemed vaguely displeased when I told him of your offer to play a part in our potboiler.”

Klavik caught the prime minister’s eye. “I can’t imagine why a whim to act in your holodrama would disturb Mr. Shatterhand,” he said, fully aware of the reason.

“Well, ‘displeased’ may be a bit strong,” said Chatham. “He’s a cold fish. Acted a bit bent out of shape, wanted to know how the arrangement came about, how I’d persuaded you to do a stint. I told him it was your idea to accept my earlier suggestion.”

Klavik turned to Ramyn and asked bluntly, his manner verging on rudeness, “Didn’t you call Shatterhand, explain our absence?”

Ramyn’s perfect features remained expressionless. Taking her cue in stride, a glint of irritation invaded her hazel eyes. “I left him a message, sir, just as you instructed.”

“Chatty,” said Klavik, “are you obligated to reimburse Eden for the services of the android who’s been playing the safari leader?”

“Yeah, at scale. It’s in our contract with Eden.”

“Losing the fee may have rankled Shatterhand.”

“No way does that figure,” scoffed the director. “Shatterhand won’t be out a single minim. Bel Monde is on the hook for a specific number of android spear carriers, grunt workers, ersatz aborigines, and what have you. The studio has to cough up a per diem fee whether or not the androids are used.”

A second meaningful glance passed between Klavik and Kurani. “I’m confused,” said Klavik. “Why would my decision to playact upset Shatterhand? Can you think of a reason, Kurani?”

“None,” replied the PM on cue. “We’re paying through the nose for the privilege of enjoying ourselves in this lush paradise. Where we choose to go, what we choose to do, is our affair.”

Chatham beamed. “Hear, hear! I’m told you’re this youngster’s guardian, Mr. Kurani.”

The PM regarded Kewart with what passed for paternal fondness. “Aye, that I am, Mr. Chatham. His late sire was beyond doubt the most dearly beloved gentleman in Kraan. By agreeing to chaperone the lad I’ve gladly accepted a weighty burden.”

The director chuckled the prince’s arm familiarly, eliciting a wince from the PM. “Hear your heart’s set on looking over the wildlife, that right, Kewart?”

“I’d like that, yes.”

“Well, you’re going see more critters than you can count. I’ve arranged a guided tour of the preserve. You and Mr. Kurani can look over the game while Klavik, here, undergoes wardrobe fittings. How about it?”

Kewart brightened. “Can Ramyn come with us?”

The director glanced knowingly at the supposed android. “Don’t see why not.”

* * *

Victor Chatham consulted his wrist chronometer. “Hate to sound boorish, nice people, but if we’re finished with breakfast my wardrobe maven’s waiting to get her hooks into Klavik. The Great White Hunter has to be fitted with safari duds.”

“Shall we?” said Cheryl. Her seductive smile commended Klavik for his thoughtfulness in rising, drawing back her rustic chair. Taking his arm with a proprietary air, she launched a dissertation about actors and acting Klavik found condescending. Escorting the actress, he was preparing to descend the steps from the verandah and came face to face with Timmy, the holovision troupe’s key grip.

Despite the best available medical treatment, the stocky youth limped noticeably from the injury to his knee. Klavik managed not to flinch at the wave of naked hatred erupting from the muscular youngster.

“S’cuse,” said Timmy. Raking his nemesis with a second burning glare, he stepped aside, eyes lowered, and let the party file past before accosting the director. He spoke briefly to Chatham in a confidential undertone.

“Uh-uh,” said Chatham. “Not just plain ‘no,’ Tim. Tell him hell no! Doesn’t matter how important Chris thinks it is, it isn’t going to happen. Give him the word, and don’t spare his damaged ego. Tell him I don’t want to hear any more of his miserable gripes.”

“Got you, Chatty.” Timmy hobbled away.

Klavik dipped his chin toward the departing youth. “That knee will require further attention.”

The director nodded. “They did what could be done at the Village medicenter, but there’s ligament damage. Nothing a laparoscope and a night in the hospital won’t fix; we’ll take care of Tim once we’re back home in Bel Monde.”

“I would like to pay for the treatment,” said Klavik.

“Wha-a-at!” Chatham’s exclamation of surprise was intended to settle the issue. “That scuffle on the beach was largely my fault, not Tim’s. Magnanimous of you, Klavik, but unnecessary; the studio takes care of its own. Bel Monde Holovision is a major corporation, self-insured. The studio will foot the bill without a squawk, a cost debited against the production’s below-the-line budget. That way, it stays practically invisible.”

“Surgery will correct the physical injury,” said Klavik, “but not the damage to his psyche. I suspect he bears a lasting grudge.”

“Forget it.” Chatham airily dismissed the notion. “Timmy’s a tough kid, a real hard-nose. He knows the score. His ruptured ego will mend long before the knee.”

The distillation of clear quill hatred issuing from the key grip had flashed a warning in Klavik’s mind. He decided Chatham was wrong. “And if it should turn out the other way round?”

“Hey, don’t sweat it, okay? I’ll take Timmy aside, yak with him, see what I can do to smooth things over.”

“That might be a good idea,” said Klavik. Harboring serious misgivings, he refrained from saying so. Privately, he felt intercession on the director’s part might make matters worse.

NINETEEN

Wearing only briefs and a bored, putting-up-with-it expression, Klavik resigned himself to standing patiently before a petite, sharp-tongued woman of middle years employed as the troupe’s wardrobe mistress.

A pair of androids wielded electronic mensuration devices, recording the data obtained. The woman’s lips twitched. “You’re from where?” she inquired. “Chatty mentioned the name, but I —”

“Kraan, a distant world.”

The wardrobe mistress let her skeptical gaze slide over his scarred torso. “Take no offense, dear boy, but I’ve yet to see anyone quite so torn up who still had a pulse. There must be a tot of dangerous animals in . . . wherever you’re from.”

“There are, many the two-legged variety. Will this take much longer?”

“A few minutes more,” she said. “If we were shooting in Bel Monde, automatic laser fittings would be done for all contract players and extras, and you wouldn’t have to put up with this nuisance. Here on location, especially out here in the sticks, with you popping up from nowhere, it’s the best we can do.”

“How’s it going?” Victor Chatham swept into the fitting room. “Is the Great White Hunter toggled out, ready to emote?”

“Not yet, Bwana,” the woman told him, he tone one of measured sarcasm. “Where’d you dig up this outsized specimen, Chatty? He makes things tough six ways from the get-go. We can let out the hem in the cutoffs, but that chest! We’ll have to custom-tailor a bush jacket.”

“Fine, if you make it march. I need him on the set in an hour.”

“An hour? You’re putting me on.”

“Never throw sand in the gears of progress, Dearie.”

The woman pouted. “You expect miracles, as usual.”

“From you, major miracles. That’s why you’re generously overpaid and underworked.”

The woman uttered a mild obscenity.

The androids finished electronically scanning Klavik. The wardrobe mistress awarded the director a defiant glance and hurried away to wave her magic wand, consummate the prescribed miracle.

Klavik gratefully pulled on khaki shorts, a clean linen tunic. He slipped his feet into open-weave sandals. “Chatty,” he said in a conversational tone, “at breakfast you mentioned recently speaking with Shatterhand in person.”

“The iceman? Yeah, he graced us with his presence. Stopped by our number two jungle set a few periods ago. Why do you ask?”

Blithely disregarding the question, Klavik inquired if the director knew how much time Shatterhand had spent here in the Veldt, where he’d gone after his visit.

“Nary a clue,” drawled the director. “He showed up in one of the electric bush buggies his game wardens ride around in. First time I’d ever seen him out of that null-grav chair of his. He yakked with me a for a few minutes, watched a scene being shot, and zipped away.”

“Heading back toward the lodge?”

Chatham awarded his prospective Great White Hunter a searching look. “No, as I recall the bush buggy trundled off down a game trail toward the escarpment. Now that you mention it, my curiosity was whetted at the time. So-called dangerous critters down here in the preserve are one thousand percent program-controlled, but up in the high country it’s strictly dog eat dog. You’re on your own, and good luck.”

“The wildlife up on the plateau is unprogrammed?”

“Yep, it’s dog eat dog. Up there you have to watch your backside *and* your front side. That’s why we hardly ever film up there. Hardier guests give it a go — ballsy types willing to sign a waiver and pay beaucoup stellars to risk their necks hunting the real thing.”

“Was anyone with Shatterhand when he came by?”

“In the bush buggy? Only a pro hunter from the lodge, and a pair of androids — a weapons bearer and driver.”

“Weapons bearer?”

“Right, an android packing the genuine goods,” said Chatham. “Hunters up there use live tranquilizer ammo, but every safari’s backed up with megajoule laser rifles. On the plateau, no one in his right mind goes weaponless.”

“You believe Shatterhand might’ve been headed up the scarp?”

“Seems like a reasonable assumption, considering the firepower in the buggy.”

“Is there a hunting lodge like this one in the highlands?”

“Well, yes and no,” said Chatham. “I was up there once during a shoot. The lodge is small, in fact tiny compared to this one, with few amenities. Big game safaris down here in safe-and-sane jungle country, or south in the rain forest preserve, are about as dangerous as using knitting needles. The beasts are in both places to titillate guests, not maim them or eat them alive. I’ve used the rain forest location twice for prehistoric backgrounds. It’s an even worse steam bath than here, and the huge saurians are spooky to work around no matter how well they’re programmed. Only a masochist would want to film on the plateau.”

“It sounds to me,” said Klavik, “fairly dangerous to hunt up there.”

“Affirmative, at least to a degree,” the director said. “Don’t misunderstand; nothing’s allowed to get too dicey anywhere in Eden. The do-it-yourself beasts up there are prime specimens, but safari leaders cheat. Unless some mucho macho guest decides to keep the playing field level, give the critters an even break, a subsonic generator on each bush buggy’s roof shies game away.”

While they spoke, Chatham had been eyeing Klavik keenly. “None of my affair, but does this Twenty Questions routine have something to do with your assassination sleuthing?”

Klavik froze.

Realizing too late he’d touched a raw nerve ending, the director swallowed his discomfort. The would-be Great White Hunter’s features had jelled into mask not conducive to friendly discourse. “Sorry,” he said lamely, “just trying to be helpful.” Refusing to wilt under Klavik’s frigid stare, Chatham lifted both palms defensively. “Okay, I only thought to . . . Listen, you’ve been decent about coming to help me out on a cast problem. Why not let me and my people lend a hand? Scratch me, and I’ll scratch you.”

“I do not itch.”

“I understand, but keep the offer on file. Change your mind, and I’ll be happy to oblige.”

Klavik relented a trifle. “I appreciate the offer, but I would appreciate it if you’d forget this conversation.”

Chagrined over a gaffe he had lied about understanding, Chatham fumbled open his attaché case and tugged out a shooting script. “The light blue pages are revisions,” he said uneasily, indicating insertions in the loosely bound hardcopy. “Read from this mark to . . . about here, and remember as much as you can. We’ll do a walk-through after lunch, then a dress rehearsal with Miles, Cheryl and the other principals. You haven’t much to do in this bit; it’s called an establishing shot, an insightful quickie that introduces your character, lets the audience know who he is, what he’s about. Studying the whole scene may strike you as a time-waster, but I’ve learned the hard way that actors are better prepared if they visualize an entire sequence, form a gut feel for the other characterizations, the interplay going on between them.”

Klavik nodded, wordlessly accepted the script and stalked away.

“I’ll be dipped in . . . !” Chatham muttered to himself, and puffed his cheeks. “If that one isn’t the touchiest sumbitch in the visited galaxy, I’ll eat my director’s chair.”

* * *

Emil Shatterhand opened the clandestine communications circuit. “The fault is entirely mine,” he declared. “In my haste to see Buford, I overlooked the orbital surveillance systems aboard their orbiting vessel. I assume they’ve inferred Buford’s whereabouts.”

“An oversight?” The exotic’s flat, transliterated words issued from hidden speakers. “The consequences of your dereliction may prove immaterial. Our distinguished visitors have again shown themselves resourceful, especially the talented one. That revelation is definitely of material value.”

“Have you defined the nature and scope of his talent?”

“Superficially. Stated simplistically, it is the overt manifestation of a primitive ability to attune empathically with other neohumans, an enhanced sensitivity to the constant emotional turmoil raging within them. Yet it disturbs this poor creature to learn that such talent, should the term ultimately prove appropriate, is wholly unprecedented within the species. Manifesting itself in the guardian has to be either the product of cultivation and training, an isolated anomaly attributable to mutation, or conceivably an evolutionary benchmark.”

“Isn’t it unlikely for a mutation to pertain to a single, unique individual?”

“Well reasoned, Shatterhand,” complemented the exotic. “Nevertheless, it remains a possibility. The disturbing element is that such an unforeseen capability might be the pristine indication of an evolutionary trend within the species, the result of on-going natural selection. If so, the guardian may indeed be capable of genetically transmitting all or part of his potentially unique talent to succeeding generations.”

“Do you think that might be the case?”

“A degree of uncertainty exists — a somewhat large degree. Background radiation levels in Kraan are known to fall within parameters thought conducive to accelerated mutation in mammalian organisms. Experts within our peer hive are even now in the process of performing additional probes and studies. Until an appropriate hypothesis has been proven valid, this development is a cause for mild alarm, especially since it has surfaced at a most inopportune moment. Acquiring definitive data about the guardian is therefore deemed critical in order to gain insight into the development of the neohuman species, since its membership forms our beloved Syndicate’s principal clientele.

“Furthermore,” continued the exotic, “the talented one’s reaction to our subtle probes is a cause for additional perturbation. Not once but on two separate occasions has the guardian detected our overt yet delicate meddlings, and reacted in a grossly agitated manner. Yet more worrisome is the knowledge that during our most recent intrusion he dimly perceived our presence, imprisoned as we are in this horrid, inhospitable dungeon. That in itself constitutes a totally unanticipated level of mental awareness, a cause for wonderment that has spurred this poor creature as well as our confreres into intense, prolonged deliberation. A sign of unanticipated mental maturity within a heretofore uncommunicative species could easily flower into something disadvantageous, perhaps even perilous in an economic sense.”

“Best we rid ourselves of him and have done with it,” suggested Shatterhand.

“On the contrary,” the Parvon denied firmly. “Such an arbitrary might have once seemed the height of wisdom. Taking that path no longer obtains in light of the imperative nature of what must be learned. All there is to know about this unique neohuman specimen must be learned and evaluated. We intend to plumb the depth and breadth of the guardian’s unheralded mental ability, and extrapolate there from.”

“A matter of customer research?” said Shatterhand.

“Precisely, Shatterhand. But enough digression. You’ve have assured us it would be impractical to pluck Buford from the wilderness and return him to his prior duties. Is that a firmly held belief?”

“Affirmative,” replied the executive. “Our friends are certain to detain and question Buford. I had thought to arrange an attack by some predator as the simplest, most effective way to be rid of Klavik. Now you say his life must be preserved.”

“At all cost,” insisted the exotic, “if only for the nonce. Our peer group demands a thorough, rigorous examination of this specimen, citing it quintessential.”

Despite his earlier statement, Shatterhand proposed flying the operations manager back to the Village.

“An action you formerly deemed fraught with foolhardiness,” warned the exotic. “Other than emergency conveyances, yours is the sole airborne vehicle in this dismal wilderness of poisonous oxygen. Doing as you suggest would immediately put your personal chop on the venture.”

“Agreed. Yet I see no other way to avoid what will surely take place.”

Seconds passed while the Parvon sorted among the available options. “In the final analysis,” resumed the monotonal voice, “we may be fleeing from nonexistent shadows. Should our visitors locate and interrogate your associate, what then? What can they hope to learn? Buford knows naught of the essentials.”

“That is so, at least on the surface. And yet . . .” Shatterhand paused to reconsider. “Doesn’t the unknown scope of Klavik’s talent tend to introduce a serious complication? Buford is admittedly weak emotionally, vulnerable to questioning. If he were to collapse under pressure, he could reveal certain damaging aspects of the circumstances surrounding our involvement.”

“Ah, a nebulous glow begins to illuminate the matter. Shatterhand, it is you yourself who seeks a shield, not a desire to further conceal a trail leading to the killing ground.”

“Should we afford our friends the luxury of digging deeply,” declared Shatterhand, “and what little Buford does know might reveal evidence of the thorium. They were purposely exposed to the gelignite’s source, and the thorium also originated in Kraan.”

“Have you yourself drawn that specific conclusion?”

“I mention it only as a tangible risk,” said Shatterhand. “A convoluted track does exist, after all. No matter how well sums of that magnitude are laundered and dispersed, major blocs of funding invariably leave a record in one place or another.”

A thoughtful interlude ensued. “Your point is well made, and will be taken under consideration. Accordingly, our potential courses of action shrink to four: eliminate your unfortunate subordinate altogether; spirit him away by air; arrange for him to be evacuated overland; or simply fling him to the wolves and let matters settle out of their own weight.”

Offering a mild objection to the first option, Shatterhand described Buford as someone who had contributed to Eden's successful operation, but agreed to order him eliminated if that was deemed necessary."

"Although his continued existence poses an obscure threat to our endeavor, this poor creature senses your reluctance to dispose of him and his assistance."

Recognizing the subtle rebuke for what it was, the director asked straightforwardly, "Which alternative do you favor?"

This time the pregnant silence stretched longer. "None of the above, Shatterhand. Attend this poor creature. Here is what shall be done . . ."

* * *

In early evening, the troupe's thespian and technical principals gathered in the hunting lodge's small auditorium to view the daily rushes. Chatham explained to Klavik how dynamic synchronization of the propagated holographic images would eliminate fluorescing and the stroboscopic effects tending to degrade the action when sudden movements were made by actors or animals, adding that synchronization could not take place until the cutting and editing process was completed in Bel Monde.

Klavik spotted Timmy, Chatham's key grip, lurking behind the rearmost row of seats. The stocky youth looked away quickly, refusing to meet his former adversary's glance. For the remainder of the session Klavik felt uncomfortably aware of resentful stares and burbles of anger radiating from the youth. Chatham had been truthful when he said the encounter on the beach had not actually been Timmy's fault, that it had been he himself who'd egged him into it. Nor in all honesty, reasoned Klavik, could the onus be laid at his own feet. He had twice warned the trio of intruders not to bother his charges. The simplest method of handling the situation, he supposed, would be to ignore Timmy, allow his resentment to dwindle over time and die a natural death.

Klavik watched with detached objectivity as his avatar halted warily at the sound of someone, or something, crashing through the underbrush. Bored with the utterly realistic if virtual nature of the propagated images, his attention kept strayed from the holovision tank.

He returned Cheryl's smile mechanically when she squeezed his arm and a whispered compliment endorsed his role as the Great White Hunter because he was exceptionally photogenic. On safari — a strange, previously unknown term — clad in an artificially sweat-stained bush jacket, the scene in the holovision tank featured him swinging a machete, cutting a path through thick brush, an android gun bearer following close behind toting the replica of an antique projectile firearm. Klavik watched his clone lead the train of bearers into a small clearing, and stiffen in surprise as the ragged, desperately hungry romantic pair staggered out of the surrounding jungle. Exhausted and scratched by thorns, their clothing soiled, in tatters, the former castaways, told the Great White Hunter they'd escaped from captivity by the "natives," and had a desperate need to reach the nameless planet's space terminal. They begged Klavik's character to aid them elude pursuit by their villainous nemesis and his nefarious henchmen. Who these worthies were, or what variety of mischief they represented, had not been made clear to Klavik, nor did he care to learn.

Scouting for a campsite after administering minor first-aid and offering the fugitive lovers food, water and what little comfort was offered, the Great White Hunter again led the

column of porters until he spotted a prowling jaglon. The tawny, outsized saber-toothed feline had been programmed to crouch as if ready to spring. Cheryl's character screamed convincingly and rushed into the safety of hero Miles Matson's manly arms. The Great White Hunter whirled, snatched the rifle from the gun bearer.

"Shoot it!" cried Matson.

"Stand perfectly still," ordered the safari leader. "Do not move. A hunting female isn't likely to charge."

"You know it," said a chubby actor responsible for the epic's comic relief, "and we know it. But does big pussy know it?"

The cast stood en tableau as the jaglon's sullen growls rolled through the clearing, a sound similar to that of a tubful of marbles being stirred. The predator crouched low, tail whipping through the knee-high grass, studying the caravan with feral green eyes.

After a programmed parting growl, the huge cat turned and bounded into the undergrowth. The fade-to-black featured sighs of relief from Miles and the actress makeup had made to look artificially pale.

"First rate, kiddies!" Victor Chatham clapped his hands. "Two huzzahs, three cheers and a bravo for the latest addition to our distinguished cast. You aren't a bit camera shy, Klavik, and it shows. My, how it does show!"

Bel Monde's fledgling holovision actor modestly endured the kudos bouncing off him in the auditorium's makeshift screening room.

"Damfine job for a beginner," congratulated Miles Matson. "Good work, Crater Man."

Although the reactions of cast and crew to his "acting" ability were not uppermost in Klavik's mind, he fielded the compliments with a show of passive indifference. He could not imagine how walking about in a silly costume and saying a few scripted lines could have impressed anyone, let alone a roomful of professionals.

"Well, Kewart," he asked his future sovereign in private, "what did you think of my performance?"

A snicker. "You looked silly holding that fake weapon. I suppose we'll have to see the whole thing to make sense of it."

Amused, Klavik said, "If then."

Kurani had also witnessed the screening. "You're a born thespian," he praised, tongue figuratively in both cheeks. Making a pretense of drawing Klavik aside to shake his hand, he whispered, "Tonight?"

After a brusque nod, Klavik put a finger to his lips. "Ramyn and I will meet you behind the lodge after everyone's asleep. Say nothing to Kewart."

"Not a word. But why haul the lass along? I thought we'd go alone."

"We need Ramyn," whispered Klavik. "If Buford's found, he'll jump out of his skin if only we two confront him unexpectedly. We want him nervous, but not scared speechless. Ramyn knows Buford, while he in turn knows she isn't an android."

A sly nod from the PM. "We'll jaunt uphill and shake the trees, see what falls out, eh?"

TWENTY

Klavik spent the late evening hours prowling restively about his room. Thinking, and looking forward to the junket, he extrapolated courses of action based upon what was known, what was conjecture, and what was unknown. Everything that might take place atop the escarpment would be contingent upon whether or not the operations manager was actually hiding there.

He sank back on the bed, hands clasped behind his head, and stared at the ceiling, only his mind active. Faint, random sounds penetrated from the lodge's dormitory wing — the muted conversation of guests passing in the hallway, nearby doors opening and closing, the subdued tinkle of glassware as android servants delivered and retrieved room service.

Sometime later, he glanced at his wrist chronometer. Enough time had passed, causing him to roll from the bed, check the charge in his hand laser and nest it in an underarm holster. He washed his hands in the autolave, doused his face in cold water and towed vigorously. Lifting a pair of infrared low-light goggles from his kit, he slipped them under his belt and commanded the door to slide open. The hallway was deserted in either direction.

He and Ramyn had made a point of sleeping apart, hopefully keeping Kewart ignorant of their liaison. The door to her room slid open at his first light tap.

She flashed a smile of encouragement, but said nothing. Using the lift would have meant going through the hunting lodge's main vestibule. They took the rear utility stairway and found Kurani lurking outside.

His urge for silence driven by equal measures of caution and impatience, the PM led the way across the courtyard toward the lodge's underground garage. In a hushed tone, he asked Klavik if they would have to pilfer a conveyance.

"Let's try the easy way first."

Middle age had rendered the night attendant incompatible with the youthful template prescribed for Eden's android population. Bowing to the threesome, the 'unit' said, "How may I serve you?"

"Roll out a bush buggy," ordered Klavik. "The night's too pleasant to waste sleeping."

"At once, sir. I assign a driver."

"That won't be necessary. I'll drive."

"As you wish, sir." A silent electric vehicle automatically trundled up the shallow ramp unattended. The android made a show of holding the door for the guests. Klavik noted his uncertain blink upon discerning Ramyn's "beauty mark," and distracted him by pointing to an oblong bulge between reinforcing ribs on the buggy's roof. "I was told that device warns away dangerous game."

"Correct, sir; it emits subsonics only animals can hear. Engaging it will not be necessary here in the preserve. Are you planning to drive up the escarpment?"

"Oh, no; merely curious," assured Klavik. "We only want a short spin, a breath of air before retiring."

"Have a pleasant outing."

A half-kilometer along the game trail mislabeled as a road, Klavik briefly slowed the vehicle to check the fuel-cell gauge's amp-hour charge level. Lights rimming the lodge

compound had vanished behind the jungle's towering canopy. Looming in the night sky, the crescent of Eden's smaller moon, Persephone, dipped close to the treetops. On either side of shafts of illumination from the vehicle's headlights, impenetrable gloom closed in. The stillness was broken by chitterings, whirrings, the faint cries of nocturnal creatures. The pervasive smell of rotting vegetation was redolent with an underlying scent of animal droppings.

"Spooky!" Despite the balmy night, Ramyn rubbed her bare shoulders as if to warm herself.

"Don't let it unsettle you, lass," advised Kurani. "Klavik, has this contraption sufficient juice to make it up the hill?"

"It does, I'm sure. According to Chatham," said Klavik, "the hunting lodge is only a klick or two from the crest of the scarp. I'll activate the subsonic game warden when we reach the plateau."

"Then I suggest you pour on the watts. We must be back before Kewart wakes."

While efficient on level ground, the electric bush buggy slowed appreciably climbing the escarpment's endless succession of switchbacks canted backward on the steep grade, making the three passengers to hunch forward in their seats. The ascent was orchestrated by a tumultuous roar from the waterfall, a ghostly, nearby vertical ribbon of water limned in moonlight. Klavik could feel the soft caress of spray on his cheek

Topping the escarpment, the buggy crossed a permanent subsonic barrier designed to keep unprogrammed wildlife from using the only pathway down the scarp's near-vertical cliff. The buggy nosed into a gentle downslope beyond the crest, encountered a succession of gentle curves, and entered a darkling tunnel in the dense upland jungle. The air was noticeably cooler than below in the savanna.

Apprehensive about abandoning the safety of the lowlands, Ramyn uttered a muffled cry when the buggy rounded a bend and came upon a huge, tawny cat crouched in the roadway, its tail weaving ominously. Greenish-yellow eyes reflected lantern-like in the buggy's headlights.

"Jaglon." Klavik braked to a stop. "One of the real predators the hardier guests contend with, not a living toy." He depressed a switch, activating the buggy's subsonic generator. The cat bared dagger-like canines, loosed a low, intimidating growl, twisted about and disappeared into the undergrowth with a fluid bound.

"Roof gadget appears to do its job," approved the PM. "I daresay we'll see few if any more wild creatures."

Ramyn hugged herself more tightly. "That monster was all teeth and claws. It looked hungry."

"You're imagining things," teased Klavik. "It was an oversized pussycat with insomnia."

Ramyn was not amused.

The bush buggy wended through greenery thickly strung with creepers and vines trailing down from the canopy overhead. Several other nocturnal plateau denizens challenged their use of the roadway. A furred creature with a quartet of young clinging tenaciously to its back scurried out of the buggy's path. Farther on, blinded by the lights, a sluggish armored reptile the size of a honey bear scuttled away, spooked by inaudible subsonic pulses.

Klavik glanced at the odometer from time to time. He finally brought the buggy to a halt. “Jungle’s thinning out,” he said, and killed the headlights. “We should be fairly close. I’ll walk on ahead, have a look before we press on.”

“Don’t stray far from the subsonics,” warned Kurani. “The wildlife hereabouts seems aptly named.”

“Goes without saying, sir.”

* * *

Klavik seated the infrared night goggles on the bridge of his nose, eased from the driver’s seat and cautiously walked up the rutted lane. Haloed in a fluorescent greenish glow, a field of high grass rustled in the night wind — “lion grass” the neohuman safari leader acting as technical adviser on Chatham’s holodrama had called it. The clearing was broad, its perimeter hemmed with dense jungle. Pale green at the extremity of vision at the center of the clearing, the roof of a single-level structure poked above the sea of grass.

Klavik turned round and round, listening. The lion grass whispered restlessly in the night wind. A faint, gargling animal shriek announced a distant kill. A bat like creature pursued a smaller flyer across the odd looking, greenish sky with intricate dartings, turnings and shrill pipings.

Satisfied, he marched back, rejoined his companions. “We’re close; the lodge is just ahead.”

The electric bush buggy crawled forward silently and bumped onto a graveled drive. Klavik pulled up beside two identical vehicles parked adjacent to the lodge’s rough-timbered porte cochere entrance. The front windows were lit; a wisp of smoke curled from the stone chimney.

“I’ll go in first.” Klavik did not wait for a response. He went up the steps, found the double doors unlocked. Loosening the hand laser in its holster, he pushed his way into the lodge’s rustic, hewn-beam vestibule. The lone occupant, an android attendant, was dozing in a leather armchair.

Klavik touched the fine-featured “unit’s” shoulder. The attendant woke with a start and sprang to his feet. “Sorry, sir. No guests were expected this late.” He bowed to Klavik. “How may I serve you?”

Weighing his response, Klavik decided to be forthright. “My companions and I have arranged to meet here with a gentleman named Buford.”

“Sorry, sir. I don’t remember a guest by that name being registered. A small hunting party is scheduled to leave on safari at first light, but Buford is not among them.”

“Mr. Buford,” informed Klavik, “could be traveling under another name. May we look around for ourselves? Our reason for meeting him is very important.”

With a typical lack of emotion, the android bowed when Ramyn and Kurani appeared in the doorway. “Your pardon,” he said, “but disturbing guests at this hour would be unwise. A safari here in the uplands involves an element of risk. Huntsmen need their rest.”

“We’ll try not to disturb anyone,” assured Klavik.

“Here, what commotion is this?” Clad in a robe and slippers, a guest had emerged from the hallway. He blinked unhappily at the intruders.

“I hope you’ll forgive us for disturbing you, sir.” Except than that, Klavik ignored the guest. He paid no heed whatever to the android’s protestations and quietly suggested that the PM and Ramyn search the building’s east side, while he looked through the opposite wing.

“Right,” said Kurani. “Give a shout if you strike pay dirt. We’ll do likewise.”

The first three doors Klavik eased open revealed dark, unoccupied quarters. The fourth was locked. He knocked softly. Seconds passed before the door swung wide on a sleepy-eyed, nubile young android who had not bothered to cover her nudity. Klavik dodged past the “unit,” stepped through a small parlor into what he assumed was the bedroom.

A head lifted from the pillow. Round-eyed with surprise, a man said, “How dare you burst in here!”

“Apologies, sir; it’s an emergency.” Klavik ducked out of the suite. Four more untenanted apartments failed to yield a clue to Buford’s whereabouts. Hearing a high-pitched, feminine squeal from the lodge’s opposite wing, he jogged back the way he had come, holding the hand laser inconspicuously at his side, and found Kurani trying to placate a fuming female guest whose incurious android companion hovered behind her.

“Doesn’t look like Bufie’s here,” said Ramyn.

A third guest appeared bubbling complaints about being roused in the wee hours. Klavik offered a few placatory words. He was confronted by a tall, rugged looking android he assumed was a proctor.

“Sir, if you’re searching for a particular guest, you might inquire after the gentleman in the basement.”

Kurani perked up. “Basement, you say?”

“Yes, sir; a separate suite of quarters. Someone is staying there. He asks nothing of management, and takes his meals apart.”

“Show us,” directed the prime minister.

The basement suite was not only self-contained, but lavishly appointed compared to the upstairs quarters, where guests willingly paid through the nose to “rough it.” The hydraulic bed was unmade, the pillow dimpled, the coverlet thrown back as if in haste.

Klavik went through the three-room suite with an economy of movement, opening and closed drawers, sweeping aside a man’s racked clothing in the walk-in closet. Brow furrowed, he searched diligently and soon realized tossing the apartment was useless. The rooms offered no hint of the recent occupant’s identity. “The bird,” he told Ramyn, “has flown.”

“Klavik, look here!” The PM’s bellow issued from the adjacent study. Kurani pointed to a marble end table. Resting on it was an opaque cube.

“A holosculpt,” said Ramyn.

“Aye, it’s the clincher. Activate the fool thing, and stand by for a less than surprising surprise.”

Klavik depressed the stud. Ramyn flinched when the lifelike figure of much younger Emil Shatterhand condensed in the cube’s depths. While utterly lifelike, it did not depict the man Kurani and Klavik knew. Many cycles in the past, the holosculpt had captured him standing upright, not reposing in the geriatric chair. The very model of a polished, debonair executive, he had been frozen in time leaning casually on the balustrade of the administrative tower balcony, gazing imperiously across the calm Southern Sea, a breeze tousling his wavy, gray-flecked hair.

“It’s . . . Bufie’s,” Ramyn told them. “I’ve seen it dozens of times in his office. He keeps it as sort of a . . . Well, a shrine, something like that.”

Kurani’s fists clenched. “The devious weasel *was* here, and not long ago. If he was warned him of our arrival, I mean to have the head of whoever alerted Buford. Q&A games with the androids and guests might be appropriate, don’t you think, Klavik?”

“It would be a waste of time. His identity was probably kept from the guests and androids. Besides, I already I know who alerted Buford to our presence.”

“Who?”

“We did.” Klavik figuratively kicked himself for having missed a stroke.

“How so?” demanded Kurani, his head cocked in challenge.

“Something in the bed chamber provided a clue,” said Klavik. “I didn’t put two and two together until I saw it.”

“Saw what? Come, out with it.”

“A sensor panel,” said Klavik, an edge to his voice. “The bush buggy’s subsonic generator wards off dangerous game. I suspect Buford was subsonically warned of . . . even more dangerous game — us.”

Kurani swore a bitter oath at the disclosure, his expression liverish. “I warrant the scurvy fellow’s hiding out there somewhere.”

“He could be anywhere by now. We’ve no chance of finding him unless . . .”

“Unless . . . ?”

Klavik left the study hurriedly. Ramyn and the PM followed him into the adjoining bedchamber, watched him fiddle with the sensor panel flush-mounted in a bedside night stand. He pushed up a sliding knob, increasing the device’s sensitivity.

“Anything?” demanded Kurani.

“Not a wiggle. If he’s hiding out there,” said Klavik, “he’s not being guarded by subsonics. Probably feels safe in a closed vehicle.”

“We’ll hop back in the buggy, run a search pattern.” Kurani broke off to consult his wrist chronometer. “No, not enough time. We have to get back downhill before Kewart is up and about. What say we come back tomorrow night without benefit of the infernal subsonics?”

Klavik did not agree. “Nocturnal predators pose a particular danger. The risk of dispensing with subsonics involves . . . Wait, I’ll make some calculations, estimate the subsonic generator’s range. We can minimize the danger by switching off before —”

“Into the putrid pit with safety! We’ll come back in the night, collar the fellow before Shatterhand has a chance to move him. After rousting the lily-livered sod from his bed, we’ll toast him over a slow fire till he begins to feel talkative.”

Klavik conceded to the inevitable. “As you say, that we shall, sir.”

TWENTY-ONE

Buford was beside himself. “Emil, how can you live with yourself telling me not to worry? They were *here*, I tell you. They tracked me, found out where I’m staying.”

His aristocratic features perfectly composed, Shatterhand evaluated his colleague's vidicom image. He advised Buford to calm down. "Fretting about their persistence is futile. I want you to do exactly as I've suggested."

"Let them find me? But, Emil, that's insane!"

"Not in any way. Tell me, of what crime do you stand accused?"

"N-none," faltered the other. "I've done nothing . . . wrong."

"Then precisely what do you have to hide? Examine the situation logically, not emotionally. Only a single eventuality presents itself. The annoyance factor of our visitors could only double or triple if they succeeded in subjecting you to energetic, fruitless questioning. Agreed?"

"If you don't get me out of here soon," warned Buford, "I'm certain they —"

"Bear with me, please," insisted his superior. "If the worst on worst were to come about, your obvious course will be to answer their queries succinctly and directly. Tell them whatever it is they wish to know. Your disclosures can do no lasting harm."

"You aren't . . . serious, Emil."

"Never more so. Now listen, and listen carefully," said the planetary director. "Through no fault of your own, your emotional makeup serves as an ideal fulcrum with which to pry loose information. The rationale for having you lie low — a misjudgment on my part, perhaps — was to avert the trauma incurred by subjecting you to an inquisition concerning certain incidents about which you know very little, if anything, namely the seduction charade involving their princeling and the subsequent android assault in —"

"There!" cried stridently indignant Buford. "Tell all, you say, and no harm can come of it. Emil, I *programmed* the units who perpetrated the seduction hoax."

"Um, so you did. It had slipped my mind."

"Slipped your . . ." Buford's grimace was a meld of disbelief and anguish. "Aside from 'minor' incidents, how can I begin to explain Ramyn?"

"Why, straightforwardly. Reiterate the theory that some unknown malefactor secretly programmed the android social butterfly in order to corrupt the youngster."

"Some unknown . . . Emil, you aren't making *sense*. Generalities won't wash with these barbarians. I'll sound like a total idiot if I try to lie, and you know it."

"Nevertheless," Shatterhand said patiently, "I suggest you cast blame on the same unknown entity, or entities, thought to be responsible for the assassination, the attack in their quarters, and compromising their princeling."

"But," objected Buford in a choked voice, "Ramyn is no android."

"Haven't we convinced our friends from Kraan otherwise?"

"Have we? What makes you so sure?"

"She has played and is playing her part. She reports regularly. By the way, if it matters she and Klavik have become bedmates. That stiff-necked barbarian, as you call him, finally succumbed to her charms. I can find no basis for suspecting her android pose has been penetrated."

Buford pouted. "What if," he asked, sounding thoroughly miserable, "the 'stiff-necked barbarian' decides I'm refusing to cooperate and pulls out one of the knives he's so fond of using?"

“He wouldn’t dare harm you,” assured Shatterhand.

“No? Is torture considered harmful?”

“Buford, this discussion has gone beyond Byzantine and ventured into the ridiculous. You must excuse me now; a number of items are calling for my attention here. Stay where you are until I can arrange to have you moved. Understood?”

“Then it’s your decision to, uh . . .”

“To relocate you, naturally.”

“When?”

“Oh, soonest. Shall we say next period, or the following. Having your whereabouts revealed has caused me to rethink certain matters. The best hiding place is often in a crowd, not in a lonely Veldt outpost. Leave it to me. I promise to devise something satisfactory.”

Buford sagged in resignation. “They’re persistent, Emil. They’ll find me wherever I am.”

“If that should happen,” submitted Shatterhand, “you have only to reaffirm the suspicion that some malignant third agency is, has been, and will be actively thwarting their efforts. Trust me, Buford. We’ll talk again later.”

The director closed the secure vidicom link, and Buford’s unhappy visage faded. Reposing for a minute in silence, he went to opened the audio circuit to the Parvon’s sanctuary. Wasting no words on preliminaries, he tersely described events in the Veldt.

The exotic’s transliterated response had a ring of finality. “And still you deem this nobody a ‘friend’?”

“Your pardon; I should have said colleague.”

“Sentimentality is an egregious fault, Shatterhand. It must never be allowed to subvert an important endeavor. Friend, foe or colleague, what matters it? Neohuman terms often evolve from shoddy semantics. This attachment you feel for your so-called ‘colleague’ is hereby rendered null and void. Here is precisely what shall be accomplished . . .”

* * *

Groggy after an all but sleepless night riding up and down the escarpment, Klavik mechanically went through the motions during the fourth or fifth retake of a scene he decided limped very badly. The shooting script called for the Great White Hunter to stand by looking displeased, not bothering to mediate a shouting match between Cheryl’s character, the epic’s trouble-prone heroine, and two purported “heavies” woodenly portrayed by androids.

“Cut!” cried the exasperated director. “No dice, kiddies. It doesn’t work. Everybody take a deep breath and think about what you’ve been doing, and we’ll try it again.”

Chatham had aggressively coached Klavik between takes. “I need something more dynamic from the Great White Hunter. He has to stay in character — self-contained, more or less above it all — during Cheryl’s dispute with the black hats, but he has to look thoroughly pissed-off about the goings-on. Want to try it with that in mind?”

“I’ll do my best, Chatty.”

Klavik uttered his single line during the ensuing retake, then tried to look indifferent to the heroine’s agitated histrionics. From the corner of his eye he saw Chatham, sitting hands on knees beside the hovering holovision blimp, intently following the scene’s progress. Behind the director, a circlet of gaffers, juicers and grips stood about in various lax attitudes. Chatham

opposed audio dubbing unless absolutely necessary, favoring what he termed “naturalism.” The troupe’s professionals dared not move or make a sound that might spoil the take.”

With the furnished property article, an antique projectile weapon called a “rifle” in his hands, Klavik waited impatiently for Cheryl’s cue line. He idly spotted Timmy, the key grip, on the fringe of bystanders and unintentionally locked glances with the muscular youth. Timmy blinked and looked away quickly, petulance written large in the curl of his under lip. The bolt of naked rage emanating from him impacted Klavik forcefully. He decided then and there to keep watch on his backside.

Holding an expression of feigned displeasure, the Great White Hunter glowered at the distant, nonexistent mountains until Cheryl delivered her cue.

He pretended to lose patience, spun around poised to put the “heavies” in their places, and a bolt of fearfulness slammed into his consciousness, ripping all else from his mind.

Despite his resolve to endure future mental batterings stoically, the assault was tempestuous, worse than the earlier intrusions. Staggered by the onslaught, he dropped the “rifle,” clamped his eyes tightly shut. Cheryl Brooks, in the act of voicing a second cue line, flubbed it and trailed off uncertainly. Reaching out, she tentatively touched Klavik’s shoulder. “What is it? Are you all right?”

“Cut, cut!” barked the director, jumping to his feet. He hurried to Klavik’s side, his manner solicitous. “What’s troubling you, Klavik?”

“No cause for . . . alarm,” gritted Klavik, struggling to hold himself together, desperately trying to fend off buffeting waves of dread that inundated his mind. “A touch of indigestion. Give me . . . a minute.”

Savagely resenting the aggravated nature of the attack, he lurched to the canvas-backed chair bearing his stenciled name and collapsed, straining to determine a direction, a source for the remorseless, pulsing avalanches of nameless terror. Minutes passed before the frightening, overpowering sense of dread began gradually subsiding, diminishing further. Once again he perceived a flashing subliminal impression of intense brilliance bathing an alien, obscenely writhing shape.

The terror-filled moment dissolved much more slowly than it had arrived. Breathing deeply, he made a conscious effort to shut out the concerned chatter going on around him and analyzed the fleeting vision, confirming it as something actually experienced, not a product of his own skewed consciousness. What he had sensed seemed identical to the flashing, presque vu image briefly rippling in his mind’s eye on prior occasions. Of one thing he became certain; it was not, had never been, a figment of his imagination.

In this instance, however, the intrusion had exceeded by a full order of magnitude what he’d thought of as the original “nibblings” to which he’d been subjected. This time his root consciousness had been under siege, the target of all-out mental warfare, a concentrated assault on his id.

Indecently disturbed by the occurrence, Klavik felt mauled internally, an more aggressive form of mind rape. His essence had been violated by a shadowy peripheral force he did not begin to understand.

Klavik opened his eyes. Kurani hovered beside him, with Ramyn and Kewart crowding close behind.

The PM muttered softly, “The ‘indigestion’ excuse is beginning to wear thin.”

Klavik kept his voice low. “Blame it on . . . a lack of sleep.”

“Tell me no tall tales, Klavik. I’ll not swallow that brand of nonsense.” Kurani swung to face the concerned director. “Mr. Chatham, I think we’d better let Klavik rest a while.”

The thought of falling further behind schedule did not sit well with the director. Nevertheless he said unhappily, “Sure, okay. Take off, Klavik. Be a good idea to drop by the infirmary at the lodge, let the medics run a quick computer diagnosis.”

“I think I’ve caused you enough grief, Chatty. I feel fine now, just tired. Will my absence inconvenience you beyond repair?”

“First things first,” said Chatham. “Go take care of yourself. We can shoot around you this afternoon, no sweat. I’ll expect you on the set in the morning, bright-eyed and bushy tailed.”

“I won’t disappoint you,” promised The Great White Hunter.

* * *

Before he swung aboard the bush buggy, Klavik gently urged Kewart to come back to the hunting lodge with him and the PM. The youngster declined. Intrigued by the filming process, he said he wanted to stay with Ramyn, watch another scene or two. Klavik acquiesced, smiled at Ramyn to let her know everything was all right, and settled himself behind buggy’s joystick.

Beside him in the passenger seat, Kurani said, “Sure you’re up to operating this contraption?”

“No problem, sir.”

The buggy trundled into twin ruts, a poor excuse for a road. The PM’s dubious silence persisted until the holovision set vanished behind the screening jungle, and he opened up, insisted upon learning what had repeatedly afflicted Klavik in an oddly disturbing manner. “And no ‘indigestion’ doubletalk,” he concluded.

His senses still reeling in the wake of the mental assault, Klavik tried to fend off the other’s questions with mumbled reassurances. The buggy reached a fork in the cow path, and he braked to a stop. The left track led back toward the hunting lodge; the right fork, a game trail, wandered up a gentle rise to the foot of the escarpment. He knew it was not merely unwise, but next to impossible to try and deceive the elder statesman. “A pregnant thought occurred to the Great White Hunter back there. Why not visit the highland lodge now, in daylight? We can skip the subsonics, take our chances with the wildlife. I have my hand laser, and you never go anywhere without yours.”

Kurani’s grunt of surprise sounded genuine. “Bravo! Why didn’t I think of . . . ? One moment. I suspect you’re trying to bamboozle me by explaining away your ‘indigestion’ as a ruse to get shut of the holovision fol-de-rol?”

“It seemed as a convenient way to break free, sir.”

“I’m loathe to disbelieve you,” said the other flatly, “but your oh, so convenient inspiration definitely won’t wash. I’ve seen it before, the dazed look that comes over you, grabs you unawares. Whatever afflicted you in the past has done so again. What the hell is going on? Why do you refuse to confide in me?”

“I may be a better actor than you think, sir.”

A glint of deeper suspicion lit the prime minister's dark eyes. "Or a far better prevaricator, a suspicion I lean toward heavily." Kurani's clipped enunciation announced that his banked fires of indignation had been reignited.

"The afternoon is waning. I think we'd be remiss to squander the opportunity. Last night you spoke of wanting to reach Buford before he could be moved. This may be our best, perhaps only chance to do so."

Kurani realized he was being manipulated. His craggy visage jelled in an expression of disbelief. "I'll not play word games with you. Turn this kiddy car uphill smartly. We'll collar the scheming weasel, squeeze the truth from him. But if you think being sloughed off by the likes of you and your feeble pretense of digestive problems, or your celestial acting ability, you are very sadly mistaken."

* * *

Bathed in windblown spray from the tumbling waterfall, the bush buggy crawled upward, ratcheting back and forth from switchback to switchback, and eventually rolled over the brink of the escarpment.

His range of vision limited by the jungle encroaching on either side of the seldom used lane, Klavik stayed alert for predators lurking in the thickly grown underbrush. Doing his best to steer and at the same time keep watch in all directions, he guided the vehicle into a winding tunnel of greenery latticed with slanting shafts of sunlight. Two dozen meters farther on, the buggy rounded a gentle curve.

"Hold it!" A hand laser leaped into Kurani's hairy fist.

Klavik braked sharply. A mammoth, bull-shouldered animal lounged in the roadway, its broad, buff-colored head crowned by a sweeping rack of horns. The beast regarded the invading buggy coolly, stolid antipathy in its bloodshot bovine eyes. Humping its hindquarters, it kneeled on long, knobby-kneed forelegs and surged erect, revealing cleft hooves. Rearing taller than seemed reasonable, it glared redly at the bush buggy and its occupants.

"Ruddy nuisance," muttered Kurani. "Can we get around it?"

"I don't believe so."

A pawing hoof raised dust. The horned head swung back and forth in menacing fashion, then lowered with ominous intent.

"Fool thing's about to charge," warned Kurani. "Give it a brief blast of subsonics."

"We dare not this close to the lodge. Set your hand laser on low power, wide-fan. A touch of heat should spook the animal. I'll have my weapon ready in case a singe doesn't do it."

"Why so timid?" objected Kurani. "I say fry the blundering ox, and have done with it."

"Drop it in the roadway," pointed out Klavik, "and the buggy wouldn't be able to get past the carcass?"

"Um, see your point." The PM fiddled with the weapon's selector. He leaned from the buggy, aimed high, depressed the firing stud and brought the cone of thermal energy around swiftly. Fur smoked on the animal's legs and flank.

The beast emitted a plangent bellow and backed off, lowered its head enraged, bellowed again more loudly and thundered toward the lightweight conveyance, ramming it with a screech of tortured metal.

The buggy careened, almost overturned, and bounced to rest with the rear wheels entangled in the roadside thicket.

Jolted by the impact, Klavik tried to jump out and eliminate the menace. But the driver's door had buckled, jamming it shut.

The animal bellowed again, shook its horns defiantly and floundered away, its reverberating bellows diminishing in the distance.

"Obstinate beastie made a wrinkled mess of the contraption." Kurani rotated his wrenched neck, rubbing out the kinks. "Can we to proceed?"

Klavik energized the drive, but nothing happened. He glanced at the power meters. "Fuel cell connections may be sheared. Making repairs could be difficult."

The news displeased Kurani. "How far to the lodge?"

"From what I recall of last night's trek, a half-kilometer, maybe a bit more. Everything looks different in the light."

"Come along then. We'll hoof it."

"With uncontrolled animals about, that might be dangerous."

"Into the Putrid Pit with the tooth and claw denizens of this plastic hell hole. This time we'll mince no words with android drones, but head straight to the basement hideaway. We'll take the slippery bastard by the throat, squeeze him hard. Come along."

Klavik holstered the hand laser, climbed over the open buggy's jammed door and set off behind the swiftly striding older man.

They had marched no more than one hundred fifty meters before encountering a swarm of tiny, near-invisible stinging flies. Jogging along the rutted lane, trying to beat off the annoying "No see 'ems," Klavik slowed his pace, tilted back his head and ignored the cloud of pesky nuisances. He seized Kurani's elbow, tugging the PM to a halt.

"What now?"

Klavik put a finger to his lips. "Hear it, sir?"

The faint turbine whine grew steadily in volume, gradually swelled into the sonorous propeller thrash of twin-ducted fans. The sound Dopplered away, descending in pitch as the aircar swept past overhead. A glint of burnished metal flashed through the forest canopy.

"Shatterhand!" cried the PM. "It has be the cripple; his is the only private verticraft in Eden. I wager the devious bastard has come to spirit Buford away. We'd best hustle and confront the conniving scum."

Five minutes of energetic, alternating jogging and striding brought them out of the jungle beneath the open sky. Parked on the far side of the clearing, the whale-backed, aerodynamic shape of a verticraft humped above the field of lion grass. Perspiring in the sultry air, they trotted along the gravel drive to the lodge's porte cochere entrance. Klavik paused atop the lodge's steps to look back in the direction of the grounded vehicle.

"Later," said the PM impatiently. "If the overly polite cripple is here, he'll be inside by now."

"It's not Shatterhand's verticraft," said Klavik. "It bears the striping and green cross of a medivac emergency vehicle."

A cluster of figures were standing and kneeling around something on the ground not far from the grounded verticraft. A neohuman game warden took note of their approach and held up a warning hand. "You'll want to stay back, gentlemen. It's no pleasant sight."

One of the men hunkering down looked up at the newcomers incuriously. Over the heart of his pale green jumpsuit was a medic's serpent-and-staff caduceus. He let fall the opaque plastic sheet covering a still form sprawled in a patch of flattened, bloodied lion grass.

With a pang of foreknowledge, Klavik asked what had taken place.

"A predator most likely," said the game warden said. "Jaglon, probably. For whatever reason, the victim was out here alone, unprotected."

Klavik bent without asking permission and lifted a corner of the shroud. His gorge rose. There was no face; it had been ripped away. Beneath a shredded tan tunic, the corpse's midriff was laced with deep, bloody gouges rent by feral claws. The upper left leg had been partially devoured. The volume of blackened, coagulated blood nearby struck him as more excessive than seemed reasonable.

"Is it Buford?" asked Kurani.

Klavik let the sheet drop. "In a way, I hope it is, and not some android double."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because," said Klavik grimly, "if it's an android it would be even more horrible."

"In what way?"

"Think how it would feel," said Klavik, "for a programmed android to know in his deeper consciousness what was in store, yet be helpless to prevent it from happening."

The prime minister blanched. He did not respond.

TWENTY-TWO

Klavik questioned the android who had discovered the victim. Satisfied with the straightforward account, he spent a moment flattering, and then cajoling the medic, urging him to estimate a time of death. The physician hedged. He explained that lacking an autopsy to determine the condition and content of the victim's stomach, the degree of lividity, liver temperature and other esoterica, any answer he gave would be an educated guess, not an estimate.

Klavik persisted. Eventually grudging an off-the-cuff answer, the doctor estimated that the bestial attack had probably taken place three or four hours before dawn.

Intensely frustrated by the development, Kurani joined Klavik going through the lodge's basement quarters. After digging into the contents of each drawer and cabinet, they examined the linings and pockets of all items of clothing in the walk-in closet, minutely inspected every item of furniture, each built-in appliance. They even sampled the contents of the holographic library, then went so far as to pull out and leaf through a set of priceless hardbound books — antique relics lining the shelves in a glass-front étagère. Literally tearing the place apart room by room, item by item, they found nothing of even minimal interest.

Hands on hips, Kurani defiantly surveyed the ransacked suite as if it were sentient, consciously thwarting their efforts. "Same as it was last night, isn't it?"

“Not completely,” whispered Klavik, and pantomimed a move to the exit. He led the PM into a small courtyard outside the lodge’s rear entrance that was hopefully free of surveillance devices.

“What did you mean, ‘not completely’?” demanded Kurani.

“The holosculpt of Shatterhand is no longer in the study, or anywhere else in the apartment. The marble pedestal it rested on has also disappeared.”

The PM’s bushy brows knit. “Hmm-m-m, missed that.” He loosed a blistering obscenity. “Klavik, this tail-chasing fiasco is . . . The opposition owns every advantage in the book, not to mention all weapon in the arsenal and every scrap of ammunition. The crippled conniver in charge of this bestiary has at his beck and call legions of conscienceless slaves who do his bidding like robots. He’s pulled one puppet string after another since the moment we set foot in his gaudy paradise, kept us trotting hither and yon, dancing to his tune, and we’ve reacted like benighted fools to everything we’ve heard, seen, or touched.”

Klavik waited for the tirade to subside.

“Wrapped us in a silken web, he has.” Hoarsely venting his anger and frustration, Kurani ranted about being trapped in a hall of mirrors, where nothing was as it appeared. “We’ve yet to garner a single lead worth following, and might never do so. Time after time we’ve lunged at Shatterhand’s lures, stumbled like dimwits over his roadblocks. We’ll achieve nothing worthwhile in this nest of sybarites, mark me!”

“We may learn something from this.” Klavik withdrew something from the slash pocket of his tunic.

“What have you there?”

Folded in Klavik’s open palm was a small scrap of cloth darkened by dried blood. “I tore it from the corpse’s tunic when the medic was otherwise occupied. We’ll let the lab aboard the Kolodaan do a comprehensive analysis.”

“Ah, I see, I see. Good, Klavik! It should tell us whether the deader’s bloodstream contained programming agents.” Impressed by the demonstrated astuteness, the PM’s head bobbed in commendation. “Thinking, always thinking, you are. A DNA analysis will definitely confirm the unlucky devil as Buford or some poor misbegotten android.”

“Not . . . definitely,” said Klavik, sounding hesitant.

“Why not?”

“The opposition misses few bets, sir. One possibility is that mutilation rendering the victim unrecognizable was intended to convince us the remains are indeed Buford’s, who could have been injected with faux programming agents against his will. On the other hand —”

“Hold it!” exclaimed Kurani. “You’re saying we’ve again circled the galaxy and landed back where we started, that analysis will prove nothing one way or the other?”

“Nothing conclusive,” admitted Klavik, “but it may lend insight into the reason for —”

“May, might, could!” raged Kurani. “By the ever enduring First Principle, why even bother?”

Klavik pressed on resolutely. “Think of it this way, sir. Should the lab results indicate an uncontaminated bloodstream, it would mean —”

“Ah, now I see,” interrupted Kurani, his enthusiasm renewed. “A lack of contaminants would mean it is, or rather was, Buford.”

Sublimating his discomfort, Klavik said, “Not . . . necessarily, I’m afraid. The deceased could also be a neohuman double, someone of Buford’s approximate size and build.”

Kurani eyed his companion archly, his expression a mixture of anger and dismay. “You,” he declared, “are a remarkable piece of work. I’ll be condemned to an eternity in the Putrid Pit if your merry-go-round of suppositions and conjectures totes up to anything other than a big, fat goose egg. Round and round we go, but where the exit to this labyrinth is we shall never know. Thus far, our so-called ‘investigation’ makes me wonder if we’re afoot or afloat. Much as I despise sounding like a defeatist, isn’t it time to consider packing it in, divesting ourselves of this insane tail chasing quest?”

“Not quite yet, sir.”

“Why not? Why stay on? You’d best come up with an outstanding reason, I warn you. “Thus far, we’ve gotten less than nowhere. We’ve frittered away period after period chasing shadows, while he risk to His Highness mounts with each passing hour.”

Klavik abruptly changed tack. “There are three truly outstanding reasons for persevering, the least important of which is my contract to perform in Chatham’s holovision opus.”

“Bah! The ‘acting’ fol-de-rol is occupational therapy for morons. Now Shatterhand’s dispatched us into yet another blind alley. Why squander one additional minute on the acting foolishness? You owe that director fellow nothing, not one damn thing.”

Klavik folded his arms. “I promised Chatham to see it through, sir. I also signed a short-term contract, and n agreement is an agreement.”

The PM snorted indignantly. “You’d better plead an infinitely stronger case for your other reasons.”

“Stay in the Veldt another period or two, and we’ll obtain analytical results on this patch of bloodied cloth. Also, I want to question the man who programs the android extras and animals, learn the details of his technique. Chatty introduced us on the set. A bad-tempered fellow named Theo, he’s a waspish expert who programs —”

“Confront him? Question him about how the deader got himself zotzed?”

“That’s my intention.”

“Good luck! Odds are he’ll do a tap-dance, neatly sidestep the issue just like the rest of Shatterhand’s minions.”

“He’s neohuman. He would have to tell us whether he wants to or not.”

“Ah, now the waters clear a bit. Probe him with your special ability, that what you have in mind?”

“Among other things.”

Kurani revolved the notion. “So be it. I’ll sit still for that, but not much more. And your third reason?”

Klavik turned away to gaze at the parti-colored sunset flaring in the west. “Indigestion, sir.”

“I wondered if and when you’d get around to that topic.”

“To date,” said Klavik, “we’ve been sparring with second and third echelon opponents. I think the true opposition has gradually made itself known.”

“Explain.”

“I’ll tell you about it as while driving down the escarpment?”

“How? Our conveyance bagged it, remember?”

“We’ll commandeer another.”

* * *

An android attendant had just settled himself in the driver’s seat of the only bush buggy parked beneath the hunting lodge’s porte cochere entrance. Klavik’s request startled him.

“Sorry, sir. Guests aren’t permitted to drive down the escarpment in darkness. Let me call, have a vehicle sent up to fetch you.”

“It will take too long,” objected Klavik. “You drive us.”

A programmed menial, the android could neither ignore the command of a guest, nor cope with a denial. Instead, he described the urgency of his current task, a venture west to retrieve a slightly injured hunter from one of the parties on safari.

Klavik pulled open the buggy’s door, tugged the android from the vehicle bodily, swung him to one side and deposited him gently on the lodge’s steps. The knife wound along his rib cage was still not completely healed, but did not inhibit him from doing it effortlessly, as if he were manhandling a hollow mannequin.

The android’s behavioral programming did not permit the thought of physical resistance to the whim of any guest. He watched the bush buggy depart with docile indifference.

Dusk descended over the plateau with tropical suddenness. The silver crescent of Ariel, the larger of Eden’s two moons, appeared above the treetops. Klavik switched on the twin headlights, activated the subsonic game warder. Trundling at full speed, the vehicle left the lodge’s graveled road, slewed into shallow ruts in the narrow jungle lane.

Driving in silence, Klavik heard the PM snuffle and blow his nose. “The topic,” said Kurani, “I believe to be indigestion.”

Klavik roused from an introspective reverie. “First let me briefly recapitulate. I’m convinced that the purpose of either simulated incident — Kewart’s faux seduction, and the android attack in our quarters — was to distract us from the hunt, misdirect our quest, and perhaps frighten us away. I’m also sure no physical harm was intended during either staged event.”

Kurani cogitated. “I don’t subscribe entirely to either postulate, yet if true neither achieved its purpose, though I readily admit the danger to His Royal Highness gave me serious pause. Proceed.”

“Inducing psychic trauma by varied means and methods,” pursued Klavik, “would appear to be the primary opposition tactic. Several periods ago, if you recall, we had a seaside conversation, then I left you to walk alone on the beach, where I was attacked.”

“Attacked . . . ?” The older man’s head turned sharply. “Attacked by whom? You made no mention of any such —”

“Not a physical assault,” said Klavik. He described the original, barely perceptible experience as, for want of a better term, “mind nibbling,” and explained how the mental molestation had increased in intensity during successive incursions. He confessed that the most recent incident, earlier that period while filming the holovision scene, had been a virtual ravagement of his sense and sensibility, how he’d been victimized by a mind-numbing deluge of synthetic terror, wave after wave of fearfulness short-circuiting his own thought processes like a seizure, leaving him with a blinding headache only now beginning to abate.

“Telepathy . . . ?” Kurani’s basso growl underscored his scornful opinion of the subject.

“Prime Minister, I realize how outré that sounds to a pragmatist like yourself. Please remember, conditioning sessions have endowed me with susceptibility to mental and emotional pressures much greater than those perceivable by an average neohuman.”

Serious misgivings tugged down the corners of Kurani’s generous mouth. He watched the road’s dual ruts unfold ahead of the bush buggy. “Were I to hear that from a lesser individual,” he drawled at last, “I’d request his immediate certification. How can such a thing be remotely possible? I reviewed the reports detailing your progress during the, uh . . . conditioning. Enhancing a natural aptitude for sensing gross emotions in another is one thing, but mental communication . . . From the data I assimilated, I’m willing to concede your extrasensory ability as an inarguable talent. Even so, the notion of one mind speaking directly to another is . . . To me, it smacks of magic, and in that I place no faith whatever.”

“Nor I, sir.” Limned in the buggy’s headlights, the broken-down vehicle that brought them uphill appeared. Klavik guided the buggy to the lane’s narrow left shoulder, and crept past the damaged vehicle with decimeters to spare. Kurani glanced back at the conveyance’s forward deck, crumpled by the huge, ox-like creature contesting their right of way.

“I only wish,” said Klavik, “what experienced could be described more accurately. I felt violated, soiled. Mind rape describes the overall sensation as definitively as any other term. You needn’t feel alone in doubting what occurred. Had someone else related such an obvious impossibility to me, I would never have given it a minim’s worth of credence.”

Kurani did not respond. The buggy rounded a curve, sweeping past tangled thickets brightly etched in the headlights. When he finally did speak, his bass voice was laden with solemn overtones. “Klavik, you’ve given me absolutely no cause to doubt your veracity or integrity. What else can you tell me? How does this . . . mind-to-mind thing work? Are the messages cast in language, pictures, what?”

“Judging from my limited experience, it’s like being afflicted with a waking nightmare. First an oppressive sense of wariness comes over me . . . It’s difficult to explain coherently.” Klavik shifted disquietly in the driver’s seat. “What’s especially disturbing is that during the latter instances of . . . well, mind-rape, some form of reversal took place.”

“Reversal . . . ? I fear you’ve lost me.”

“Bear with me, sir; I’m floundering in the dark myself.” Klavik kept his eyes on the road. “It was as if an omniscient entity had bludgeoned its way into my consciousness, tapped into the core of my being and squatted there within my innermost self, occupying space. It reminded me of ancient legends dealing with demonic possession. The fearfulness creeps over me as a formless sensation of uneasiness, an ominous rumble of distant, foreboding drums, then swells and balloons into something intangible yet impossibly real, like an overpowering oppression that gradually turns into waves of full-blown, nameless terror.”

Kurani frowned. “And what of this . . . reversal?”

“The original instances affected me in varying degrees, like illusory images that vanished even while forming. Something different occurred this afternoon. A single instant of what might have been a two-way exchange took place. I perceived a distinct impression lasting milliseconds that was exactly like the first distant glimmering, but more vivid. It was as if I had instantaneously entered another place, obtained a flash of insight into the mind of . . . another.”

“Another . . . being?” Kurani stared fixedly at the younger man.

“There was a fleeting impression of a rock-walled chamber lit with intolerable brilliance, an alien form immersed in liquid, writhing and twisting, never still.”

“Are you intimating that an *alien* is behind these attacks?”

“Totally alien, some type of exotic. I don’t believe putting two and two together sans concrete evidence. But we do have a hint of evidence, sir: the mystery vessel orbiting in hyperspace, the fragmentary data we’ve obtained concerning Eden’s absentee ownership. Enough, I believe, to form a tentative, inescapable conclusion.”

“A Parvon!”

“I firmly believe an exotic is in our midst.”

“To the best of your knowledge, are the owners of this gaudy bordello telepathically endowed?”

“No one has the vaguest notion of Parvon capabilities, Prime Minister. The sum total of knowledge concerning exotic species in general is extremely limited. What is known, however, is that no exotics thus far encountered have demonstrated telepathic capability, nor could it be readily recognized as such. The visited portion of our galaxy is enormous, vast beyond comprehension and speckled with immensely diverse, equally incomprehensible life forms. Many if not most exotic societies are either unknown, or disinterested in anything more than casual, sporadic contact with neohumanity.”

Kurani’s head wagged. “You’ve made your point twice over,” he said. “In essence, what you’re telling me is that the game has not simply heated up, but undergone a radical shift in direction and focus. Would it be sensible to assume that astute sleuthing on your part has flushed out the slimy beggar, or do you think Shatterhand found himself in over his head and called for help?”

“Either conclusion strikes me as reasonable.”

“Um-m-m, and if so,” continued the PM, thinking loud, “we’ve perhaps been barking up the wrong damned tree all along. Do you believe Parvo’s money-mad Syndicate is behind the assassination?”

“It’s one of several likelihoods.”

“Aye, and to my mind one worthy of critical examination. But, why, Klavik? The homeworld has enjoyed only incidental contact with alien cultures, and none whatever with random exotics. Nor do we have much of anything in common with the few exotic species our experts have bothered to catalog. None have demonstrated a remote kinship to neohumans.”

“With one exception, sir — intelligence.”

“Aye, that I will not dispute. But what farfetched motive could an immensely wealthy, parsecs-distant alien business conglomerate concoct for involving itself in the assassination? The primary investigative criterion you’ve employed, positing the principal beneficiary of a particular crime, still seems valid. I can’t begin to conceive how the murder of His Omnipotence would benefit Parvo in any way, shape or form.”

“Nor I,” said Klavik, “other than possibly adopting the role of well-paid middleman. But that notion strikes me as even more farfetched. The most astronomical sums imaginable would hardly suffice to fund the commission of a crime laced with such far-reaching, potentially lethal

ramifications and consequences. Any number of combinations and permutations of circumstance could exist.”

“Permutations . . . ?”

“Yes, sir. Expressly because Parvo is a distant enigma, its exotic inhabitants deeply involved in interstellar commerce, mightn’t some vengeful third party have conspired with them to contract the assassination?”

“Certainly, but a vengeful who? I don’t believe astronomical sums would suffice for doing what you postulate may have been done.”

“Several theories come to mind,” said Klavik. “One or more members of the Parvon Syndicate could have been blackmailed into engineering the deed. A second hypothesis suggests that the assassination may have been hired through a third party, some individual or agency not necessarily allied to Parvo’s governing body, should any exist, or its commercial syndicate.”

“True, true.” Kurani’s brow furrowed. “Or through the offices of one or more renegade Parvons.”

“Another postulate worth consideration,” said Klavik. “We may even learn that someone of Buford’s stripe accepted the contract without syndicate knowledge or approval, and perhaps without Shatterhand’s knowledge or complicity. I admit that sounds like a stretch, but if it proves true it could also mean a Parvon has come here with the goal of bailing out the guilty party or parties, or perhaps acting as an intermediary on their behalf. The link may also —”

“Hold it!” exclaimed the PM. “You’ve an admirable gift for this searching type of conjecture, but guessing games will never sort out the wriggling pan of worms. We’re obligated to diligently chase down each lead, each postulate. And then, once guilt had been proven beyond reasonable doubt, we shall address the culprits with daggers drawn, exact punishment in the ancient way.”

“It will be as you say, Prime Minister.”

A sage nod. “And should the burden of guilt fall upon Parvo, neither Shatterhand nor anyone else in his gaudy playground will save the scurvy alien monsters from wishing they had never heard of Planet Kraan.”

“Admittedly, it’s mostly intuition, but they may already wish that were the case.”

TWENTY-THREE

His arms roped with muscle, his manly, hirsute chest bared and beaded with sprayed-on perspiration, megastar Miles Matson struggled vainly against captivity. Rolling his eyes in dramaturgical anguish, he strained mightily at the leather thongs binding his wrists that were actually flimsy straps. With helpless fascination, he turned soulful eyes toward his lady love’s most recent hideous predicament.

“Guy’s a grade-A hamola,” whispered one of the juicers standing beside the grounded holovision blimp.

The set decorator beside him snickered. “Carpet-chewing’s his specialty.”

Once again in dire straits, a condition obtaining throughout the melodrama, nude Cheryl Brooks was also immobilized in bondage. Displaying proud defiance, as well as her proud

altogether, she forced an expression of determination meant to be a visible manifestation of hanging tough despite the prospect of ravishment by one or more of the nefarious black hats populating Chatham's epic.

Slouched in the canvas-backed chair bearing his stenciled name, Klavik watched the third — was it the fourth? — retake of a kidnap scene crucial to the plot, and wondered if a plot even existed. Having no part in the scene, he took advantage of the idleness to absorb the ebb, flow and counter flow of emotional whorls and eddies emanating from members of the holovision troupe. Of special interest were the emotional spikes and squiggles generated by the actors engaged in their roles. Synthetic or genuine emotion was, after all, still emotion; either variety triggered his enhanced sense of esthesis.

Cheryl's inner turmoil came through clearly. Any self-consciousness the actress might have felt due to nudity before cast, crew and the holovision camera's all-seeing triple eyes was sublimated by the overtones of projected fear illuminating the utter hopelessness of her character's situation.

The emotional tenor of Miles Matson was flatter, more subdued. The megastar seemed unable to suppress or disguise his apathy after repeating the take for the third or fourth time. His lackadaisical performance was apparent in the facial contortions he displayed in lieu of the stoic, "chin-up" strength of character demanded by the script.

Victor Chatham's emotional state informed Klavik that the director wavered between acute discontent and outright revulsion. Overtly displeased with the way the scene had played out in previous takes, he was straddling a fence of uncertainty, his unhappiness directly proportional to the thespian endeavor of his jaded leading man. His drooping eyelids and clenched jaw gave additional evidence of the inner conflict that ravaged him.

Bemused, Klavik sorted among the emotional whirlpools and eddies reverberating in his mind, idly categorizing them. He sensed the diverse interpersonal, competitive drives and sexual tensions running through the troupe. Chatham, leery of Klavik's continued well-being due to the unexplained "seizures" that twice disrupted filming, was anxious to complete the film, rush home to Bel Monde and begin the post-production labors, eager to escape the slings and arrows steadily fired his way by various studio executives and department heads, all of whom were up in arms over shooting schedule stretch-outs and budget overruns. The director had recently abandoned filming for one entire period and ventured on-orbit, where he'd spent an anxious hour in Eden's ultraband communications module trying to placate the Bel Monde front office.

Knowing full well the hero of the piece was at the root of the problematic scene, Chatham was also uncertain about how to correct it. The titanic ego of Miles Matson would never let the actor down; his faith in himself, perpetuated and reinforced by a deep-seated conviction that he was irresistible to each and every female of the species, made it impossible for him to conceal his towering lust for Ramyn, "the android dazzler" he believed to be Klavik's personal, programmed harlot. Unaccustomed to unfulfilled desires, especially when the target was a voluptuous, living, breathing wet dream capable of being programmed to accommodate every conceivable form of randiness, he privately cursed Klavik's obstinate selfishness for keeping a treasure like Ramyn all to himself, and for having the gall to regard her as his "private stock." Klavik sensed Matson's fear of physical retaliation the sole reason for having left off pursuing

Ramyn despite an obsession so obvious that it infuriated young Kewart every time he visited the jungle set.

Cheryl Brooks, heroine deluxe, and currently the actor's legal spouse, struck Klavik as a dyed-in-the-wool neurotic indifferent to her co-starring mate's omnivorous carnal appetite, but deplored Klavik's attachment to the beauty she considered just another android slut. Actually, Matson's fascination with Ramyn only served to inflame Cheryl's own carnal appetite. Early on, Klavik had become acutely aware of how the actress felt about him. Vaguely contemptuous of her, uneasy in her presence, he thought of Cheryl as the distaff equivalent of her legal mate, a sensualist in her own right, and every bit as self-centered and not easily denied as her "husband." He had gone out of his way to discourage the holovision queen's attentions, but despite his display of negative interest and studied coolness she fancied herself deeply in love with him. To Cheryl, his attitude was a pose, a masculine game mirroring the feminine game of playing hard to get.

Timmy, Chatham's key grip, his knee ligaments unfortunately torn by Klavik, added a dash of spice to the rich emotional stew boiling on the set where Timmy was omnipresent, limping about or skulking in the background between his duties and innumerable gofer errands, all the while covertly watching with malicious intensity as the Great White Hunter went through the motions. Klavik had developed a feeling of wariness about the husky youth, sensing equal measures of hatred and fear at war within him.

The director groaned, bolted from his director's chair and shouted, "Cut, cut! It limps, people," he said, announcing his displeasure. "Not just sick, either, but terminal. Something's missing, something's wrong, R-O-N-G! Steve," he called, "what's your take on how to stir this mess of pottage to life?"

The assistant director said cautiously, "Beats me, Chatty. Keeps bogging down in the middle and stays down. Can't put my finger on the whys and wherefores."

The wardrobe mistress held out a filmy robe to Cheryl Brooks. Her megastar husband slumped into the name-stenciled chair next to Klavik's. A wardrobe assistant hastened over and removed the ersatz leather bonds from Matson's wrists.

"Listen, Genius," Matson said snidely, "I've a hunch about what's gone sour. This scene's your cliffhanger's heart and soul, and it has zero pizzaz. What's needed is a touch of garnish, a cherry to top off the whipped cream."

Chatham regarded his leading man levelly. He considered recommending the actor to do a tad less overacting as a remedy, thought better of it and said something to the cameraman, who nodded and went back to fussing with his equipment. Dispirited, Chatham relented, allowing Miles Matson to tug him into hushed consultation.

Frowning, the director cast a quizzical glance at the Great White Hunter. "Klavik, 'spose I could ask a favor?"

"Anything within reason, Chatty."

"Miles had a hot flash about this cobbled-up scene, and he could be on to something. He says it badly needs pepping up. Think we could borrow your, uh . . . companion for just this one take?"

Klavik faced the director squarely. "My companion . . . ?"

"The android."

“Ramyn is our party’s assigned escort,” Klavik said coldly, “not my companion.”

A nasty chortle from Matson. “Yeah, we know how far you’re above that sort of thing, Crater Man. Come on, bend a little.” The actor rose, swaggered toward his portable dressing room.

Chatham opted for diplomacy. “Take no offense, Klavik. Miles suggested salting the scene with a pair of nude kidnap victims instead of one. I’d like to insert your, uh, escort as an anonymous aborigine trussed up like Cheryl. Miles thinks your, uh . . . He thinks the android femme is stunning-plus, and that middle-aged rake has ten-ten vision when it comes to the ladies. You met Theo Breganza, the programming specialist who takes care of our androids and animals. He could set up the doll for a walk-on in five minutes.”

Klavik concentrated on reining in his temper. “I fail to see,” he said, biting the words short, “how the added presence of an android unit, unclothed or otherwise, would improve the action. Instead, you might tell Miles to cut down on his gargles and grimaces.”

After a quick glance to make sure his megastar was out of earshot, Chatham said, “Frankly, that’s my own rationale for wanting to plug the android into the scene. Miles gets out of hand, but he’s a typical actor, touchy as hell. Belting him with the truth would drive him into fits and sulks and end up making things worse, not better. I suspect two items of undraped pulchritude will capture enough audience attention to let his heavy-handed emoting be overlooked.”

“We were told,” said Klavik stiffly, “a professional escort like Ramyn is subjected to very light programming. Unless you have a speaking part in mind, I doubt if programming will be necessary.”

“Terrific!” enthused the director.

Klavik bottled his ill humor. “I’ll tell her what she’s to do.”

* * *

Ramyn had been idly lounging behind the set. Due to the fleshly nature of the scenes in production, in addition to what she alluded to as Kurani’s “antediluvian morality,” Kraan’s impressionable heir apparent had been kept at a distance, much to his disgust. Her grin coquettish, Ramyn said, “Doing it in the buff is no bother.” Seeing Klavik’s reaction, she bit her tongue. “Relax, Klavik. You’re the one who keeps saying you want to have done with this nonsense and cut to the chase.”

Distinctly uncomfortable, Klavik said, “It’s a lot to ask of you.”

She tittered. “Ridiculous! It’s nothing, nothing at all.”

Ramyn disappeared from the set for a quarter-hour. Instructed to hold cotton puffs over her eyelids, she stood nakedly unconcerned while a makeup artist sprayed her with tinted body paint. The wardrobe mistress swept back her shock of raven hair, fitted her with a crudely beaded “native” headband. Makeup was applied, touched up around her eyes, with an extra-thick dollop appliquéd to cover her android “beauty mark.” The aboriginal metamorphosis complete, she was robed and dispatched to join the waiting cast and crew.

After having her wrists bound with prop straps, she let the robe fall from her shoulders and took her assigned place. The unveiling was met by hushed, appreciative exclamations from everyone in the ensemble except Cheryl Brooks. Miffed at being upstaged by an android — a non-person, and Klavik’s sluttish paramour at that — the actress felt herself, her role denigrated.

She was now the scent's secondary centerpiece; and worse, Miles' brainstorm had made it so. She readied her self for the camera looking daggers at her megastar spouse.

Though hardened to a display of bare skin, the assembled showbiz regulars and hangers-on applauded Ramyn in their own unsubtle way, awarding rapt attention to her every move.

"Sweetie, you're some five-star stunner!" Miles leered at Ramyn while his phony bonds were being reaffixed, his face and torso sprayed with fresh "perspiration."

The quip earned a tight-lipped pout from Cheryl.

Ramyn bobbed her head, acknowledging Chatham's terse, last minute explanation of what was expected of her.

"Okay, people," squawked the assistant director's bullhorn. "Let's do it one last time, and get it right. Quiet on the set."

"Let 'em turn," called Chatham.

"Rolling A, B and C," reported the cameraman, cueing the trio of three-headed holovision blimps widely spaced to catch the scene from all angles.

Despite a lack of necessity, the kid holding a clapboard stepped forward and did his thing.

"Action!" called Chatham.

The revamped kidnap scene was shot again, then re-shot once again. Chatham seemed satisfied with the first take that included nude Ramyn, but Miles out shouted Cheryl's protestations and insisted on doing another. Between setups, the megastar devoured Ramyn with burning eyes and made more than one lascivious crack Klavik overheard, but ignored.

Tired of wasting holodiscs, Chatham firmly called it a wrap. By that time Klavik's tolerance for Matson's adolescent behavior, no more than surface deep to begin with, had frayed to the point of contemplating mayhem. He regarded Miles, frost in his eyes, promising himself to correct the actor's attitude at the first opportunity.

* * *

Late that evening, the troupe's key grip limped into the basement facility of an adjoining utility building screened by jungle behind the lodge. "Hi, Theo."

Of mercurial temperament, Theo Breganza was the holovision cast and crew's poster boy of world-weary cynic, but admired his technical proficiency. Nodding obliquely to the newcomer, he returned his attention to a trio of android "extras" stretched out on gurneys undergoing programming and drawled, "Dear boy, I suppose you've come to convey the most recent impractical demands of Bel Monde's single-minded director."

"Uh-uh, not this time," denied Timmy. "Chatty wants to know how things're going, is all. He's prepping for the jaglon attack scene, kind of getting extra-wired about it. Is pussy hot to trot?"

Theo gestured negligently. "Caged in the other section and 'hot to trot,' if that's the proper term. What sparked Chatty's sudden interest in my absurd occupation? The brilliant auteur of holographic epics seldom voices such concern, nor for that matter do you, dear Timmy. You never act the least bit interested in my work, or me."

The key grip flushed. Hands thrust deep in his jumpsuit's slash pockets, Timmy limped across the room, threading his way between gurneys, and commanded the pocket door to slide into the wall. He peered into the annex,

The tawny, saber-toothed feline padding ceaselessly back and forth in the sawdust of a large, woven-wire cage halted. The jaglon's massive head swung around; it returned Timmy's analytic gaze with yellowish-green eyes. The pungent scent of dung caused Tim to stab a switch, and the door slid closed.

"Sorta spooky, isn't it, Theo?"

"What might be 'spooky' in you juvenile opinion, dear Timmy?"

"Handling overgrown meat-eaters like the big cat in there. Makes me jumpy to think what a raunchy mess it'd make if your programming juice went sour, sent pussy on a tear."

A dry chuckle. "Rest assured," soothed Theo, "that carnage of that order will not occur. On that score, you may also reassure Bel Monde's savant. I've been programming bipeds, quadrupeds and footless creatures longer than I can remember. Not once, mind you, has any type of creature failed to perform precisely in accordance with my input. Sorry, no thrills are in store on the morrow. Programming may not be an exact science, but it comes close."

"Uh-huh." Timmy shuffled his feet nervously. "Speaking of thrills, I guess you do lots of special order stuff on guys like these."

Theo's head lifted. Dark eyes alight with secret amusement, he said, "For instance?"

"Aw, come off it, Theo. You know damn well what I mean. Take that second bo under the headset." He indicated a young, sleekly muscled male android unit. "Likely looking hunk, isn't he? Don't tell me you never get the hots for a luscious lump like him. All you'd have to do is dole out an extra squirt of juice, or something."

Theo Breganza laughed aloud. "An 'extra squirt of juice, or something'? That is droll, Timmy, simply delicious."

"Don't try and con me, Theo. I know you."

"Do you really?" The programming specialist's sanguine smile lingered. "I'm not squeamish about my . . . failing, if that's the aim of your oblique inference. Employment in Eden is rather like working in a candy store. When first introduced to the local livestock, I confess to having gorged myself. But in time 'delicious hunks' like that one lose their charm and turn into artfully wrought, undead lumps of male flesh. The artificiality soon grows tiresome. Synthetic personalities and induced emotions ceased to intrigue me quite some time ago. I prefer leisurely liaisons, relationships with a tad of duration. There, is that honest enough for you?"

Mildly embarrassed, Tim said, "Guess so."

"Now then, handsome rogue that you are." Theo stepped closer to the key grip, daring the youth to avoid his piercing gaze. "What 'special order stuff' has piqued your interest? No feminine specialty certainly. A surfeit of android doxies can be had by surfing the lodge's meat rack."

Timmy coughed and tugged at his earlobe. He hemmed and hawed, wasted words, and finally got around to a cautiously worded explanation of the special order he had in mind.

Breganza recoiled. "You're not serious."

"*Dead* serious," emphasized Timmy, leaning heavily on the word.

"I'll pretend to not hear that," declared the programming specialist. "Do yourself a monumental favor, dear boy. Forget it."

"Can't forget it, or him."

“Because of your injury? I heard through the grapevine how that delectable brute brought on your limp. Hours ago, he visited here to question me rather thoroughly about programming techniques.”

“Who told you about the scuffle?”

“Does it matter? An extensive grapevine does exist in Eden, or hadn’t you heard. Few tidbits remain secret here in Shatterhand’s wondrous make-believe world. But you’re treading on extremely dangerous turf. Both of us could be boxed and shipped, perhaps cancel-stamped, if I were to aid in accomplishing something so raw and nefarious. What you suggest would also be very expensive.”

“How much?” demanded Timmy.

“Oh, money,” scoffed Breganza. “Money is an appalling bore; I’ve put enough aside for two lifetimes of indolence.” He placed a tentative hand on the key grip’s arm, squeezed gently. Looking into Timmy’s eyes, he whispered a less than subtle suggestion.

Chatham’s key grip blushed to the roots of his brush-cut blond hair. “I’m not . . . like that.”

Outwardly nonplused, Theo returned his attention to monitoring the androids. “If you say so, dear boy. Quid pro quo, so forth and et cetera. Otherwise, it’s nada. You’ll have to excuse me now. I must unburden myself of these half-alive creatures.”

Timmy licked his lips. “When,” he faltered, “would be a good time?”

“A ‘good time’?” Theo uttered a soft chuckle. “My, you’re overflowing with drollery this evening. Why right now, this minute, would be an excellent time for a good time to be had by all. But as I mentioned, I utterly detest one-night stands.”

Perspiring freely, Timmy said, “Do your thing with pussy first.”

“Oh, no,” denied Breganza. “No IOUs, if you please. Say, you do lust rather earnestly for that delicious brute’s downfall.” A lascivious smile. “Sorry, but I fancy payment in advance. Up front, or never, dear Tim. That’s the way it has to be”

His expression bleak, Timmy nodded. “Okay, Theo.”

Breganza responded with a wispy half-smile.

TWENTY-FOUR

The ravenous, white-furred behemoth snuffled, padded closer.

Too close!

His gloved fingers numbed by the intense cold, his booted feet frozen blocks devoid of feeling, he chanced a leap to a lower ice shelf, but bone-deep weariness, compounded by leaden limbs and the heavy fur anorak he wore, conspired to accentuate his clumsiness. His knees buckled on landing and he skidded across the ice, floundered in drifted snow, overbalanced and almost toppled over the glacier’s sheer flank.

Fueled by desperation, though severely handicapped by exhaustion, he swung the ice axe, pecking to find a purchase, and awkwardly skirted the bluish, rock-hard ice pinnacle’s canted lip. The gale keened around his anorak’s furred hood, offering only partial protection from the wind-driven, granular snow needling his unprotected face with stinging ferocity.

Inured to arctic climes, driven by its perpetual hunger, the huge, heavy-furred beast stalked him with tenacity and purpose. Uttering harsh chuffing sounds, it clambered down from ice shelf to ice shelf, laboring after him with relentless determination.

The glacier chose that moment to tremble beneath him. A tremendous report like the shattering of a world cut through the moaning wind. A cleft widened meters from where he stood panting, his lungs seared by the frigid air. The glacier calved ponderously. A wedge of ice massing thousands of metric tonnes separated from the face, tilted outward and thundered into the roiling emerald sea, giving birth to a cloud of windblown spume.

Trapped on the ice pinnacle's canted verge, with no place to go, nowhere to hide, he searched about frantically. The thing hulked above him, rearing upright on bowed hindquarters. Yellowed fangs bared, it screeched a thin, skirling paean of triumph.

He raised the ice axe in defiance; it was like threatening a tyrannosaurus with a pocket knife. He backed toward the knife-edge brink left by the icefall.

The beast lunged, its taloned forepaws outthrust to clutch him in a fatal embrace. He ducked low, swung the ice axe with all his remaining strength, plunging it into the creature's swollen belly, and threw himself sideways. His lower body slid over the edge of the ice precipice.

Scrambling desperately for a handhold on ice slick by loose snowdrifts, he heard the creature's ragged bellow of pain. Clawing at its gut, it lost its footing, roared again and careened outward, tumbling into space.

He strained upward, struggling in a last ditch effort to save himself, his strength so far gone he dared not look down and watch the beast plummet into the sea. The glacier's new face was slightly concave beneath him; his forearms slipped on smooth, rock-hard ice.

Dangling from the crumbly, sharply sheared lip of ice biting painfully into the cuffs of his gauntlets, exertion and frigidity had sapped what little energy remained, enervating his will to live. The ravening wind tore at his body. Each wrenched breath a painful gasp, he felt himself slipping a few decimeters at a time, slipping . . . There was nothing he could do to arrest the slide, no purchase available for his quivering arms and wrists.

Lifting his eyes, he savored a final glimpse of the sky, where big-bellied umber clouds scudded before the wind.

At least, came the inane thought, I cheated the monster of its dinner.

Then he was falling through space, falling . . .

* * *

Klavik awoke drenched in sweat, sat bolt upright and scrambled from the hydraulic bed quivering, his heart trying to pound a hole in his chest under a flush of adrenaline shock. He lurched across the hunting lodge's rustic bedchamber clutching his throbbing temples.

"What is it?" Ramyn's head lifted from the pillow. "You've been thrashing about like you were on fire."

"Nothing . . . a nightmare." It had not been a nightmare. The severe panic attack wore off gradually, leaving him with a head pounding as if rivet guns were going off inside his skull.

Ramyn mumbled something unladylike, and rolled over, prepared to slide back into sleep.

He went into the autolave, slid the door closed and bathed his face in cold water, purposely keeping his mind blank, keeping the surreal episode in sharp focus. Even so, he had to

wait through a calming respite before he could begin subjecting the “nightmare” to anything resembling analysis and evaluation. After stewing about it for minutes on end, he concluded that in no way had it been the creation of his own subconscious. He seldom dreamed, and on those rare occasions only a hazy recollection of the dream’s content stayed when wakeful. This particular vignette of delirium had been more like the product of a slickly produced holovision virtual reality show than a dream. Events on the glacier remained indelibly etched in his consciousness.

Profoundly shaken by the vivid, all too real experience, he reluctantly recognized it for what it was, a new form of mental assault. Nor could he feel anything but grudging admiration for the tactic employed by his unseen tormentor. The scenario had capitalized on more than one innate neohuman phobia: the inborn fear of falling; the primal terror of being eaten alive; the lesser trauma of being cold, miserable, totally exhausted physically.

Prior mental onslaughts had always begun with tentative probings — “nibblings” as he thought of them — then evolved into waves of sourceless dread. He suspected the earlier intrusions had been designed to test the waters so to speak, and had segued into increasingly terror-laden, incapacitating assaults on his conscious mind, as well as apparently shifting to an invasion of his subconscious.

Wakeful in the wee hours, he was not ready to either discuss the cause of the unnerving night sweats with Ramyn, or dismiss the “nightmare” that had jarred him awake in the manner of an ice water douche. He spent the remaining hours of darkness pondering, trying to assess the damage, if any, and speculating what could be done to combat future mental batterings.

Dawn found him sitting dejectedly on the commode, wondering if he would ever again be allowed a decent night’s rest.

* * *

Kewart stretched across the breakfast table, reaching for a salt cellar. “Feeling okay, Klavik?”

“Splendid, Your Roy. . .” Klavik broke off, figuratively kicking himself. Addressing the youth by his honorific was second nature, yet embarrassing. “Fine, yes. Why do you ask?”

“You look sort of done in.”

“I didn’t sleep well,” confessed Klavik. “I’m anxious to finish this holovision commitment and get back to our . . . To concentrating on real-world problems.”

Kurani’s grunt lacked any vestige of compassion. “About time, I’d say. We can’t rollick around much longer among these lotus eaters.”

Kewart ignored the remark. “You said this next scene winds up filming where your character’s concerned.”

Klavik sipped coffee. “It’s finis for the Great White Hunter’s exploits, but by no means the last scene in Mr. Chatham’s holodrama. I’m told scenes are hardly ever shot in continuity, the same sequence cutting and editing assembles the bits and pieces for theatrical release. But, the coming scene depicts my character dying a loathsome, bloodthirsty death.”

Kewart grinned. “Aren’t you scared?”

“Oh, no. It may not be able to read, but the jaglon will follow the script to the letter. The ferocious cat is programmed to charge when the Great White Hunter leaps to defend the heroine, and veer at the very last instant. The programmer fellow I spoke to tells me special effects

wizardry will do a fill-in of the climax once the troupe returns to Bel Monde. A robotic mannequin wearing my bush jacket and hat will be gorily torn to pieces.”

“Can they make it look real using a dummy?”

“I asked the same question. The answer was: yes, they can.”

“They’re using a dummy now,” remarked Kurani sourly.

Kewart laughed. “Sorry we won’t be here to see the finished showing.” He turned to the PM. “When we toured the game preserve, we saw a big cat run down a smaller critter with horns, remember? I think the guide called it a jaglon.”

“Aye,” said Kurani, his expression one of distaste, “and a foul smelling killing machine it was. I say good riddance to this jungle steam bath and its contrived bestiary. The sooner we shake free of the place, the better.”

Klavik parted from his charges in the hallway outside their rooms. The prince and PM planned to visit the bush location in late morning and watch Klavik’s finale, but Kurani could see no reason to stand around waiting for the holovision cameras to roll.

Before heading to an early makeup call, Klavik thought to look in on Ramyn and apologize for keeping her awake with his restlessness. Although they had begun warily sharing their nights, he abhorred the deceit and stealth necessary for Ramyn to slip down the corridor to his room, or he to hers. Doing so offended his sense of honor; it reeked of dishonesty where his impressionable young future sovereign was concerned. Yet their relationship had blossomed into something far more rewarding than a physical liaison. Not sure how well he’d be able to function once he and Ramyn were forced to separate, he dreaded the inevitable moment of parting, blocked the specter from his thoughts.

Tapping softly at Ramyn’s door, he received no acknowledgment and knocked again more loudly, thinking she might have gone back to sleep or was using the autolave. Turning away, he headed toward makeup and abruptly halted when vague scuffling sounds issued from inside the room.

“Ramyn!

A muffled cry was the response.

Klavik punched the switch; the sliding pocket door, secured from within, refused to budge. Seizing the manual override handle, he twisted and tugged. The door did not move. Planting a booted foot on the sill, he inserted the fingers of both hands in the flush-mounted handle’s groove and strained until the cords stood out on his neck. The handle ripped free of the door, clattered to the tiles.

Bounding across the corridor, he put his uninjured shoulder down and bull-rushed the hollow-core door. Designed to slide, not pivot, it bowed inward with a screech of tortured sheet metal. Two more powerful thrusts tore loose the metal molding strip along one edge of the sill. Savagely kicking in the door, bending it backward into the room, he squeezed through the gap and came face to face with wide-eyed megastar Miles Matson.

His classic masculine features contorted, the actor clutched Ramyn tightly about the waist, his other hand cupped over her mouth. She struggled hard, tried hard to bite him. Miles swallowed his fear and turned her loose. “Now, hang on, Sport. Let me explain.”

The fragile straps of Ramyn’s nightgown dangled freely, the sheer fabric hanging loosely below her waist. Breasts bared, dark hair flying wildly, her hazel eyes ablaze with killing fury,

she made no effort to cover herself, and instead drew back a daintily pedicured foot and kicked Matson in the groin as hard as she could.

Miles barked a coughing obscenity, doubled over and dropped to his knees.

He will never know, thought Klavik with icy clarity, *that Ramyn just saved his life.*

The picture of vengeful fury, Ramyn whirled and marched into the autolave. The door slid closed behind her, punctuating her strategic withdrawal.

The megastar groveled in pain.

Klavik stood over him, fists clenching and unclenching spasmodically, his back to the ruined entry door screening much of the room from a gaggle of androids and curious guests attracted by the commotion.

Mindless rage rendered Klavik immobile. He knew if he moved a muscle his remaining self-restraint would vanish and he knew he would do what he wanted very badly to do. He came within a hair of losing the battle to an all but unquenchable urge to pummel the actor senseless, radically dismember him, and trample the residue into strawberry jam. He had never wanted anything quite so wholeheartedly, or desperately, as he wanted the life of Miles Matson.

Later, after the seething rage within him had abated somewhat, he could not imagine what had stopped him.

His features contorted, the actor clutched his aching privates and peered up at Klavik, his mouth working wordlessly. What he saw was not reassuring; the man from Kraan loomed above him, a menacing bronze statue, eyes lizard like and opaque, totally devoid of sympathy.

“Don’t . . . blame you,” whined Matson haltingly, “for being upset.”

Klavik stared down at the actor through a gradually dissipating crimson haze.

“Okay, so I got carried away. Apologies for going behind your back and having her programmed my way. I didn’t think it would be such a —”

“You lie badly,” declared Klavik.

“Hey, now hold it right there,” objected Matson. “I only wanted to show the dolly a good time, have a little fun. I wasn’t going to hurt her.”

“Is strong-arm rape your idea of a good time?”

“Rape . . ? Get real! Rape an android *bimbo*? Who’s kidding who?”

Resurgent outrage unlocked Klavik’s rigid limbs. Swooping down, his hands closed on Matson’s tunic. He pitched the actor headlong on the rumpled hydraulic bed. “Say no more,” he warned. “Not a word.”

Ramyn emerged from the autolave, a towel wrapped around her raven tresses. Having scrubbed herself and slipped on a robe, she stood hands-on-hips, studying the holovision megastar as if he were a nauseous, multi-legged thing that had crawled in out of the surrounding jungle. She said, “Lend me your dagger, Klavik.”

“No,” he said, “I can’t allow that.”

“Oh, I won’t kill him,” she promised. “I just want to nip off his testes. He doesn’t deserve them.”

Matson howled, leaped from the bed and made a desperate attempt to dodge past Klavik, who caught him neatly, flung him back on the hydraulic mattress.

“Your dagger, give it to me,” insisted Ramyn.

Convinced Ramyn actually meant what she'd said, fear struck Matson like a physical blow. He came apart at the seams, began pleading frantically like a child caught in some mischievous act. The pleas choked off in mid-sentence. Scrutinizing Ramyn nearsightedly, he said incredulously, "Your . . . android mark, it's *gone*."

Ramyn had allowed the autolave to scrub her too conscientiously. Soap and water had eradicated the appliquéd stigma on her left cheekbone.

"Hey, what gives here?" demanded Matson, his ego suddenly restored. "I was told androids were labeled as teeny-tinys just hatched from the incubator." He uttered a nasty laugh. Sweet Stuff, you're no android."

Ramyn and Klavik exchanged glances.

"Well, har-de-har-har! Now the script starts making more sense." Avidly grasping the advantage he had unwittingly stumbled upon, the megastar's ineradicable self-esteem became resurrected. He rolled from the hydraulic bed, his manner jaunty. "Now I get it, Crater Man. Now it's plain why you're so pissed-off. Private stock, my ass! You kiddies are floating some kind of scam, trying to put one over on . . ." He looked expectantly from Klavik to the woman. "On who . . .?"

Klavik knew any attempt to disabuse Matson of the revelation would be useless, and chose the next best alternative. If, as he suspected, surveillance devices were secreted in most if not all hunting lodge rooms, irrevocable damage had already been done. "Get out," he told the actor, "while you're still in one piece."

"Sure, you bet I'll be on my way. But listen," said Matson with renewed bravado, "I don't cut and run from anybody, see? If you think it's forget and forgive time, you're dreaming." He forced a malevolent grin.

"Forgive and forget, no. What you tried to do will be neither forgotten," assured Klavik, "nor forgiven."

"Change your tune in one helluva hurry, don't you, now that I've got the goods on you. And that goes double for you, Missy." Re-donning his assiduously cultivated, heroic self-image, the actor waggled an admonitory forefinger at Ramyn. "Guarantee you I won't forget or forgive that kick in the berries. Ah, but what the hell!" he added, the malevolent grin still in evidence. "If programming isn't necessary, maybe all I have to do is ask nice. Sooner or later you and I are going to get together for a tussle in the ——"

Klavik backhanded the megastar, knocking him halfway across the room.

"Not in the face!" shrieked Matson.

"Come near Ramyn again, accidentally or with purpose," said Klavik, his voice dangerously flat, "or mention to anyone that she's neohuman, and you'll be trashed. That is a promise, not a threat."

"Arrogant bastard!" Miles massaged his reddened cheek. "If you've bugged up my scenes Chatty'll have your tail feathers for breakfast."

His temper once again flaring near the red line, Klavik took a menacing step toward the actor. In mid-stride, a wave of naked terror bilious in intensity bowled into his consciousness with sledgehammer force.

He staggered backward, sank to the carpet holding his head in both hands.

TWENTY-FIVE

Thoroughly confused by his antagonist's sudden collapse, Miles Matson prodded Klavik with the toe of his boot, jerked back as if he had touched something hot. "Be double damned! Your stud bull's made of ordinary flesh and blood after all. What the hell's ailing him?"

"Get out!" cried Ramyn.

Matson's sly wink further infuriated her. "Sure thing, once upon a time android dolly. I'll toddle along now that this hotshot's showing his true colors. But I'll be back," he promised. "You can pine for me till then, okay?"

Having delivered his exit line with theatrical panache, Miles swaggered toward the ruined door, halted and glanced down at the man from Kraan as if it had been he who had put him on the floor. Drawing back as if to deliver a kick, he thought better of it, squeezed through the narrow gap between the battered door and sill, and flashed his patented megastar smile for the benefit of a half-dozen curious androids and guests lingering in the corridor.

"What is it?" Crouched beside him, Ramyn touched his shoulder. "What's wrong, Klavik?"

"Nothing . . . Not . . . important."

"Really?" she flared. "You have to see a medic about these crazy attacks. The like an adolescent ninny and hold back? Is it an illness? Tell me. I can't help you if you won't let me."

"Calm down," he said, "and get dressed. We're leaving right after the scene is on disc."

"You forever-close-mouthed idiot! What the hell is troubling you?"

His head throbbing unmercifully, Klavik stirred and rose woozily, his movements exaggerated, precise. He urged Ramyn to gather her belongings.

After she finished dressing, tight-lipped and angry over his obstinate refusal to confide in her, he helped her pack. When she was ready, he led the way down the corridor to his room, set her luggage beside the bed and commanded the door to slide closed. Tugging her in his arms as if to comfort her, he whispered, "Your android pose just flew out the window, and that's important. I want you to report what happened to Shatterhand before he learns of the discovery, assuming he hasn't already found out."

"Report everything?"

"No. As subtly as possible, hit that we're on the verge of giving up, throwing in the towel. Tell him Kurani's convinced that Buford was the victim of a jaglon attack, that further investigation would be futile, and we're extremely worried about the safety of Prince Kewart. Tell him we're planning an immediate return to Kraan."

"Emil won't buy a single syllable of that," was her whispered rejoinder.

"Doesn't matter. I want to hear his reaction, find out what he decides to do whether or not he swallows the news."

"In that case," she said, "I'll give it a try. Shall I paste on another stigma?"

"No, don't bother. That pig of an actor has rendered your android deception obsolete. At the first opportunity, explain what happened to Kewart, but be extremely careful how you go about it, and never breathe a word of Matson's . . . visit. If Kewart learns the true story, he won't hesitate to tear Matson's self-satisfied head right off his shoulders. Our princeling may seem young and inexperienced, but appearances can be deceptive. He's been intensively schooled by

experts in hand-to-hand combat. This evening, before we tube back to The Village, call Shatterhand and fill him. And by all means pretend guilt on your part, Ramyn. Confess all, but lead him to believe the actor showed up in the afternoon, not the morning.”

“Aside from the timing, you really want me to tell him . . . everything?”

“The whole truth and nothing but. I see no reason to shade what took place just to protect the reputation of a slug like Matson. Go now, before laryngitis sets in from all this whispering. I have to explain matters to the PM, and head over to makeup. Don’t fret about my indisposition. Everything’s under control.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said flatly.

“It would be better for both of us if you did.”

She kissed him soundly, although her manner reflected a major degree of doubt.

* * *

Finding Kewart alone in his room, Klavik asked if the PM was about.

“Old Fussbudget was notified of a hyperspace transmittal. He went to pick it up at the lodge’s message center. Should be back any minute now.”

Klavik thanked his future sovereign and went in search of the prime minister. He met Kurani on the rear utility staircase just as the other began to ascend. “A glorious morning, sir,” he greeted. “Why not step outside for a breath of air?”

A sober nod, and his sour expression, told Klavik that to the PM the morning was less than glorious. “Yes, yes,” he said hollowly. Extracting a communications transcript from the slash pocket of his jumpsuit, he waved it meaningfully. “I was coming to look you up and tender the very same invitation.”

A tessellated stonework walkway led from the lodge’s rear entrance to the sanctuary of a gazebo arbored with purple, tissue-thin bougainvillea petals. Emotional antennae extended, Klavik sensed the other’s anxiety, his air of urgency. Kurani was itching to divulge the contents of the coded transmittal. Klavik preempted him by relating the morning’s events.

“Filthy lowlife scum! Is the lass all right?”

“Unharmful, but I would not say all right.” He explained how her android pose had been invalidated, and what he’d asked her to do.

“Not sure I follow your logic there. What will it serve?”

Klavik divulged sketchy details concerning his most recent vivid “nightmare,” that suggested the terror assaults had shifted from tangential attacks to full frontal assaults on his conscious and subconscious mind, a tactic specifically including sleep deprivation. “If Shatterhand takes the bait, believes we’re calling it quits, I hope to learn whether the attacks diminish, or perhaps cease.”

“Um, yes; now I see. Lull the cripple into the notion we’re packing it in, running for home, and a news item of that importance might substantiate a link between the devious bastard and the exotic you suspect is behind these, er . . . mind games.”

“Exactly, sir.”

“A sound move, but only if it succeeds.” Still more than a touch mystified, Kurani added, “As for myself, the concept of a ‘dream attack’ goes beyond the realm of believability. This indecent mental harassment you’ve experienced strikes me as something of a more curious nature each time it occurs.”

“I couldn’t agree more, sir. If the attacks diminish, or stop, it will tend to confirm something of which I’m already fairly certain: the active presence of one or more exotics.”

A brisk nod. “We shall see what comes of it. But a disturbing potential repercussion also comes to mind. With her game of spying on us thrown overboard by the actor, aren’t you a tad nervous about shoving the lass into the breach? If and when Shatterhand learns of her duplicity, mightn’t he serve up a severe dollop of retribution?”

“Timing should solve that problem,” Klavik told him. “She’ll make the evening call, plead severe distress and so forth as an after effect of the rape attempt. Shatterhand should have no reason to punish her for fighting off the actor’s assault.”

“You’ve instructed her to tell it straight out, exactly what the scurvy lout did?”

“I told her to hold back nothing.”

“Then we shall pray that she’s believed. I confess to a growing affection for the lass. But, here, read this, Klavik. We’ve another serious matter to discuss.”

The encrypted communication’s flimsy, decoded by Kurani, enumerated the laboratory results pertaining to the swatch of bloodied cloth torn from the Jaglon victim’s tunic. Refined analysis had evidently produced inconclusive results. The sample contained no traces of contamination by known programming agents, nor any breakdown compounds or byproducts of standardized medications routinely administered to Eden’s android population.

“So you see,” remarked Kurani, “the victim was neohuman after all.”

“Someone may be devoutly hoping we make that assumption, sir.”

“What do you mean, ‘assumption’ . . . ? The deader could have been Buford.”

Klavik ruminated briefly. “Possibly, though I sincerely doubt it. Allowing Eden’s second ranking executive to be mauled to death in the wild by a predator simply doesn’t ring true. We knew beforehand the analytical results might be misleading. All they actually prove is that the likelihood of an android double has been lessened.”

Unable to hold back a yawn, Klavik said, “Your pardon; I really should lie down for a while before reporting to the set. Between chasing Buford’s ghost on the plateau, and this latest . . . nightmare, I’m on minus time for sleep. Keep a close watch on His Highness if you will. He’s bound to pester you to come and witness my final scene, but I’d prefer him to stay clear of Matson. If he should somehow learn what the actor did, or even guess, well . . .”

“Aye, makes a great deal of sense,” said Kurani. “If the lad somehow found, he’d likely as not blow his top, do something we’d all regret. Go and get what rest you can. In the meantime I’ll put a tight collar on our stubborn monarch-to-be.”

Klavik dragged himself back to his room. He crashed fully dressed, and was asleep almost instantly.

* * *

He had labored for weeks, hands raw and blistered, erecting the crude log cabin on the brink of a shallow declivity where the grassland shelved down to a lakefront meadow. Behind the rough structure, its sod roof level with the verging tundra, the terrain sloped up through scalloped timberlands to a backdrop of jagged, snowcapped peaks.

He groaned, jolted by a resurgent wave of severe pain. The arrow wound festered; he had used a knife to cut off the shaft protruding from his shoulder, and then twice, holding a shard of shattered mirror, and attempted to remove the arrowhead with his fish knife, intending to

cauterize the wound afterward. On both occasions he had passed out, succumbing to lancing, white-hot agony. Now the wound was a vicious, throbbing reminder of his failing strength, his faltering alertness. Growing steadily weaker and more feverish, he knew he'd soon be delirious, unable to stay lucid during the last stand he knew was inevitable.

The bitter siege was near an ending; the prescient knowledge panicked him even more than the fact that his food, water and ammunition were almost gone.

On that first harrowing afternoon, whooping and hooting to an accompaniment of thundering hooves, the savages had broken open the corral and driven off his meager herd of livestock. Lately, whenever he had peered through either embrasure slot in the log walls, he'd seldom detected movement. But the crafty devils were out there, lurking in the darkness, scheming, waiting him out with subhuman patience, apparently their outstanding attribute.

He sniffed, sniffed again in alarm. Wood smoke! His bowels turned cold. The savages had fired the cabin.

Gritting his teeth, he fumbled one-handedly, struggling to fill the extra magazine with cartridges, and jammed the clip beneath the rope belt holding up his buckskin trousers. He would go down, a surety, but meant to take as many of the marauding jackals with him as possible. What he refused to do was sit quietly, and burn.

The chinks between logs began smoldering. Soon long, thick curls of smoke billowed inside the cabin; they had undoubtedly blocked the chimney with chunks of sod cut from the roof. Seizing the scarred rifle, he pried up the squared timber with one-handed clumsiness and made ready to unbar the door. Drawing a deep, smoke-filled breath, he coughed and yanked hard. The door fashioned of rough-hewn timber, with the bark still in place, refused to budge. Leaning the rifle against the smoking log wall, he strained with both hands, fighting to remain conscious despite the flaring agony in his arrow-riven shoulder. He tugged until his joints creaked and the tendons popped in his wrists. It was hopeless. The bastards had roped the inward-opening door, securing it fast. He was effectively locked in.

The vicious demons *wanted* him to burn.

Coughing spasmodically, he dropped to the compacted dirt floor, lying prone to take advantage of clearer, more breathable air. The heat grew steadily more intense.

He screamed hoarsely when unbearable heat enveloped him. He was still screaming, still conscious, flopping about amidst burning furniture, when the collapsing roof engulfed him in an inferno.

* * *

Klavik sprang from the bed shaking uncontrollably. It had been so authentic, so achingly real. He kneaded his arms, subconsciously confirming the fact that his flesh was whole, uncharred, and wilted under a headache so blinding that it blurred his vision. In icy fury, he fell back on the bed, the impact sending waves through the gel-filled mattress. His invisible antagonist had again made certain he did not sleep.

Stoically accepting the challenge as a minor distraction, sleeplessness was something he realized he would have to live with for the present. But whoever or whatever his tormentor turned out to be, and wherever it lurked, the exotic had best be on guard. Sooner or later, somehow, there would be a reckoning. Repayment in full would be exacted, plus compound interest.

He walked out of the wardrobe tent twenty minutes later in costume, finding Victor Chatham in a hyperactive mood. With the holodrama's goriest scene about to unfold, the director was bounding about the jungle set issuing instructions, assuring everyone including himself the preparations were adequate, that all was in order. Preoccupied with getting the stage properly set, he neglected to comment on Klavik's tardiness.

"Ah, the Great White Hunter's with us." Chatham beamed. "This is your swan song, Klavik, your moment to shine." Pleased with himself, the director referred to what was to come as the epic's bread-and-butter scene. "Ready to show everyone how much fun it is to die messily? Four holoblimps are set to roll, so let me run through the sequence one last time, just to make certain you know what to expect. There's no dialogue except for Cheryl's recorded screams, so if we go about it carefully a single take should get it on holodisc from every angle."

The director's recital continued as a grip handed Klavik his prop, an antique big-bore rifle with a single blank cartridge chambered. A dresser touched up his artificially sweat-stained bush jacket, then played with the damp folds, getting them just right.

"Typical of her ditsy character," Chatham went on to say, "Cheryl's wandered off ahead of you and the file of porters. She spots the jag, screams her fool head off. You'll be over there, on the far side of the clearing, leading the safari. You drop the machete, grab the rifle from the gun bearer and run like the hammers of hell to get between running Cheryl and the jag."

"The cat charges," continued Chatham earnestly, "and I warn you again, when that ferocious feline moves it'll be on top of you before you can say jaglon. You get off a snap shot that misses, and the jag springs. Theo's programmed to cat to tuck in its off-paw and zip past close to your head — real close, so don't panic and duck down too far. If you do, it'll screw up the special effects fill-in, where the jag halfway takes off your character's head. Got it?"

"May I," inquire Klavik with a straight face, "question the jaglon to make sure it understands the stage directions?"

Chatham barked a nervous laugh. "Don't fret about the jag; think of it as just another harmless prop. Theo Breganza is the best programmer I've ever had anything to do with, bar none, the *crème de la crème*. He's set up dozens of beast encounters with nary a scratch or barked shin. I offered to let an android double for you, but you insisted on doing it yourself."

"Where is this . . . Theo? I'd like a word with him."

Chatham shrugged. "Who knows? When it comes to his specialty, he's a first-water genius, but that middle-aged swish is about as companionable as the jaglon. He never hangs around to watch shooting. I think our filming mish-mash bores him."

"No matter. Ready when you are, V.C."

Chatham grinned and clapped his hands. Clambering up into the null-grav crane's saddle, he commanded the crane to swing him up between the quadrates of holovision blimps. "Round 'em up, Steve," he called. "Let's so it."

The assistant director's bullhorn bleated imperiously. "Time to get with it, people. Places everyone!"

Klavik sauntered past the jaglon's woven-wire cage, and paused to admire the tawny predator's rippling grace. Feral eyes of green-tinted amber regarded him with unblinking indifference. He stood back and watched as android handlers casually slid up the cage's door and used voice commands to coax out the huge, saber-tooth feline.

The swashbuckling, devil-may-care hero of the piece, Miles Matson, had no part in the scene featuring the Great White Hunter's demise. Sitting apart in his personal, canvas-backed chair, the megastar pointed to the uncaged jaglon and exchanged rude gallows humor with the crew, but refused to acknowledge the Great White Hunter's stern glance of disapproval. Klavik searched for the key grip among the onlookers, but it seemed as if Timmy was elsewhere.

At the head of the safari column, heavy-lidded from lack of sleep, Klavik stifled a yawn and handed the prop rifle to a dusky-hued android extra playing gun bearer.

Chatham saw Klavik yawn, "You look awfully casual," he called good-naturedly, "for someone about to get nailed by a bloodthirsty predator."

In answer, Klavik exaggerated a second yawn.

"Quiet on the set!" roared the assistant director's bullhorn.

"Let 'em turn," called Chatham.

"Rolling A, B, C and D," announced the head cameraman.

"Action!"

Despite the Great White Hunter's repeated admonition to stay close to the column, the trouble-prone heroine had again taken to wandering ahead of the slow moving procession of bearers. Skylarking among flowering shrubs on the clearing's perimeter, she halted, squealed in alarm.

Her squeal ripened into a shrill, full-throated scream of terror. She threw up her hands, stumbled and nearly tripped dashing back toward the procession of plodding porters. Striding along ahead of the gun bearer, Klavik dropped his machete, spun around and snatched the rifle from the android's hands. He sprinted hard to interpose himself between the terrified, dashing woman and crouching cat, its tail weaving ominously from side to side.

Cheryl tried to throw herself into the safety of Klavik's protective arms; he brushed her aside. The porters dropped their burdens, squatted nervously beside them.

The huge cat, its tail whipping to and fro, gathered itself like a coiled spring. It neglected to growl a warning, and charged.

Klavik instantly learned Chatham's warning had been valid. The bounding jaglon, a fluid blur, was upon him almost before he could bring up the rifle and squeeze off a round. A loud report echoed through the jungle clearing as the big cat left the ground.

Klavik's involuntary nervous system took over. He bobbed his head to the left just as a searing jolt in the shoulder knocked him sprawling.

The jaglon landed half-turned, paws churning for traction, loosed a blood-curdling roar drowning out the alarmed cries from rapidly scattering members of the holovision cast and crew. Crouched panther like, the jaglon prepared to finish Klavik.

Caught up in a situation far worse than any induced "nightmare," Klavik struggled to rise, disregarding the ballooning agony in his ripped, bloodied shoulder, and groped for the fallen rifle, knowing there was precious little he could do to defend himself.

Dagger like canines bared in a death-dealing rictus, the jaglon roared again and sprang. Klavik brought up the rifle in a futile, one-handed effort to fend off the oncoming fury.

A scissoring pencil of lased energy chopped the jaglon in midair. Three hundred kilograms of dying cat smashed into Klavik, knocking him senseless.

TWENTY-SIX

“Who was responsible, Shatterhand? Has guilt been established?”

At bay in the steamy subterranean chamber, bathed with perspiration, Eden’s director said, “The perpetrator will soon be known, and confirmed.”

“Soon, but not as yet? This wretched creature is grossly offended by random happenings not in consonance with our orchestration. Such happenings are intolerable.” Despite the dry, unmodulated electronic speech, the Parvon’s all-consuming anger came through clearly. “Allowing capricious events to sully an unfolding scenario is symptomatic of haphazardness. Happenstance inevitably breeds chaos, and a wholly unacceptable outcome. If permitted to flourish to so much as a minor degree, a random happening disrupts the confluence of predictable events mandatory for a satisfactory closure to the ill-conceived Kraan affair.”

Having survived more than one withering session in the exotic’s rock-walled underground lair, Shatterhand had long since realized salvation would be a matter of conducting himself with subservient aplomb, speaking only when spoken to, giving rapt attention to the exotic’s every utterance. Now, however, a huge, glaring difference made itself known; his master’s air of inscrutable detachment had given way to towering wrath, a state that encouraged extremely wary walking.

As always, the mood of a Parvon exotic was impossible to gauge; nuances of emotion were absent from the exotic’s transliterated monotonal speech. Even so, Shatterhand was uncomfortably aware of his master’s underlying rage — not merely pique, rage. “Guilt will be fixed shortly,” he ventured to say. “Presuming the accident resulted from slipshod programming, not malice, it could be an oversight probably attributable to —”

“Oversight indeed,” interrupted the flat voice. “You also dare to ‘presume’ the facts and personalities driving the ‘accident’ will shortly come to light? You presumptions are wholly unacceptable. You will immediately learn the identity of the miscreant or miscreants. Determine which cretin is responsible for this flagrant example of irrationality, and we shall have his head not shortly but instantly.”

“As you wish,” soothed the executive. “Analysts are reviewing every shred of surveillance data from the Veldt. The guilty party should be known within a matter of hours.”

“Make it so.”

“I can’t begin to guess,” declared Shatterhand, on moderately firmer ground, “how such a spontaneous attack could have taken place. Chatham personally requested the services of our premiere programmer, and had it written into the contract. Theo Breganza has served us brilliantly for more than twenty standard cycles. Chatham praised his services during prior filmings, and demanded them again. I plan to question him closely and —”

“That will do, Shatterhand,” asserted the exotic. “Do not belabor this poor creature with wearisome details. It will be imperative to put this matter to rest with neither fuss nor furor. You should also have realized an infinitely more vital complication now confronts us.”

The abrupt change of topic made the director lean forward expectantly. “A complication?”

“A pernicious complication. Hereafter, we shall conscientiously exercise every iota of effort to ensure the personal safety of Kraan’s royal youth and chief of state. They must be kept

from harm's way at any cost. Yet while their safety is undeniably vital, they are of minor consequence compared to what our recent research has discovered about the guardian."

"Klavik . . . ?"

"The same. He has somehow transformed himself from a blatant nuisance into a fascinating neohuman specimen a full order of magnitude more important than the obscure entity we erroneously envisioned him to be. An extremely singular fact once semi-confirmed has become evident. Although neohuman, he possesses de facto mental ability, an unprecedented endowment demanding our full attention."

Surprised, Shatterhand said, "Are you certain?"

"An fact beyond dispute." The flavorless statement came as close to an exclamation as the exotic's wooden speech permitted. "When their ailing monarch first engaged in discreet negotiations with our senior hive, the woeful one known as His Omnipotence displayed not the faintest whisper rudimentary extrasensory capability, nor do Klavik's distinguished fellow travelers. Most worrisome to this poor creature is the fact that currently relevant data residing in Parvo's encyclopedic database, continuously updated by our senior hive, ascribes no such ability to neohumans or the mutated subspecies with whom our beloved Syndicate has extensive dealings.

"Due to the alarming nature of this disclosure," pursued the exotic, "the master of the vessel patiently awaiting our departure in hyperspace has been instructed to stay in constant communication with our senior hive. Reports describing the guardian's unheralded accomplishment have engendered heated debate within the inner circle of our governing swarm, which now considers the upshot doubly alarming. Hitherto, our leadership has been totally unaware of burgeoning mental sensitivity within diverse neohuman cultures. Now, with no warning, we find a rudimentary example springing from an allegedly backward subculture thriving in Kraan. Had there been the slightest inkling of such sensitivity, our commission to orchestrate and conduct events on the killing ground would never have earned acceptance. There is no method extant to indefinitely placate the suspicions of a dedicated, telepathically endowed member of this or any other species."

Shatterhand frowned. "I fail to see what has changed. The ability of a single individual to gauge basic emotions in others is —"

"Ah, there you have unwittingly hit upon the crux of our dilemma, the ability to gauge basic emotional patterns in others. Such an ability, fragile and adolescent though it may seem, comprises the first tottering step toward authentic mental competence. Unbeknownst to this wretched creature, our several attempts to engender fear and insecurity by means of clandestine sorties into the conscious and subconscious seats of the guardian's being have unfortunately rebounded to our detriment. The talented one has somehow managed to turn the tables, if that is the proper neohuman idiom, by intruded briefly, albeit in blundering, juvenile fashion, into our own consciousness.

"Should this unique neohuman specimen survive and learn to control the talent with which he is amazingly endowed, he cannot help but eventually become an adept — a virtual certainty not open to questioning 'if,' but merely 'how soon?' Subjected to our mental inquiries, he not only demonstrated an awareness of this poor creature's presence, but also sensed our cruel confinement within this foul pit. From there, to our misfortune, it is but a short, modest leap to

the development of true mental discipline. And that eventuality, needless to say, could precipitate extremely dire consequences.”

“If it’s that great a concern,” said Shatterhand, “wouldn’t you rather the jaglon had succeeded in ridding us of —?”

“No, no,” denied the Parvon. “You misconstrue; the substance of our discourse has eluded you. Above and beyond all else, it is mandatory for us to learn whether the guardian’s abnormal talent is unique, or generic. We must determine whether his ‘talent’ is an isolated anomaly deriving from accelerated mutation within his unique organism, or the pristine appearance of evolving mental competence within the neohuman species.

“Should the latter postulate prove valid,” continued the Parvon, “we must then ask ourselves if an increasing degree of mental competence is destined to become a universal attribute within neohumans; in other terms whether it is a product of natural selection, or merely something unique to a single, individual organism. Should the latter case prove true, such a ‘talent’ can possibly be extinguished forever. But even should that postulate be accurate, our senior hive unanimously shares my fear that it may be the mere tip, to borrow another neohuman simile, of an enormous, menacing iceberg.

“What we assert and strenuously reassert,” added the exotic, “is simply this: should extrasensory endowment be proven an evolutionary characteristic, and breed true, it will be essential for we of Parvo to obtain a comprehensive knowledge of its scope, else in time allow the commercial dominance we have labored so long and diligently to establish within neohuman spheres truncated.”

“I had no inkling that mental ability,” said Shatterhand, “was a facet of the Syndicate’s commercial success.”

“A facet, Shatterhand?” declared the exotic. “Not so; it is the basis of our commercial dominance. Perhaps you now begin to appreciate why we have no desire for that particular shred of information to be disseminated.”

“I . . . yes.” Hunched in the geriatric chair, perspiration dripping from the end of Shatterhand’s nose. “If you will permit a personal opinion, I think the problem may solve itself. This evening, the female unit assigned to escort our visitors reported that they are devastated by the lack of progress, and deeply concerned about the safety of the royal youth and statesman. She advised me the statesman has talked seriously about putting the investigation behind them and returning to Kraan.”

“And do you give credence to such a blatant fantasy, Shatterhand?”

The director hesitated. Sounding less than confident, he ventured to say, “The unit has proven herself reliable. She also mentioned that they are convinced the neohuman remains found outside the highlands hunting lodge were indeed those of Buford.”

“Ah, convinced. On what grounds have they become convinced? Is their conviction based upon evidentiary analysis confirming the fact that the victim’s bloodstream had been cleansed? One wonders at your gullibility. Our friends have no intention whatever of abandoning their quest.

“But we stray far a field,” announced the exotic, changing tack with customary abruptness. “We shall abandon the deeper aspects of this affair for the nonce and return to the immediate problem. In our judgment, what happened to the prized neohuman specimen was not,

could not be, an accident. This poor creature will be delighted to learn that the guilty party or parties have been identified. It is our fervent desire that the matter be closed at once.”

“It shall be,” assured Shatterhand.

“Excellent. Now go quickly. The awesome chill and benighted dimness you bring to our ghastly prison is terribly enervating . . .”

* * *

“Hi, Klavik. Feeling better?”

“Good morning, High . . .” Woozy from the pain medication, and grateful to still be breathing, Klavik revised his salutation. “The wound’s coming along nicely, thank you.” He sat up in bed slowly, his bandaged shoulder partially concealed beneath a skimpy hospital gown.

“Does it give you much pain?”

“No longer. I’m definitely on the mend. The medics told me to get up and move around once the side effects of the analgesic begin wearing off.”

“Big kitty came within a hair of doing for you,” said Kewart with youthful realism. “I guess accidents happen.”

“Accidents, bah!” The PM thrust his chin forward pugnaciously. “Someone wanted you out of the way permanently, Klavik. No, don’t argue the point. For whatever the cripple’s pledge is worth, he’s sworn an oath to dig out the truth. He told me he questioned that programmer fellow for hours.”

“I doubt if Breganza was to blame.”

Dissatisfied with the response, Kurani sniffed in displeasure. “We shall see. Have you rested at all?”

“Not . . . exceptionally well.”

Kurani bent close. “More nightmares . . . ?”

“I’m afraid so.”

His hearing acute, the prince said, “Are you troubled by nightmares, Klavik?”

Kurani put a finger to his lips, silencing his future monarch. “We’ll discuss it another time.”

Kewart caught the drift, and said nothing.

Eager to change the subject, Klavik said, “I’m grateful for your quick action, sir. I thought you and Kewart had agreed to stay at the lodge.”

A benign expression transformed the PM’s countenance. “You have His Obstinacy here to thank for your deliverance. He pestered me unmercifully, refused to mope about at the lodge while you performed the derring-do stunt. I finally gave in, let him drag me over to watch filming. At that, we cut it close, arriving just as the holovision cameras began turning, but were accosted by a pair of android dullards who tried to keep us from approaching.”

Klavik smiled at the youngster. “I’m grateful, ‘Your Obstinacy.’”

The prince laughed.” Kurani’s overdoing the modesty bit. You should’ve seen him unlimber his hand laser and fry the cat, a swinging up-chop carving big kitty in midair.”

“I saw the result,” Klavik said drily. “Rather, felt it.”

Kewart grinned.

“We’d best be off,” said Kurani. “The Great White Hunter needs his rest.”

“The former Great White Hunter,” amended Klavik.

It was Kurani's turn to grin. "Far better to be a former Great White Hunter than a late State Security Director."

"I'll not argue that point."

* * *

The android proctors moved silently, efficiently. Shrouded in predawn darkness dampened by the diurnal rain shower, they slipped from the compound into the hunting lodge one by one, a procession of swift-moving wraiths. Four androids targeted Timmy's room; a second quartet entered Theo Breganza's more luxurious quarters in a staff domicile screened from the lodge by a copse of towering trees.

The proctors assigned to collect the holovision troupe's key grip found the bedchamber unoccupied, and rejoined their comrades outside the staff building.

An electronic master key permitted stealthy access to the staff quarters. All eight proctors stole quietly into the programming specialist's apartment. Theo Breganza and his newfound paramour were apprehended in flagrante delicto. Shamed and terrified by the invasion of expressionless androids, Timmy was too frightened to offer any resistance. Assuming the joyless homosexual romp to be responsible for his rough treatment, Timmy was dragged feet first from the hydraulic bed.

Theo Breganza knew better. Intuiting what was transpiring, he made a conscious effort to remain calm. "I must speak with Shatterhand," he said. "Please let me make a call."

Robot like, the androids were unheeding.

"Shatterhand!" cried Breganza, raising his voice, praying a member of the lodge's surveillance team would overhear the cry. "You have to let me call Shatterhand."

A gag fashioned of firm yet resilient material was jammed into the programming specialist's mouth. He writhed mutely, eyes bulging from their sockets, as the proctors trussed him in a body harness.

"Got to let me put on some clothes," cried Timmy, having a notable lack of success reasoning with the unreasoning androids. "I have to call Victor Chatham. Please!" His protestations also fell on deaf ears. The proctors used Timmy to duplicate Breganza's incapacitation. The key grip decided much too late that being trussed and gagged was not in his best interest, and fought back gamely. "Wait," he cried, trying to ward off four pairs of hands, "you can't do this! Get Chatham on the horn. I work for Bel Monde Studios. Chatty'll vouch for my —"

A gag brutally shoved in Timmy's mouth was taped in place.

Two android proctors left the domicile surreptitiously and brought an electric trak-truk around to the staff quarters rear entrance; four others stationed themselves as lookouts, making certain the activity escaped chance observation by guests or insomniacs among neohuman staff personnel. Bound and gagged, the prisoners were wrapped in coverlets, spirited outside and unceremoniously dumped on the trak-truk's corrugated metal floor.

The vehicle trundled to the far side of the compound, halting before a low, unprepossessive building camouflaged from the view of guests with luxuriant tropical foliage. High double-doors rumbled apart. The trak-truk backed into a cavernous lift compartment that settled downward the instant the doors closed. The van and its prisoners were deposited in the building's sub-basement utility complex.

Manhandled from the trak-truk, Theo uttered stifled screams, spurring Timmy to twist and struggle, painfully wrenching his injured knee. A bulky, insulated metal hatch ground slowly open. Theo Breganza was lifted bodily, squirming helplessly, uttering unintelligible gargling sounds, and dumped headfirst into an ovoid metal chute.

Bubbling naked terror, Timmy choked on bile, shrieked impotently, inaudibly. He was borne toward the chute's gaping mouth, where a wave of intolerable heat instantly blistered his face.

Bel Monde Holovision's key grip disappeared feet-first into the slickly polished, "S"-curved trash chute leading down to the hunting lodge's mini-fusion furnace, where the component elements of his body flashed into plasma destined to be reassembled later for more utilitarian purposes.

TWENTY-SEVEN

"Top of the morning to you, Great White Hunter." Victor Chatham appeared in the infirmary room's doorway with Cheryl Brooks in tow. "Feel up to having visitors?"

"It's good to see you both," said Klavik."

Holding a bouquet, Cheryl went to the bedside and gushed, wishing him a swift recovery.

Shuffled aside by the appearance of celebrities, the prince and prime minister chafed with ill-concealed impatience, listening to the director and his leading lady run the gamut of all the clichés ever uttered by sick room visitors.

"Just wait, Klavik," enthused Chatham, "till you get a peek at the rushes. Faa-ab-u-lous! I know what a near thing that jaglon was for you, but even the rough-cut projection will make you sit up and take notice. Once you see it, I wager you'll agree it was worth it."

"A bet you will lose, Chatty."

"What is being done," broke in Kurani in his stiffest conning bridge manner, "to locate the programmer fellow?"

Chatham's conviviality sloughed away. Admitting that Breganza was nowhere to be found, he told the PM no one, including Shatterhand, was able to explain his disappearance, or discover in what manner the jaglon had been misprogrammed.

"Mis -pro-grammed!" sputtered indignantly. "Really, Mr. Chatham! I hope you'll forgive me for saying that is pluperfect nonsense. That killing machine was programmed to do exactly what it came within a hair of doing. And by the way, isn't it amazing how the few individuals able to answer important questions conveniently disappear into hard vacuum?"

"Or how," added Klavik from the infirmary bed, "Shatterhand is forever at a loss to explain the disappearances."

"Hear, hear!" applauded Kurani.

"I hate to tell you," said Chatham, "a collateral mystery has reared it's head. Timmy, my key grip, has also turned up missing."

The prime minister uttered a contemptuous snort. "The malady, whatever it may be, seems to be infectious. Do you think there's a connection? Did the two of them perhaps run off together?"

“Very unlikely,” denied Chatham. “Theo Breganza stands head and shoulders above most programming experts, but he has a reputation for . . . Well, to put it politely he’s of the third sex. Far as I know, Timmy’s either straight arrow, or he puts up a convincing romantic front. No, I don’t believe those two are involved that way.”

Cheryl’s laugh tinkled merrily. “Love conquers all,” she said, attempting to make light of the topic despite Chatham’s warning glance. “All a matter of simple friction, isn’t it?”

The offhand remark ruffled Kurani’s feathers. “Dear lady,” he said, “I hope you’ll permit me to disagree.”

Klavik intervened. “Chatty, sorry I won’t be around to see the rushes.” He reached for the pushbutton, elevated the hospital bed a few notches and threw back the coverlet. Waving off Kewart’s proffered assistance, he unsteadily gained his feet. “We’re heading to the mainland right after dinner.”

“Oh, must you?” Cheryl’s limpid blue eyes lit with dramaturgical sorrow. Holding Klavik in her fond gaze, she said, “Can’t you stay a little while longer?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“But, must all three of you leave?”

“Hate to see the last of you.” Chatham sounded as if he meant it.

“What’s next on your slate, Chatty?” asked Klavik, redirecting the conversation. “Things must be winding up here in the Veldt.”

“We’re almost, but not quite, sneaking up on success,” admitted the director. “Another few periods at the jungle set, then it’s back out on the briny. I took a hardnosed look at the shipwreck rushes, winced and kicked myself for being blind to a blind spot. A lot of stuff we shot at sea looked like the work of a fumble-bumble tyro, which is my fault for not giving those discs a more thorough look-see while we lived in the undersea habitat. The studio braintrust in Bel Monde will develop a severe case of heartburn when I hit them with more schedule-delay, cost-overflow re-shoots. What makes it worse, the post-production costs will chew and swallow a lot more than the allocated below-the-line budget. Ah, well! Chalk it up to the joys of holovision production.”

The director brightened. “Come to think of it, after we do the critical editing, color blending, image integration, final cut and whatnot, I’ll be happy to ship a set of holodiscs to Kraan along with a letter of credit for your services. How’s that suit you, Klavik?”

“I’ll look forward to it, Chatty. Working with you was enjoyable, unless you ask for details.

“Details . . . ?”

“My final scene comes to mind.”

“A wry grin. “Right you are. Okay, count on it. But I’ll need your full name, address and, uh . . .” The director glanced from Kurani to Kewart, his manner speculative.

“An excellent guess, Chatty,” said Klavik, in a tone of wry amusement, “but not quite on the mark.”

Chatham looked startled. “What do you mean?”

“I suppose it’s only natural,” Klavik told him, “for you to be curious about my friends and me. Shatterhand betrayed a trust explaining how the crater came into existence, why it had to

remain as it was for a time. You're too perceptive to fall for the line spoofing us as average citizens off on a holiday, and surmised that my friends are ranking personages."

"I didn't . . . say anything," faltered Chatham.

"You didn't . . . But I distinctly . . ." Excited as well as flustered, Klavik sank back on the edge of the bed. It had flashed in his mind like heat lightning, a bell-clear impression of Chatham's inquisitiveness regarding the respective status of the prince and PM — not a verbalized statement, but a subliminal impression that had instantly registered, instantly vanished.

"I only wish . . ." Klavik hesitated, mildly bewildered, his excitement mounting. To mask his inner turmoil, he made a project of adjusting the sling supporting his injured shoulder, looked up to find Kurani staring at him levelly, a question in his dark eyes. "Sir," requested Klavik, "would it be permissible to . . . ? What I mean is, I think Mr. Chatham and Miss Brooks have earned some sort of explanation."

Kurani had intuited what he believed might have taken place. He stared fixedly at Klavik, mesmerized by the inferred happening, trying hard to believe in the unbelievable. "Not sure that would be wise."

"Oh, go ahead," urged Kewart. "Tell them. The people who run this funny farm already know all about us, and why we're here. What harm will it do?"

"Kewart's point is well taken, sir."

Kurani waffled, pulled an unhappy face and displayed an obligatory degree of reticence. He eventually acquiesced, figuratively slipping into his role as statesman, and declaimed, "Miss Brooks, Mr. Chatham, allow me to present His Serene Highness, Kewart ab Kraan, Princeps, future protector of the Holy First Principle, the scion of our late revered sovereign, His Omnipotence Twenty-fourth, Esemplastos."

The director's mouth fell open.

"*A prince*," squealed Cheryl. She squealed again. "*A real prince?*"

Kewart nodded shyly.

"I myself have the honor," declared Kurani, "of serving the Crown as the leader of the government. Your former Great White Hunter, Mr. Chatham, has for some time served the Crown splendidly as State Security Director."

Badly shaken by his fleet, unpremeditated glimpse into the mind of another neohuman, Klavik had heard only a fraction of what Kurani said. Recovering, he asked the holovision director to forgive the deception. "It was necessary, Chatty, although that may be hard for you to understand."

Although a sophisticate through and through, the disclosure had rendered Chatham all but speechless. At length he said, "I . . . hope you find what you're searching for."

"We shall, never fear," declared the prime minister.

Minutes later, still more or less at a loss for words, the director and his leading lady said their farewells and filed out of the infirmary room.

The instant the door slid closed behind them, Kurani pounced. "Did what I think happened actually take place?" he asked.

A sober affirmative nod.

"What are you mumbling about?" asked Kewart.

“Later, Highness, please.” Kurani puffed his cheeks. “Can such a thing actually *happen*?” Still in something of a daze himself, Klavik nodded wordlessly.

* * *

Kolodaan’s flight surgeon, summoned to treat Klavik, agreed to discharge him in mid-afternoon. Returning to his quarters at the lodge, still short on sleep, he tried unsuccessfully to take a nap, but his thoughts gyrated too wildly for his sleep center to turn off. Caught up in a vortex of supposition and conjecture consisting of equal parts exhilaration and amazement, he was at once astonished and thrilled at having unwittingly bridged the sublime yet parsecs-deep gulf separating one neohuman mind from another. He thrilled anew, wondering if the newfound ability could be synergistically connected to his enhanced sense of esthesis. He had no way of knowing. How could one tell? The difference between being schooled and conditioned to a heightened ability to perceive overt emotional patterns in others, and the reception of conscious thought, struck him as a gulf of comparable to the boundless scope of the universe.

Preoccupied as well as dumbfounded by the blinding revelation, he rose from the bed and awkwardly used his good hand to begin throwing personal items into a carryall.

Ramyn slipped into the room unannounced and helped him finish packing. She kissed him tenderly, careful to avoid bumping his injured shoulder, and fingered the sling supporting his arm with a rueful expression.

“More scar tissue for you to admire,” he said. “I told you it went with the territory.”

“I don’t much like the territory.”

“Nor at times do I. But it’s my territory.”

They met Kurani and the prince in the hunting lodge refectory and enjoyed a leisurely evening meal. Ramyn had broken the news of her android pose to Kewart while Klavik was having his wound treated at the infirmary. Her missing android stigma delighted the prince. Animated all through dinner, he jabbered incessantly about her new status.

Shortly after sunset, the foursome descended to the transit gallery, boarded a pneumatic tube module and were whisked back to the Village. Ramyn, parting from the others at the entrance to Petite Palais, went directly to Shatterhand’s administration tower, rehearsing in her mind a replay of Matson’s attempted rape, and her subsequent unmasking.

Later in the evening, Kurani convened a council of war on the balcony terrace of his suite. Drowsy, barely able to keep his eyes open, Klavik contributed almost nothing to a discussion centered about the question of whether or not to carry on with the scheme of trying to convince Shatterhand of their intention to abandon the investigation and depart from Eden. Klavik listened with half an ear as the PM vetoed the notion, stating and restating his contention that since events were showing signs of coming to a head, he proposed confronting Shatterhand in the morning, wresting the truth from him.

Although leery of trying to coerce Shatterhand into doing anything he didn’t want to do, Klavik was too weary to argue the point, and the PM realized he was literally out on his feet. Kurani told him to either crash there in Petite Palais, or take the tube out to the pinnacle and boost up to orbit aboard the *Kolodaan*, where he could hopefully sleep without a fear of further induced nightmares.

Heavy-lidded, Klavik had no intention of being separated from his charges. He rejected the notion going on-orbit, he offered a counter suggestion: the three of them could again doss

down in a single bed-sitting chamber, as they had on the night of the android assault. Except this time they were to use Kewart's suite, which might or might not incorporate a hidden stairway.

"Agreed." Reluctantly leading the way back inside Petite Palais, Kurani requisitioned the hydraulic bed. The prince chose a comfortable settee.

"Doubt we've much to fear this night," grumbled Kurani, preparing for bed.

"Probably not." Klavik yawned, knuckled his eyes. "A hidden stairway does exist, however." Clued by the prior experience, knowing what to look for, he had discovered a nearly imperceptible crack running around a section of wall paneling. "I'm one-armed at the moment, Highness. Can you lend a hand?" Working together, he and the prince pushed a heavy armchair against the paneling, effectively blocking the concealed door. They proceeded to barricade both conventional entrances.

As before, Klavik laid cushions from a lounge on the floor beside the glass wall, placed both knives and his megajoule hand laser within easy reach, and waited for Kurani to bed down. Commanding the table lamps to switch off, he gratefully settled himself and closed his eyes. Twinges of soreness in his torn shoulder accompanied each slight shift of position.

"On the morrow," muttered Kurani from the hydraulic bed, "we shall present ourselves in the scheming cripple's ivory tower and exact a reckoning. And this time, I warrant the devious bastard won't be allowed to weasel word his way into slipping off the hook. Count on it! We'll tolerate no more of his flim-flam, no more watered-down excuses."

Klavik was too sleepy to respond.

Kurani's hearty snores resounded in the lush bed-sitting chamber. Wondering if he would be allowed to refresh himself, Klavik slid into a deep sleep.

* * *

Thoroughly dedicated, their methods fiendishly efficient, they kept him awake with brilliant flashing lights and the earsplitting honk of a klaxon that shattered the dungeon's dank stillness at maddeningly random intervals.

The tiny, claustrophobic cell hewn from rough-trimmed limestone was curved in a way that left a prisoner unable to either sit or stand upright. The stonewalls wept with suppurating dampness, chilling him to the marrow. His feet were swollen lumps, sore from the strain of hunching hour after endless hour in a semi-crouch.

Captivity had gone on too long for him to remain wholly sane. He had endured so many endless hours of acute discomfort that there was no longer any sensation in his limbs, only a fatalistic weariness, a dull, pervading ache telling him the end was not, could not be, far off.

Denied food, water, and sleep, he was not surprised to learn he no longer had any interest in a prolonged existence. Oblivion would at least bring peace, an end to the living hell he had somehow managed to endure.

The harsh clang of an iron-barred door opening in the dungeon's main passageway roused him from hopeless lethargy. A pair of burly, half-naked warders appeared, their muscular torsos gleaming in the torchlight. Wearing black, tight-fitting hoods, with narrow slits where the eyes and mouths should have been, the warders radiated ham-handed energy approaching his cell. Mute and insensitive to his condition, they opened the grate, pulled him roughly from the stone cell. His bare, swollen feet scraped and bounced painfully on worn stone steps as he was dragged down into the dungeon.

His wrists were stretched above his head, and he was manacled to a rusted iron post fetid with dried blood. He watched with helpless objectivity, as if it were happening to another, as cold iron shackles closed about his ulcerated ankles. Raising lackluster eyes, he could barely discern the black-robed figure seated in the shadows, a monk's cowl shrouding his features in impenetrable gloom.

Panicky, dreading what was to come, he twisted violently against the bonds. The manacles bit into his sore, swollen wrists and ankles until fresh blood oozed. A hooded figure faced him holding a set of ruby-glowing pincers in his gauntlet; a second torturer seized a handful of his filthy, tangled mane and yanked his head back, rapping his skull against the iron post.

They began with the tender flesh between his toes. He screamed, amazed at how loud the bellow of agony sounded in his own ears.

"Stop!" he cried, and gagged. "I'll tell you anything. Anything! Stop!"

"I'm sure you would," declared the cowed inquisitor, his fruity baritone velvet smooth. "Alas, nothing you care to say would be of a interest."

Deliberately, dispassionately, they reduced him to a writhing, retching mass of agony. He eventually passed out. A pail of foul-smelling ice water drenched him, brought him around.

When he had revived sufficiently, they worked on him some more. He lost consciousness again, and again a pail of frigid water revived him.

Semi-conscious after bearing up under the unbearable, but unable to dodge, he screamed until he thought his throat would rupture at sight of the glowing, cherry-red needles coming toward his eyes . . .

* * *

"Klavik!" The prime minister bent down, gently shook Klavik's uninjured shoulder.

Quaking, his heart pounding in runaway mode, Klavik had difficulty speaking. "It's . . . all right, sir."

"No, it isn't all right, so don't tell me that. Judging from the way you were thrashing and moaning it must've been something dreadful."

"It wasn't . . . nice."

"This can't be allowed to continue."

"Somehow I don't believe it will." Klavik rose and one-handedly massaged his viciously throbbing temples. "This time I caught a more vivid impression, and a major difference."

"How so?"

"The chamber was dimly lit, not brilliant. In the background, beside the liquid pool, a neohuman figure was seated in a bulky metal chair."

"Him!" breathed Kurani.

"I can't be sure. His features were indistinct, but it's difficult to believe otherwise."

"Shatterhand!" Kurani gave the name the inflection of a curse. "By the enduring First Principle, that tears it."

Klavik's response was a yawn, a spirited nod.

TWENTY-EIGHT

The svelte, elegantly coiffed receptionist bubbled programmed deference when what she assumed were three guests trooped in from the loggia. Welcoming them with a vapid android smile, the android announced them, and ushered them into Shatterhand's spacious tower suite.

Klavik surveyed the tastefully appointed yet rather austere office. He judged the minimal furnishings a necessity; in order to move about freely, Shatterhand's cumbersome geriatric appliance required minimal obstructions.

Seated fist-to-chin before a tinted, floor-to-ceiling picture window, the director contemplated the pasturelands encircling the Village, where shaggy cattle grazed on green, rolling hills. Beyond, in the morning light, the sheen of the Southern Sea stretched to a sea girt horizon.

Outwardly imperturbable, the silver-haired director pivoted his throne-like chair, facing his guests. Voicing a hope that they had rested well — something Klavik found ironic — he offered solicitous sympathy for the injury in the Veldt, and invited them to be seated. He asked what refreshments would please them.

Kurani planted himself aggressively, feet apart, directly in front of the geriatric chair. Looking down at their suspected nemesis with unleavened enmity, he said, "The most delicious refreshment you could serve up would be a bowl of truthfulness. Our patience is worn to the nub. We'll listen to no more glib evasions from you or anyone else in this plush bordello. Only one item is on the agenda. It calls for you to make a clean breast of your involvement in the sordid murder of our sovereign."

His demeanor calm and unruffled, Shatterhand said, "Nothing would give me greater pleasure, Mr. Prime Minister. But I must say you —"

"Good," rasped Kurani. "Let's begin at the beginning? For starters," he said, ticking off the point with a stubby forefinger, "please explain your reason for planting a supposed android spy in our midst the moment we set foot in this vile paradise. The beauteous 'social butterfly' you dumped on us miraculously escaped from her chrysalis, transformed herself into a neohuman woman. Why the duplicity? Why was something that devious necessary when sophisticated surveillance devices are sewn into every nook and cranny of your plastic playground?"

Physically exhausted after the most recent assault on his sleeping habits, Klavik had expected to find Ramyn present; her absence made him vaguely uneasy. Seated in a lounge beside Kewart, he stretched mentally, hoping to discern any emotional nuances Shatterhand might be lax enough to reveal. He was disappointed, but not surprised. Although confronted by the belligerent chief of state, Shatterhand gave no impression of being cornered. Strain as he might, Klavik could discern only null tranquility.

Further incensed by Shatterhand's unresponsiveness to his opening salvo, the tide of indignation surging within Kurani threatened to overflow. He managed to bridle his urge to rant and rave, and simply stood before the geriatric chair, waiting.

The picture of misunderstood innocence, Shatterhand met his antagonist's withering gaze squarely. "Mr. Prime Minister, you have naturally assumed that assigning Ramyn to 'spy' on your activities was my doing."

"Who the devil else could be responsible?"

“Whatever capacity you may believe I enjoy in Eden,” said Shatterhand, “may not be correct. I have superiors, you must understand, to whom I am obligated to render satisfaction. The Parvon Syndicate directors were desolated by the dreadful event that took place here in our ‘plastic playground,’ as you choose to put it. A decision handed down from on high instructed me to have Ramyn join your entourage as an android. I was directed to bend every conceivable effort toward aiding in the discovery of those culpable of regicide, and —”

“Oh, no!” Kurani stamped his boot in vexation. “That won’t wash. Simply following orders is without doubt the oldest, most feeble excuse for villainy in history.”

“Villainy aside, in this instance my ‘excuse’ happens to be valid.”

His displeasure mounting steadily, Kurani’s normally composed features were a ruddy, vengeful mask. “Again you dodge the bullet in your usual self-serving manner, by sloughing off responsibility on others. How convenient! By now, my friends, I give less than a minim’s worth of credence to yet another paper-thin sidestep. Push has come to shove, and you’ll find twice the force in our shove. We insist upon the truth, nay *demand* it.

“Secondly,” pursued the PM, daring the confrontee to interrupt, “were we the victims of a crafty, well-engineered bit of stagecraft designed to convince us that His Royal Highness had been seduced by the selfsame false android siren you now say your superiors ordered thrust into our midst.”

His expression maddeningly neutral, Shatterhand did not offer a rebuttal.

“Then every bit as bad, or perhaps worse,” declared Kurani in the same scathing vein, “hard on the heels of the preposterous seduction play within a play was the attack by three android ‘assassins’ who sneaked into our private chambers through an artfully concealed access stairway of which you, of course, had absolutely no knowledge.”

The director lifted his hands in an appeal to reason. “I believe we covered that ground in an earlier discussion. Had we been able to deduce the perpetrator’s identity, both unconscionable happenings would have been solved.”

“Evasion piled upon deceit, and capped with an outright *lie*.” The seething statesman gritted his teeth. “In light of the other bald-faced untruths you’ve spun for our benefit, it’s obvious that you and your alien masters take us for cretins. Ever since we touched foot in this plush hall of mirrors you’ve hedged and tap-danced and done your damndest to cloud every issue. You’ve turned everything we’ve seen, touched, heard, felt, and most likely smelled into some form of will-o-the-wisp illusion. You have yet to come forth with one entirely honest and truthful statement. Not one!”

The ensuing silence dragged on uncomfortably. “Your pardon, Mr. Prime Minister,” said Shatterhand, “but I’m forced to take umbrage at your loosely cast aspersions. Nor do I feel it necessary to defend my integrity after observing the —”

“Integrity!” bellowed Kurani, what little self-restraint he had left curdling. “Take umbrage and be damned! Leap into the Putrid Pit wearing your umbrage. Thirdly, if I may complete my list of ‘aspersions,’ we were informed of the astounding disappearance of your Nervous Nellie operations manager, who purportedly vanished from neohuman ken. Now we know — *know*, not guess, mind you — that it was you yourself, not the alien masters upon whom you casually slough off blame, who carted the fellow to an upland hunting lodge in the island zoo across the water. How do we know? Because your hasty flight to the jungle hideaway took

place in the only private verticraft in Eden, its airborne vector and destination tracked and recorded aboard our orbiting starcruiser. Therefore, as I said, we know, not guess, that afterward you waited patiently until we were offworld before flying to the island and paying Buford a visit. Deny it if you wish, and be damned!”

“There is nothing to deny,” Shatterhand replied equably. “Buford was frightened to death of you, literally frightened to death I regret to say. My associate met a truly gruesome end when your after-hours visit made him abandon his quarters and dash out into the dangerous darkness. Buford and I traveled a long road. A respected colleague, I grieve for him.”

“Grieve to your heart’s content!” admonished Kurani. “You lied to us then, and by the enduring First Principle you’ve compounded your lie. Sent the fellow packing to conceal his guilt, you did.”

“To the best of my knowledge, there was no guilt to conceal.”

“Then why bother arranging for his disappearance? Why hide him underhandedly, then dexterously cover up the arrangement?”

“Because,” the executive said smoothly, “Buford’s fragile psyche made him especially vulnerable to harsh interrogation. Your thumbnail description of my late colleague was apt, Mr. Prime Minister. He was indeed a ‘Nervous Nellie,’ a condition exacerbated when Ramyn reported that Mr. Klavik was apparently endowed with some arcane form of mental talent. To answer your question directly, I removed Buford from the scene to protect him from an incipient nervous breakdown. In any event, you have my absolute assurance that nothing of value could have been learned by interrogating the late Mr. Buford.”

“Ah, your *absolute* assurance.” Kurani oozed sarcasm. “After all, that’s the best form of assurance there is, not so? Don’t tell me we’ve finally stumbled upon a kernel of truth, hard as it is to believe. At the time, you gratuitously told us you suspected Buford guilty of perpetrating both offenses against our persons, then underscored the lie by blithely disclaiming all knowledge of his whereabouts. Afterward, we witnessed a meaningless charade during which you supposedly ordered a planetwide, house-to-house search for bogus androids, staff members, guests, and phantom offworld intruders who ‘slipped into Eden’ unnoticed. These unknown ‘slippers’ were cited as perhaps responsible for taking the life of our beloved sovereign, and later for assaulting us in our sleep. Sent us off on a first-order snipe hunt, didn’t you? Except for a total lack of humor, your cascade of deceptions and misdirections would be laughable.”

Still outwardly at ease despite the indictments, Shatterhand steepled knobby fingers. “On that count, I must confess to the duplicity of which I stand accused.”

Kurani’s voice cracked. “You admit lying to us?”

“A white lie, Mr. Prime Minister.”

“If so, you should also admit to color blindness,” raged Kurani, his exasperation peaking. “Your lie was as black as the lower depths of the Putrid Pit. But, wait; none of this has thus far taken us in the direction we must go. Let’s move on to your most recent deception, when we were encouraged to believe a dangerous predator had been rendered impotent via custom programming, and watched the feral beast attack Klavik on cue. And *then*,” emphasized Kurani, “lo and behold! The programming wizard assigned to Chatham’s holovision troupe conveniently disappeared before he could be questioned. What a pluperfectly amazing coincidence!”

“It was . . . unfortunate.”

“Unfortunate indeed, especially for Klavik. Even more unfortunate is the unfortunate fact that these ‘unfortunate’ incidents came hard on the heels of of your oft-repeated pledge to assist our investigation in every way possible.”

Sustaining his air of cool composure, Shatterhand was in the act of framing a response when Klavik grunted loudly and surged to his feet.

Having sleepily concluded that Shatterhand’s stonewall could not be breached by rhetoric, he’d tuned out Kurani’s recital of grievances. Suddenly, with no warning whatever, a wave front of mental pressure impinged on his consciousness, instantly ballooning into the now-familiar oppressive, compelling force.

You shall now be reassured.

The phrase, rendered in flat though faultless Kraant, had exploded in his mind with crystalline clarity, as if it had been spoken aloud by someone in the chamber.

* * *

Klavik slumped back in the lounge, eyes closed, the pulse pounding in his ears, the aftereffect of a staggering headache.

“What is it?” Kurani’s hand dropped to the butt of his holstered hand laser.

You perceive our intrusion?

I do, thought Klavik, his head spinning.

Clearly?

Clearly. I also sense your nearness.

As anticipated.

How is this possible?

We shall endeavor to learn the answer. For the nonce, we credit your precocity. You left to this poor creature no choice but to contact you directly.

You are the Parvon?

None other, since that is the neohuman term.

The tenuous mental link snapped like a severed audio connection. The ominous pressure in Klavik’s mind slacked off gradually, diminished further, and ceased. He tried to relax, but could not help but cringe at the residual agony in his skull. Eyes tightly closed, he let his head fall back against the cushions.

Prince Kewart touched his arm. “What is it, Klavik? What’s wrong?”

Using his free hand, Klavik massaged his thundering temples. “Shatterhand,” he said, “your Parvon master wishes to reassure us. How do you imagine that will be accomplished?”

For the very first time Shatterhand seemed visibly shaken. He sat forward in the geriatric chair and gazed at Klavik, dark eyes slitted.”

Thrilled despite the diminished pounding in his head, Klavik said, “He, she or it has been denying me sleep. Pretending innocence of a Parvon presence is futile. I’ve had more than one vision of a subterranean chamber, a wriggling alien form immersed in a pool of clear liquid, and in the background your chair.”

The executive’s composure returned quickly. “Visions,” he said in a brittle voice, “prove little more than nothing at all.”

“As I said, my ‘vision’ included an impression of a stone-walled gallery, and you in your chair.”

Outwardly nonplused, Shatterhand silently revolved the statement. “Your wound,” he said a length, “may have left you slightly feverish, Mr. Klavik. It might be prudent to check in at the Village Medcenter, allow the medics to —”

“Enough, Shatterhand.” The dry, artificial voice erupted from hidden speakers lacking timbre or inflection. “Far too long have we suffered this farce to progress.”

Kurani’s laser weapon was in his hand. Prince Kewart rose hesitantly, half-erect, searching for the origin of the disembodied voice.

“Shatterhand,” instructed the Parvon, “kindly escort our distinguished guests to the pit of horrors in which we are rudely imprisoned.”

TWENTY-NINE

Boarding the small lift compartment was a tight squeeze. Jammed on either side of the director’s bulky geriatric chair, Klavik and his companions felt the floor drop away beneath them, then suddenly ground with knee-bending deceleration. Steel-reinforced doors rumbled apart, triggering fail-safe circuitry that automatically dimmed the dazzling actinic glare to a crepuscular glow. The bulky chair emerged ahead of the visitors. Shatterhand guided it to the far side of the central pool.

Klavik’s blinding headache had faded. Urging his charges to hang back, he left the compartment one hesitant step at a time, his good hand resting lightly on the laser weapon’s pistol grip. Within the stark, jackhammer-scored grotto, the ambient temperature and humidity approached that of a sauna. Perspiration popped out all over, drenching him, a discomfort enhancing the dulled pain in his head. Even so, he was taken by a sharp sense of déjà vu. Feature by feature, item by item, the vault looked identical to the flashing mental impressions he’d perceived.

“This wretched creature bids you welcome.” Absent of modulation or inflection, the electronic voice reverberated in the subterranean chamber with chilling clarity.

Planet Kraan, the seat of an overtly insular neohuman society, had through the standard centuries since the colony’s founding experienced no more than peripheral contact with alien societies, none whatever with exotic species. As a consequence, neither Klavik nor either of his companions were xenophobic. Prince Kewart, however, reacted like the inexperienced adolescent he was, drawing back in revulsion at sight of the pool’s occupant.

However stoic the former grand marshal might have considered himself, Kurani viewed the iridescent, wormlike entity ceaselessly undulating beneath a transparent membrane as a “wretched creature” indeed. To him, the Parvon was an animate object from which specific information might be gleaned, nothing more. “Is the Parvon Syndicate,” he demanded, wasting no words on preliminaries, “responsible for the assassination of our sovereign?”

“All in good time, gentle sir. Would you think this poor creature impolite if we first addressed the individual known as Klavik? Alas, time is of the essence; we cannot long abide the horrid frigidity and woeful dimness so needful for your comfort. Your stay must therefore be brief.”

“The topic,” said Klavik, every sense attuned to the dweller in the pool, “was to be reassurance.”

“An estimable goal forming the sole reason for your impromptu visit to our inhospitable dungeon. Yet reassurance must be reciprocal, not unilateral. In order to achieve mutual reassurance, a modicum of cooperation and trust must be forthcoming on your part as well as ours. You shall leave this unwholesome pit convinced beyond a shade of doubt that absolutely the last thing our beloved Syndicate desired was for your ruler’s noble existence to be terminated while enjoying Eden’s hospitality. Think about the matter in depth. Would it be logical for we Parvons, misunderstood strangers in this sector of our common galaxy, to actively participate in the hideous affair? Consider the atrocious effect adverse publicity the affair has wreaked, and may continue to wreak for cycles to come.”

Every sense at hair-trigger, Klavik analyzed the statement semantically. Despite the exotic’s appeal to common sense and logic, its discourse had been null in content. More importantly, in his own estimation, the empty, pacifying words had been accompanied by ghostly fingers gently probing the periphery of his mind. He received an impression that his consciousness was deftly being dissected, items of information selectively evaluated and doubtless cataloged for future reference. He struggled to block out the intrusion, but had no idea how to go about it. When the effort to do so proved futile, he put his hands to his temples and cried, “Stop!”

A laser weapon leaped into Kurani’s fist, “Now what?”

“It’s . . . tampering with . . . my mind.”

“By the sacred First Principle, that tears it! I’ve a dirt-simple solution in mind.” Dripping perspiration, Kurani lowered the hand laser’s emission bell, his forefinger on the firing stud.

A wave front of naked terror exploded from the exotic’s mind.

“No!” bellowed Klavik, knocking the PM’s arm upward. A brilliant, pencil-thin lance of coherent energy incinerated a curved scar in the far wall of living granite.

“Put it . . . away.” Klavik was breathing heavily.

“You dared to interfere,” accused the enraged statesman. “Why, Klavik? Let’s be rid of the slimy slug, have done with it?”

Klavik’s voice cracked, making him sound every bit as terrified as he actually was. “The pool,” he said, his breathing ragged, stertorous. “It’s filled with a highly volatile paraffin compound, liquid methane. Lased energy would have . . .” He choked back the thickness in his throat. “Inject thermal energy into the pool, and the whole chamber will go up.”

Kurani blanched. Seeming to age perceptibly in a matter of seconds, he groped to slide the laser weapon back in its holster. Wiping away the rivulets of perspiration coursing down his face with a palpitant gesture, he said in anguish, “Can you ever forgive me, Highness?”

His eyes bright with hypnotic fascination, Kewart was too preoccupied by the writhing, undulating exotic to acknowledge the plea.

“Klavik, in addition to your other accomplishments,” complimented the Parvon, “is a commensurate level of wisdom.”

The mental intrusion had ceased. Klavik sensed that the threat of extinction had frightened the Parvon as much, or more, than he himself. His hands still trembling, an aftereffect of acute adrenaline shock, he said, “Reassurance . . . is the topic.”

“Just so.”

“Then why the mind games?” Literally drowning in perspiration, Klavik asked the Parvon’s rationale for invading his consciousness, keeping him sleepless with induced nightmares.

“We tender a most sincere apology for the distress it caused. This poor creature opted for mental and physical exhaustion as the simplest, most straightforward method of discovering your true oeuvre. We wished to learn how you could have radically surpassed the primitive extrasensory parameters with which your fellow beings are endowed.”

“Did you succeed?”

“To only a modest degree.”

The ambiguous reply suggested dissimulation, nettling Klavik. “It baffles me why a member of some distant, xenic culture would be even marginally interested in my alleged accomplishments?”

“Xenic is a mildly pejorative term; from our perspective, such ‘otherness’ applies equally to neohumans. Your juvenile attitude is a function of totally unreasonable prejudice,” chided the Parvon. “You shall eventually come to realize that our motive for researching your capability was by no means reprehensible but, to be blunt, no more than a matter of classic academic interest. It should be obvious that in venturing parsecs from hive and swarm simply to endure a protracted stay in this inhospitable place we have abjured all but the most minimal of life’s joys and comforts. The reason we have engaged in extended self-denial can be stated quite simply. Our sole purpose was to ensure Eden’s heartfelt cooperation in your righteous quest for the evildoers ultimately responsible for the demise of your sovereign. Yet while a lofty purpose in itself, our primary objective has been overbalanced by the chance discovery of you yourself, a neohuman endowed with potentially advanced mental capabilities.”

“Absolutely nothing,” said Klavik, “outweighs the vital nature of our primary objective, to determine the guilty party or parties responsible for the murder.”

“It may seem so at this juncture,” granted the exotic. “But in the ripeness of time, when your vine of life begins bearing splendid fruit, the verity of our assessment will become apparent.”

An indignant snort from Kurani. “Infernal doubletalk.”

Ignoring the PM’s utterance, the exotic continued in the same didactic vein. “It will be mutually advantageous to strike a bargain between ourselves.”

“What sort of bargain?”

“Your negotiating position is unique,” conceded the Parvon. “It puts this poor creature at a sharp disadvantage. Yet we have privileged information to divulge, and in truth are now in possession of all facts and circumstances pertaining to the demise of your exalted ruler.”

“You know culprit’s identity?” demanded Kurani.

“Indeed, gentle sir. And much more, including the motive for consummating the vile deed. These data will be imparted in exchange for the opportunity to exhaustively examine and evaluate the current mental prowess, and extrapolate the future potential, of Klavik.”

“If you know who committed the crime, and why,” Kurani said harshly, “and refuse to divulge the particulars, why so much the worse for you.”

“Please bear with this poor creature, gentle sir. We shall refuse you nothing, not the least significant detail. Spare us a moment more of your patience, if you will.”

Wiping away perspiration, Klavik admitted the hook was richly baited, the reward for compliance very appealing. “I can’t imagine,” he said, “how researching my alleged extrasensory ability would disadvantage us, or hinder our mission, in any way. With the concurrence of His Royal Highness and the Prime Minister, I believe we can agree to that bargain, but only under one condition . . . No, make that two conditions.”

“We sincerely hope the stated conditions will be neither excessive, nor stringent.”

“Just the opposite. First and foremost, I insist upon a full night of untroubled sleep.”

“Granted willingly. It would have been so in any case.”

“Secondly, we need your promise not to subject me to similar indignities in the future.”

“Also granted willingly. The necessity to examine your subconscious in such rude fashion while somnolent has passed. You have our solemn pledge to that effect.”

“Then out with it,” said Kurani. “We’ve come many parsecs and endured a great deal of travail in order to learn the truth. How, why, and by whose hand, was our sovereign murdered?”

“Alas, gentle sir, the sorrowful disclosure cannot simply be blurted out.”

“Why not?”

The exotic’s transliterated electronic voice, though neutral, contained overtones of mild reproach. “An extended session will be required in order to adequately describe the incident, its origin, and certain crucial ancillary matters attendant upon its consummation. To do so, it will be more expedient for you to remain in Shatterhand’s luxurious habitat, while we languish in these stark surroundings. Your patience is humbly requested, for we grow weaker, ever more distraught due to the benighted dimness and frigid temperature abiding for your comfort. You must go now, else subject this poor creature to prolonged, potentially serious debilitation.”

“When,” demanded Kurani, “will this promised revelation take place?”

“On the morrow, gentle sir, you shall hear the gist of our sad disclosure, the upshot of widespread, intensive inquiries undertaken on your behalf. Now, much as it pains us to rupture our too short acquaintance, we must reluctantly bid you farewell.”

* * *

The lift compartment slowed its rise, eased to a stop. The doors rolled apart, opening on the muraled alcove in Shatterhand’s office suite.

Klavik exited ahead of his companions. Met by a sharp pang of apprehension he could not account for when no immediate threat was apparent, alarm circuits tripped in his mind. He hesitated, reached back and placed a staying hand on Kurani’s chest.

A stronger sense of dread settled over him, its source familiar, close at hand. Sensitized by intimate contact with her, he realized in a surge of genuine fear that the disturbing waves of emotion emanating from Ramyn were increasing.

She’s in trouble! The thought seared him. He glanced back; Shatterhand’s cumbersome geriatric chair had not moved, blocked by the prince and prime minister from exiting the lift compartment.

“Is there a problem?” inquired the executive.

Klavik’s scalp tingled, the false, rhetorical quality of Shatterhand’s question jarred him. The waves of distress beating against his consciousness strengthened in intensity.

“What’s wrong?” asked Kewart.

“I don’t . . . Not sure.” Klavik edged forward a step, his back pressed against the alcove’s wall, and darted his head around the corner. Glimpsing Ramyn, he pulled back, tiny hairs lifting at the nape of his neck. Gagged, her perfect features contorted, her wrists pinioned by a pair of stolid android proctors, Ramyn had seen him and jerked her head from side to side in a silent warning.

Fullness swelled Klavik’s chest. He unsheathed the throwing knife, balanced it in the palm of his hand and launched himself into the study, poised to loose the blade.

He halted, went limp.

A dozen armed android proctors lining the study’s far wall surged forward en masse, surrounding Klavik and his companions in a ring of conscienceless flesh.

Kurani’s blistering epithet punctuated the quick-draw of the hand laser. He whirled, menacing Shatterhand. “Call them off!” he cried, steel in his booming bass voice.

In answer, the director touched a switch on the chair’s armrest; he was instantly enveloped in an opalescent bubble. “Put it away, Mr. Prime Minister. It makes the androids nervous.”

“Do as he says,” urged Klavik, and sheathed his knife.

“I’ll do no such thing!”

“It’s useless. A force shell envelops the chair.”

Former Grand Marshal Kurani had never conceded defeat in the face of superior forces. Nevertheless, he did so now, allowing an android proctor wrested the laser weapon from his grasp. Another proctor relieved Klavik of his knives, shook him down and lifted the laser weapon from an underarm holster.

“We’ve consorted with the prince of lies,” raged Kurani.

“Why . . . this?” demanded Kewart, more mystified than frightened. “Klavik, I thought you reached a bargain with that thing down there.”

“So did I, Highness.” Klavik willed himself to calmness. “It seems the agreement we struck was one-sided.” Appraising the overall situation, he decided it hopeless. With one arm in a sling, or unencumbered, it would have been insane to tempt odds like these. “Shatterhand,” he told the director, “advise your master our arrangement is abrogated. It will never learn what it wishes to know.”

Shatterhand wordlessly signaled the android proctors.

Gagged and unable to speak, Ramyn twisted her head, shot Kewart a look of anguish as he was hustled into the loggia. Kurani retained his dignity, shrugging off the android hands, and marched into the loggia, the wrath in his parting grimace wasted on Shatterhand.

At ease in the geriatric chair, still enveloped in a shell of protective force, the director studied Klavik, his air one of stoic indifference. “In lieu of the promised revelation,” he declared without a hint of emotion, “nothing sinister is in store for your companions, who are about to enjoy a brief holiday. By necessity, Ramyn must accompany them, since her part in the affair has been compromised. You shall remain in the Village, Klavik. But I must warn you, and a harsh warning it is, that if any members of the military force you have standing-by at the space terminal attempt to follow your companions, or have them found, it will severely jeopardize the safety of all three individuals you hold dear. Have I made myself clear?”

The androids precluded Klavik from considering overt action. He nevertheless fought down an overpowering urge to leap forward, get his hands around Shatterhand's throat.

The geriatric chair rotated, glided silently toward the portal.

"A moment more of your time," requested Klavik, deathly calm. "You and your master have taken hostage the heir to Kraan's ancient Throne, and chief of state. Should Kewart's royal blood be spilt like that of his noble sire, or any harm come to Prime Minister Kurani, this entire planet will be held responsible."

"Rest easy, Klavik. Your friends are temporary hostages to fortune, nothing more. They will be held incommunicado, in total safety. This I firmly guarantee. At the conclusion of your examination they will naturally be released unharmed."

"Let me clarify *my* firm guarantee," declared Klavik, speaking slowly, distinctly. "Should His Royal Highness or Prime Minister Kurani suffer any form of physical or emotional abuse, Eden will be razed from polar ice to polar ice — guests, android slaves, and brothel keepers like yourself among the fallen. Once that is accomplished, Kraan will dispatch a task force second to none in the known galaxy. A series of massive strikes will not decimate, but obliterate Parvo, the homeworld of your employers. You will be wise to treat what I say not as a threat, but a solemn promise. Unlike certain others, we of Kraan respect and hold fast to promises tendered."

"A splendid ultimatum." Shatterhand beat his hands together softly in mock applause. "I strongly doubt carnage on a grand scale is in the offing, but it is intriguing to hear your caveat fail to include fair Ramyn. Has your ardor cooled so quickly? No matter. You yourself would do well to remember my caveat regarding no pursuit or action of any kind on the part of the military forces aboard your grounded vessel. I'm sure we now understand one another."

Escorted by a quartet of androids, Ramyn and the man in the bulky geriatric chair swept out of the suite into the loggia.

Left alone, simmering and seething impotently, Klavik watched in mute fury as the portal slid closed, then rushed forward and tried to command it open. The heavy, soundproofed doors had locked electronically.

He trotted across the plush carpeting to the picture window. Beneath the suite's tinted, triple-thermo pane window, thirty meters of the tower's sheer, rounded façade ended in a formal garden at the base.

Feeling as if he'd fallen into vacuum, yet fairly bursting with nervous energy, he paced the length and breadth of the Shatterhand's study, thinking, planning . . .

The exotic's characterless voice arrested him in mid-stride. "All's well that ends well, if this poor creature may quote from neohuman literature. Be of good temper, Klavik. What has been done is in the best interest of all concerned."

"Your brand of reassurance," said Klavik, "falls short of the mark."

"There is naught to fear," insisted the exotic, "unless you choose to act rashly, or attempt flight before this poor creature deems leave-taking appropriate. Does comprehension sit with you?"

"Perfectly. What you have done is called blackmail."

"In your idiom, I suppose that might be an apt term. Go now, my splendid young neohuman specimen. Return to your assigned quarters and seek the rest you richly deserve. On

the morrow, when you have refreshed yourself, we shall commence a series of mutually beneficial exercises. We wish you pleasant dreams.”

The audio connection broke with an indistinct pop.

THIRTY

Stung by the exotic’s perversely ironic parting shot, Klavik banged the portal’s switch time and again with the butt of his free hand, and was eventually rewarded when the double doors slid apart. Puzzled to find the skylighted loggia deserted, he rode down in Shatterhand’s private lift, and was equally puzzled by the way proctors stationed in the lobby looked through his departure with android indifference.

Emerging from the tower’s canopied entrance, he turned heads among androids and a few strolling guests by striding with undue haste across the plaza. Free in a sense, yet restrained by invisible bonds, the knowledge that his charges, and Ramyn, were being held hostage, he ignored pair of proctors bracketing the entrance to Petite Palais who made no move to hinder his hasty entrance. He realized that any attempt to leave the quaint, too-perfect hostelry might be a different story.

Not bothering with the lift, he bounded up the utility stairway three risers at a time, hustled down the hallway and used his electronic key to gain admittance to his suite, and went directly to the bed-sitting chamber’s walk-in closet, where he snatched the hand-held communicator down from the high shelf. In his haste to distance himself as much as possible from omnipresent surveillance devices, he eased through the sliding glass wall before it had time to open all the way.

On the terrace, he energized the transceiver, punched up the orbiting starcruiser’s monitor frequency. “*Kolodaan*, do you read? Klavik here. Come in, *Kolodaan*.”

A casual baritone responded in Kraant. “*Kolodaan*, aye. Officer of the Watch here. Say on, Mr. Klavik.”

“Has the starcruiser maintained synchronous orbit?”

“That is affirmative, sir — same equatorial groove, same rations, same dull view. What news groundside?”

“Now hear a Class One Directive,” declared Klavik in a different voice. “Prime Minister Kurani is not available to confirm, but I hereby invoke his authority to issue a Class One Directive.”

“Read you five-by-five, sir.” The tone of voice from orbit had also changed. “Standing by to record.”

“*Kolodaan* will monitor and record the vector and destination of all air traffic departing the seaside Village proximate to the southern hemisphere space terminal. Continuous triple surveillance is authorized: amplified high-resolution optical, plus infrared, appropriate surface, and ground-penetrating radar. Execute now, now, now!”

“Class One Directive acknowledged, Mr. Klavik. Shall we pipe the telepix, IR and radar data down to you?”

Klavik pondered his response. “Negative, *Kolodaan*. Telemeter all data to the pinnacle grounded at the space terminal. I’ll call later and alert the Royal Elite Guards legate. Do you copy?”

“Kolodaan copies, sir. Anything else?”

Klavik could not stifle a yawn. “One thing more. Is the unknown vessel still co-orbiting with *Kolodaan* in hyperspace?”

“That is affirmative, Mr. Klavik. We’ve ducked in and out of hyperspace every other watch and tracked the stranger.”

“Good. Advise the master to stay on his toes around the clock. We have an extremely serious situation here on the ground that may require instant military action.”

“Can do, sir.”

“Very good, carry on. Klavik, out.”

Barely able to keep his eyes open, and heartsick over the ineffectiveness he’d shown in protecting his charges, he stayed on the terrace another quarter-hour, thinking, recriminating, blaming himself for allowing events to continue on their present course. He mulled the intolerable situation, stewed about what he considered a personal dereliction of duty. His present state of helplessness left him miserable and thoroughly dispirited. Yet in the final analysis, one brutally inescapable fact loomed large. For the moment, there was absolutely nothing he could do to rectify matters.

Incredibly weary, he dragged himself back into the suite, fell into the hydraulic bed fully clothed. He wanted to give the starcruiser enough time to accomplish the surveillance task, then rise, contact the starcruiser’s grounded pinnacle and alert the phalanx of Royal Elite Guardsmen.

Sometime later he woke groggily in a state of mild alarm. Groping for the source of apprehension that clouded his waking thoughts, he listened in disbelief to rain pattering outside on the terrace. Gray, predawn light seeped through the lined damask draperies. He had slept through the remainder of the afternoon and most of the night.

Feeling renewed, ready to face any challenge, he rolled from the bed and was staggered by a sight that made him give in to blind, red rage.

While he slept, the suite had been quietly ransacked. The communications transceiver was no longer on the bedside table.

* * *

“No, do not force it,” admonished the exotic. “Relax deep within yourself. Allow the impressions to enter your mind easily, naturally.”

“It’s . . . difficult.”

“Difficulty,” suggested the Parvon, “is an integral characteristic of worthwhile enterprises. All such endeavors invariably present roadblocks. Heed our earnest counsel. Approach the exercise in a less tentative manner. Boldly fling wide the gates of your neopallium, invite the imagery to flow within. Send out feelers for that which you seek with casual purpose, neither energetically nor with undue concern for the venture’s prospective success. Welcome the images as they form in your mind in the manner of greeting cherished friends.”

Klavik gritted his teeth. “I’m . . . trying too hard.”

“Verily, you have described the problem accurately. Bearing down with single-minded determination tends to defeat the purpose of our mutually beneficial exercises. Trying too hard is the root of your difficulty. Stealing a pearl of wisdom from neohuman vernacular, loosen up.”

“My head is bursting.”

“A simile more apt than you realize,” informed the Parvon. “New, unexplored, and in a deeper sense unknown channels within your mind are gradually opening. The discomfort will diminish in direct proportion to the amount, degree and intensity of practice, and dwindle further until eventually ceasing. But that happy circumstance will not come about until you wax more proficient, graduate to full self-control of your mental processes.”

Klavik used his free hand to massage the base of his skull. “When might that be?”

“Such distress as you experience is a universal attribute, a necessary corollary of ascending an ever-steeper learning curve. Younglings of our own misunderstood species a short time out of the chrysalis endure comparable torment, and so begin the rite of passage from pupal stage to adult members of the swarm. Now then, let us try again. Attune with us if possible. What alphanumeric sequence do we presently envision?”

Isolated in Shatterhand’s tower office, Klavik adjusted the sling supporting his arm and healing shoulder, leaned the knuckles of his free hand on the director’s ebony desk. Head bowed in concentration, he reached inside himself, straining to apprehend the abstruse symbols swimming in the Parvon’s thought stream.

At first he had resisted engaging in the series of mental bouts, doing his damndest to stonewall the exotic, obdurately refusing to cooperate in any way, shape or form until his charges and Ramyn had been freed. The tactic had not only failed miserably, but rebounded to his detriment.

Displaying an unanticipated brand of whimsy, the exotic’s monotonal, transliterated words laden with droll patience, had informed him that Parvons enjoyed average life spans roughly thrice the number of standard cycles allotted neohumans. Despite the gross physical discomfort imposed by its extended stay in Eden, the exotic had slyly intimated that a wait throughout figurative eternity was not out of the question. The longer Klavik resisted “guidance,” the longer would be the protracted wait until he became reunited with his companions.

Cut from whole cloth, a double-line of consciously perceived alphanumeric symbols strewn itself magically before Klavik’s mind’s eye. He exhaled with a sense of relief, hastily tolled the sequence.

“Excellent,” endorsed the Parvon. “Your progress is exemplary, one might even say extraordinary. You have taken the first halting steps toward traversing the gulf separating an ability to perceive abstract emotional patterns in others and the willful acquisition of esoteric data. Moreover, you have reached this far from insignificant milestone after but four tutelage sessions.”

“I have no idea,” admitted Klavik, “how it was done.”

“Not yet, assuredly. With practice, however, you are certain to become adept in the basic mechanics of mental communication, and versatile in the employment thereof. Keep our oft-repeated dictum uppermost in your consciousness. Relaxation is the parent of success in pristine explorations. Now nonverbally, using only your mind, interpret the following prime numbers, and respond by citing their natural logarithms.”

This time the data exchange, while extremely difficult, was achieved in a slightly more facile manner. At first he struggled unsuccessfully to comply, then adopted the exotic's advice, relaxed and began to apprehend the prime numbers in question with relative ease compared to prior, futile attempts, and formed in his mind a succession of proper quantitative responses.

The exotic applauded his progress verbally, but for obvious reasons the compliment fell on deaf ears. Failing to break Klavik's antagonistic mood, each Parvon compliment fell like a stone dropped into a bottomless well, never striking bottom.

"We are stunned," declared the exotic, "at your progress in light of an absence of previous tutelage. The immense strides you have taken are all but inconceivable. Without prior instruction by a mentally adept entity, such feats would be impossible."

"My conditioning sessions may have helped."

"You had been exposed to some form of mental discipline?"

"Experimentally," said Klavik. "Dozens of sessions were conducted under the guidance of academics specializing in parapsychology, but nothing at all like this. The stated objective was to enhance the rudimentary, intuitive sense of esthesis everyone possesses. The psionic researchers wanted only to heighten the inborn emotional insight of selected individuals like myself."

"Individuals, plural . . . ? If this poor creature takes your meaning literally, others of your kind also underwent mental conditioning and training."

"A limited number, yes."

"Interesting." The exotic dismissed the topic in an overly casual manner that made Klavik curious. "Let us move on to the next phase."

Groaning, Klavik pressed the fingertips of his free hand to his aching temple. "Enough for now. My head is splitting."

"It shall be as you wish," granted the disembodied voice. "No purpose will be served by overtiring you, nor is there a need for it. On the morrow we shall take up where we left off, but for now a kernel of advice. The analgesic compounds neohumans absorb metabolically will do nothing to alleviate your current suffering. Go to your quarters, rest. In a reasonable measure of time, the distress will ease. Before taking your leave, however, might we converse for a moment socially? Passing a few words could lead to a greater, more mutually beneficial understanding."

* * *

Klavik sagged back in the curved lounge, cradling his aching head against the cushions. He surveyed the bucolic setting framed by Shatterhand's picture window — green, pastoral hills, with the shining Southern Sea beyond. One arm still immobilized, he closed his eyes and did his best to one-handedly rub his pounding temples. "For us to converse 'socially' strikes me as outrè under the circumstances."

"How so?"

"Well, among other things you kidnapped my companions and a lovely woman."

"Nonsense. In your vernacular, the term 'kidnapping' is wholly inappropriate. Your friends are being entertained in comfort and safety, their sequestration by no means a sinister act on our part, merely a convenient lever with which to pry your willing cooperation with our research. As a being of proven intelligence, your resentful attitude toward our action-decision is

eccentric to say the least, at worst unconscionable. Your disdainful attitude toward this poor creature will eventually pass.”

Nettled by the exotic’s cavalier attitude, Klavik said, “As a being of proven intelligence, what sort of reaction to your crime did you anticipate?”

“Labeling our action-decision criminal amounts to another error on your part.”

“Really? You did promised us,” reminded Klavik, “a detailed account of the assassination and the perpetrator’s rationale for committing the crime, in exchange for my pledge to submit to your so-called ‘research.’ Then you about-faced and order me imprisoned, my associates kidnapped, held hostage.”

“You approach the very pinnacle of irrationality,” argued the exotic, “with your insistence upon bearing an intransigent grudge against this wretched creature. No harm has come to you or your companions, nor is any contemplated.”

“That,” said Klavik with leaden irony, “is the least rational equivocation I’ve ever heard. By no stretch of the imagination can your method of getting what you want be called ‘rational.’ What you’ve done inspires less than zero confidence in any future dealings we might have, and zero sum ‘reassurance.’ Aren’t kidnapping and blackmail considered crimes in Parvo?”

“Your lack of objectivity pertaining to the confluence of events which brought us to this nexus is less rational,” declared the Parvon. “Interpreting our action-decision as criminal amply illustrates your juvenile outlook. Put aside your adolescent morality for the nonce. Learn, if you are able, to adopt the cosmic view. In so doing you should be able to perceive cause and effect with a good deal more clarity.

“Taken one by one,” pursued the exotic, “the incidents you obliquely refer to as ‘criminal’ evolved from sequential, rational inevitabilities. Were you to make a conscious effort to perceive matters as they are, not as you wish them to be, you would perceive that safely sequestering your companions, and the female to whom you have formed an attachment, was by far the most convenient means of overcoming your stubborn reticence to engage in the exercises we are jointly undertaking. Ergo, with Shatterhand the fulcrum, the lever in question was depressed with dispassionate pragmatism, a total absence of malice, in order to ‘get what we wanted,’ as you so picturesquely describe our objective. The ‘crimes’ you accuse us of committing were accomplished with neither onus, nor any intent to do harm. When our exercises are concluded, you and your friends will be reunited, and will to go your separate ways in peace.”

“And that,” said Klavik, “is your concept of ‘detached objectivity’?”

“Undeniably.”

“Pardon me,” refuted Klavik, “but actually it’s the most subjective viewpoint I have yet heard expressed, just another way of saying the end always justifies the means.”

“Ah, but the end always does justify the means. You have restated, in typically loose neohuman terms, a universal truism. The misguided concepts of ‘fairness,’ and ‘morality,’ or most juvenile of all, ‘honor,’ are typical of the faulty idealism espoused by your species. Idealism is null in semantic content, not to mention a matter of never-ending perplexity and wonder to we of Parvo. Subscribing to chimerical, unachievable values is not merely unrealistic, but in our view foolish.”

“Equally perplexing to we poor, wretched neohumans,” contended Klavik drily, “is the absence of Parvon moral values, especially since your moral vacuum is coupled with demonstrably superior intelligence. Most intriguing of all is the question of why you have gone to such extreme, criminal lengths simply to assess my mental capability. What can you, your Syndicate, or for that matter Parvon society in general hope to gain by acquiring such knowledge?”

“More than once,” countered the exotic, “have we defined our reason for conducting the current examinations. It is a matter of unquenchable academic curiosity, nothing more. The cosmic view, Klavik, insists that what there is to be learned, must be learned. None of the varied species dwelling within this, our common sphere of the galaxy, can be of disinterest to we of Parvo who possess inquiring minds.”

Klavik frowned. “Somehow, this celestial objectivity song and dance doesn’t quite mesh with your, uh . . . ‘action-decision’ to kidnap my friends. Parvons are known far and wide as the captains of a far-flung commercial empire, but to the best of my knowledge your kind has shown little if any interest in scholarly intellectual pursuits. Perhaps your ‘unquenchable academic curiosity’ has to do with a prospective increase in sales. Could that be the case?”

The transliterated alien voice remained silent for a few heartbeats. Klavik’s psyche was impacted by an unexpected burble of emotion expanding from the Parvon’s mind. Thinking he might have stumbled upon something of value, he filed away the tidbit for further evaluation.

“Alas,” mused the exotic, “doubt and suspicion are forever the neohuman forte. Your irritable nature is predictably in company with the emotional failings common to all adolescent species. But now, best we leave you to depart and rest your mind.”

“I second the motion,” quipped Klavik, feeling mellow despite the agony in his head only now beginning to subside.

“Yet again,” chastised the exotic, “has our gifted student’s rude attempt at sarcasm fallen flat. Until the morrow, my obstreperous neohuman subject.”

Klavik had to wait for the portal’s halves to slide apart. In the loggia, a quartet of armed proctors came to attention and grouped themselves like graven statues, waiting with programmed android patience to escort him back to his subtly decorated Petite Palais prison.

THIRTY-ONE

Hour after hour, period after period, the instructional give and take continued. Klavik’s proficiency increased steadily, while the severity of the headaches that went hand in glove with the exercises shrank from unbearable to painful, diminished to a bothersome annoyance, and faded to a minor nuisance. During the tenth — was it the eleventh? — session in Shatterhand’s tower suite, his mentor ordered him to abandon verbal dialogue entirely.

They spent hours batting back and forth what the Parvon referred to as “schoolbook exercises,” riffing through complex phrases, alphanumeric sets and equations, stepping up to higher and higher telepathic plateaus that forced Klavik to strain and struggle when it came to furnishing logical completions to the exotic’s increasingly involved mathematical and linguistic statements.

The exercises grew increasingly difficult. Eventually he was directed to try and delve into the Parvon's thought stream at a time when the exotic was not consciously "sending." Dozens of unsuccessful tries proved it to be exceptionally taxing. The exotic admitted that attempting such an advanced form of communication at a mid-stage of instruction was extremely audacious for any neophyte.

Klavik figuratively sweated bullets during the ensuing sessions. In the end, he somehow inveigled his way into the exotic's mind, if only in a brief, intermittent manner.

Making ready to depart from Shatterhand's tower suite at the end of a late afternoon session, the exotic informed him that his precocity had engendered sufficient range and precision, making it no longer necessary for androids to escort him to and from the administrative tower.

The suite in Petite Palais became his diurnal, deluxe prison, where he was subjected to intermittent mental and round-the-clock audiovisual surveillance. His meals were delivered and retrieved by stolid android proctors. The monotony of enforced confinement was relieved only during the invigorating mental give and take sessions he had begun to relish despite the onerous circumstance that inspired them.

He ate and slept. He eventually rid himself of the arm sling in order to gingerly exercise the healing shoulder wound. Putting aside the gulf of cultural and moral differences between himself and the Parvon, he worked with the exotic for many waking hours, and gradually came to appreciate the other's truthfulness about at least one facet of Parvon philosophy. The mental training he was undergoing might be exhausting, but he realized how grossly beneficial it had become.

His mental horizons expanded with each passing session. His proficiency grew by a full order of magnitude, and his insight into the alien intellect widened and broadened, not to mention the insight he gained into the workings of his own mind. He speculated endlessly, but could not imagine what might have prompted the exotic to spend the time and energy necessary to provide intensive mental instruction to someone definitely considered a neohuman 'inferior.' The other's purported rationale for turning teacher — a purely academic interest, so it said — struck him as nonsensical. How could educating a member of some totally foreign species possibly be of value to the exotic, or its distant Syndicate?

The most rankling feature of imprisonment was the continuous audiovisual surveillance, second only to the fact of being held incommunicado. He fell back on the twin shields of professional self-determination and discipline, deciding to adopt the exotic's "cosmic view." With that in mind, he dispassionately analyzed his predicament and every bit as dispassionately arrived at the same inevitable conclusion. It was foolish to fret about a situation over which he had no control. As matters stood, he couldn't afford the luxury of worrying about anything, although the existence of a concealed spiral stairway leading downward from the bed-sitting chamber tantalized him. He briefly entertained the notion of escape, and immediately squelched the notion lest it be intercepted mentally. Even without the Parvon's random telepathic oversight of every breath he drew, every move he made, it would be foolhardy and impractical to try and sneak out of Petite Palais with android watchdogs on duty around the clock. Dismissing the notion of escape as futile, he concentrated on the minutiae of his solitary existence as a means of deflecting the Parvon's intermittent mental scrutiny.

Bored during the intervening hours between psychic instructions, he gradually became aware of each instance when the exotic slyly pulsed his consciousness in order to learn whether he was awake or sleeping, patient or plotting, semi-content or mired in another siege of what the Parvon termed ‘discontent.’

* * *

On either the fifteenth or sixteenth evening of his incarceration, a pair of armed android proctors entered as usual to collect his supper tray. When they left, he felt enough confidence in his burgeoning mental prowess to dare a tentative probe into the subterranean vault. The exotic’s unruffled thought stream indicated passivity, or at least nulled activity. The self-styled “poor creature” was off the air so to speak. He stealthily withdrew, pondered his mentor’s unprecedented state until the truth dawned: the wormlike exotic was either asleep, or indulging in an alien equivalent of somnolent rest.

Reflecting on the discovery and its ramifications, a puckish inspiration brought a faint smile to his lips. Summoning newborn psychic energies, he conjured and projected a vivid mental image of Kraan’s grand battle fleet poised circum-Parvo, preparing to loose a planet-razing strike.

In crescent phase, the exotic’s distant homeworld bulged roundly, a rumbling planet targeted by the weaponry of Kraan’s orbiting first-line starcruisers. The system’s primary, a blue-white giant of high bolometric magnitude, caused a dazzle point of brilliance to be reflected from the planet’s methane-rich hydrosphere. Coordinated to the millisecond, the starcruisers salvoed in a planetwide time-on-target strike. Parvo’s darkened limb erupted with six dozen flashing brilliants that swelled cancerously, chewing their way across the visible hemisphere like angry sheet lightning to eventually join in a titanic planetary holocaust.

Klavik’s mind exploded under the exotic’s vituperative riposte. *Desist! One must crawl before one walks, walk before one can run.*

Tit for tat, thought Klavik, his senses reeling under the violent mental onslaught. *How does it feel to experience another’s nightmare?*

Your intrusion was rude and foolish. Never disturb our solitude again.

So even Parvon super-beings require rest.

All organisms require cyclic rest and repair. Now begone!

Exhilarated, Klavik broke the mental connection. He paced the confines of his decorous prison, and a thrilling notion began to take form, instantly followed by a stab of panic. The uncertain dread of having inadvertently alerted the exotic made him blot the tentative scheme in near panic. Fearing the worst, he envisioned a kaleidoscopic jumble of inconsequentials — an image of the items scattered across his desk in the homeworld, Ramyn’s limpid hazel eyes, a replay of oddments of conversation with Kurani, Victor Chatham and other members of the holovision troupe. Hoping the dangerous moment had passed unnoticed, he probed delicately, withdrew immediately. The exotic had apparently returned to dormancy, hibernation, whatever term best described its periodic rest. Although far from certain, he felt that his mental probe had gone undetected.

Sometime later he again pulsed the subterranean chamber — a furtive mental peek. The exotic’s condition seemed unchanged.

How long did Parvon worms sleep, remain dormant, or whatever they did? Minutes, hours? Some question, that. Safest, perhaps, would be to scope the exotic's sleep intervals, and then go for broke once he had the cycle down pat. But that might not work to his advantage. It had to be an impromptu, spur-of-the-moment thing. He was too wired, far too hyper over the looming opportunity, to plan with anything resembling thoroughness. But, yes; it might be possible to time the exotic's sleep periods and awakenings, and . . . And what? Antsy as he was over the prospect of escape, the notion was immensely stimulating.

Accompanying the potential method of deliverance had come a spontaneous revelation, an intimation that excess planning could easily kill his single chance. It would have to be extemporaneous, he decided, and then further decided that it might as well be now instead of perhaps never.

* * *

He yawned, stretched languidly, a performance for the benefit of unseen android watchdogs. As on all other evenings at about this time, he rotated his healing shoulder for minutes, undressed with unhurried movements and carelessly draped his tunic and slacks over the arm of a bedside chair. Shuffling into the autolave, he attended to business, took his time washing his hands and ultrasonically cleaning his teeth, came out and drank a quarter-liter of water from the suite's refrigerator. Extinguishing the lights by voice command, he pulled back the coverlet in darkness and crawled into the hydraulic bed. Once again yawning expansively, he shifted about as if seeking a comfortable position, knowing that even in darkness he was subjected to continuous audiovisual scrutiny by the nanotech optical eye concealed in the overhead light fixture focused on the bed for voyeuristic reasons. If caught in the furtive act he was about to engage in, he would surely receive a mental slap on the wrist from the Parvon.

There had to be some way to circumvent or deflect the video scan, or at least moderate its effectiveness. After lying motionless for endless minutes, breathing deeply, rhythmically, he slowly drew both foam-filled pillows from beneath his head, dragged them beneath the coverlet a few decimeters at a time and arranged them end-to-end alongside his torso.

He lay there breathing steadily, audibly for a second eternity. Slipping from the bed very slowly, he let himself down, lying prone at the bedside, and then belly-crawled across the carpet. Crouching behind the chair, he pulled down his tunic and slacks, dressing awkwardly. Dragging his boots, he eased across the carpet, belly-crawling to the near wall. Silently scraping a fingernail along the paneling, barely touching the wood, he felt for the edge of the concealed door. Encountering a minute crack, he rose and traced the nearly imperceptible slit upward, across the upper section of paneling, and down the far side to the baseboard.

Some sort of spring-loaded mechanism had to exist, something that would allow the section of paneling to be opened from either within or without. He used a thumb to experimentally press and prod here and there without success. Determined to find a way to get the panel open, he systematically touched the crack at its lowermost corner and again worked his way up, over and down the other side by feel, all the while pushing against the door's inner edges.

Nothing happened.

He doggedly started over, again going through the process of pressing the paneling in shorter increments along its outer edges. Again disappointed, he sat back on his haunches,

thinking. On impulse, he pressed here and there along the coved baseboard. The section of paneling opened with a metallic click that sounded deafening in the stillness.

Silence thundered in his ears. Crouched immobile, he held his breath, letting seconds tick by. No footfalls pounded in the hallway, nor did the door to the bed-sitting chamber slide open. Breathing openmouthed for silence, he slipped through the black opening, gingerly entered the cramped monk's hole by feel, and donned his boots. When his left boot touched the edge of the first descending riser, he turned back, pulled the hidden section of paneling toward him, but did not let it click shut.

Feeling his way downward in Stygian darkness one curving riser at a time, he twice bumped his head on invisible corners. The spiral stair was no more than shoulder wide, claustrophobic even when lighted, and curled back tightly on itself. He was trying to estimate if he had reached ground level when his outstretched hand touched a solid obstacle. He ran questing fingers up and down, left and right. Walls were on either side, a smooth ceiling overhead. He had either reached an exit door or a dead end, but a hidden stairway leading nowhere made little sense. It had to be a door.

Tapping lightly here and there, he searched for some means of opening a door he could not see. Without warning, it swung wide, revealing a dimly silhouetted figure.

“Jem . . . ?”

“Shh-h-h, not so loud,” whispered Klavik. “The subject's a light sleeper.”

“How did you get inside? I've been on watch two hours, and no one has —”

Klavik drove the stiffened fingers of his good hand into the android's solar plexus. The proctor chuffed explosively, doubled over. Seizing the android by his ears caused a sharp twinge in his injured shoulder. He twisted the other's head violently, doing what had to be done quickly, without remorse. Too much was on the line to let the unfortunate android regain consciousness and blow the whistle. He relieved the unmoving proctor of his hand laser, snatching it from the holster, and dragged the body into the cramped alcove at the foot of the hidden stairwell. Pushing the door closed, he found himself in a narrow, low-ceilinged passageway; from what he could see, it spanned the entire rear of Petite Palais.

Left or right — a coin toss. He padded silently to the left, noted in passing a succession of identical featureless, narrow doors, each presumably leading to a hidden stairway. He was uncomfortably aware that the passageway was too confined for a hand-to-hand encounter. He was armed now, but laser fire would immediately draw fatal attention.

The manually operated door at the far end of the passageway was intended for utilitarian android use. Hoping minimal surveillance took place at night, purloined laser weapon in hand, he inched the door open a crack.

A bank of flat-panel video monitors in the dimly lit room displayed fuzzy, green-haloed images; second from the end was the image of his coverlet in the bed-sitting chamber. He noted that his artful pillow arrangement beneath the coverlet did not look very convincing. A pair of listless androids watched for signs of activity in the penthouse suite and other rooms under surveillance.

Silently pulling the door all but closed to keep it from latching, he trotted to the opposite end of the long passageway and struck gold, or thought he had. The surveillance room here was

deserted; the only lighted video panel displayed the image of a nubile android woman caught up in the lusty embrace of an aging, hormonally precocious guest.

He slipped inside, stopped short when the outer door swung inward and he came face to face with a husky proctor. Klavik let the laser weapon drop from his hand and flung himself at the android, who had whirled, lips parted to shout a warning. Ignoring the flare of pain in his healing shoulder, his balled fists savaged the proctor's kidney area, a punishment so excruciating that his victim was unable to utter a sound. Clapping his hands over the proctor's ears, he snapped the unit's neck, the sound like a clutch of dry sticks breaking.

The effort sent burning pain through his still-sore shoulder. Dispatching technically innocent beings was wrongful, yet necessary. He used the fireman's tote to carry the corpse along the corridor, counting doors as he passed. Opening the one from which he had recently emerged, he crammed his latest victim atop the first, and jogged back to the anteroom, where he scooped up the fallen hand laser, furtively opened the exit door.

A picturesque, night-shrouded lane ran behind Petite Palais, with no one in sight in either direction. Leaving the building, he edged along a flower-bordered path, darted a glance around the corner. Across the way, a single figure was moving through the lamp lit plaza. Anyone in a hurry would attract attention; he held his gait to that of a casual stroll, making his way toward the outskirts of the Village. No guests were about in the wee hours. Reaching a point beyond Shatterhand's administrative tower, a pair of android attendants crossed his path. The units greeted him with polite head dips, paying only superficial heed as he casually strolled onward.

THIRTY-TWO

Judging from his prior travels in the high-velocity tube transit system, Klavik estimated his objective, Eden's southern hemisphere space terminal, to be no more than eight or ten kilometers south of the Village. Typical of the resort world, where no item of infrastructure was permitted to interfere with the scenic delight of guests, the terminal was conveniently tucked out of sight beyond a range of low, forested hills. Ground-to-orbit shuttles were required to rely on power-costly nullified gravity technology for lift-off and descent, and reaction motor ignition permitted only at an altitude correlated to the specific decibel output of a vehicle's thrusters, thus virtually eliminating prohibitive noise and atmospheric contamination.

He approached the greenbelt surrounding the Village, and shrank into the shadows to take stock. The only figures visible — a half-dozen android groundskeepers — took advantage of an absence of guests and were busily replanting flower beds. The slideramp leading down to the gravity-vacuum tube station was somewhere off to his right. Beyond the tube way entrance, the illuminated shaft of Shatterhand's tower soared above nearer structures like an admonitory finger.

He nixed the idea of fleeing via tube; it might leave him open to exposure for a shorter time, but would also pose far more risk. Were he to enter the station and board a capsule, Eden's omnipresent surveillance systems would pinpoint his whereabouts, and he could be trapped in a blind warren with no escape path.

A towering sense of urgency at odds with the need for caution, he realized that before the exotic regained awareness it would be vital for him to reach the space terminal, board *Kolodaan's* grounded pinnacle and alert the phalanx of Royal Elite Guardsmen stationed aboard in the event of just such an emergency. Seconds after the exotic roused, his escape from Petite Palais would be discovered; a millisecond later, the telepathic slug would deduce his objective and the chase would be on.

Unfortunately, no other destination was conceivable; only at the space terminal could he hope to obtain assistance. He considered slipping into an underground garage, commandeering an electric emergency vehicle and scooting out to the terminal overland. But such a move also heightened the chance of premature discovery. Faced with a critical decision, he stayed in the shadows beneath a flowering jacaranda, weighing the alternatives while keeping an eye on the android gardeners. Haste was essential; the hours of darkness were fleeting, and the cover of night was something desperately needed. On the other hand, the likelihood of being spotted and apprehended would quadruple if he were to undertake the potential complications involved in subduing one or more android attendants and stealing an electric vehicle.

What to do? He deliberated, chided himself for indecision, and engaged in a reflexive debate that solved nothing other than exacerbating the dilemma. Being irresolute could prove fatal; action-decision, to borrow his mentor's term, was the paramount requisite. He made up his mind hoof it cross-country. It would be the slowest, but by the same token safest course.

Bending double, he skirted a gently curved brick walkway, dodging from cover to cover, and skulked bent over between trees and shrubs, keeping as much foliage as possible between himself and the android landscapers working under portable lights that no doubt degraded their night vision.

A tall aromatic hedge walled off the greenbelt's perimeter, masking the strands of a cattle fence that might or might not be electrified. Leery of touching the wire and possibly giving himself away, he circled along the sculpted hedge until coming to a huge live oak. Gnarled branches overspread the fence, but scaling the massive trunk proved difficult. Inhibited by the sore shoulder, he leaped high in Eden's gentle gravity, caught a thick branch, one-handedly pulled himself up with an effort, and crawled out on a zigzag, tapering limb.

Out on a limb, came the inane thought; it was true literally as well as figuratively. Tucking the laser weapon under his belt, he eased from the limb, hung by his good arm for an instant, and dropped lithely into darkness, landing in the grassy meadow.

He began jogging southward. Crossing eight or ten clicks of open pastureland should require no more than two hours, maximum. Did that much time remain before sunrise? It was difficult to estimate, but then what really mattered was how long the Parvon would stay dormant, not when Eden's primary would peek over the horizon.

Hesitant to increase his pace after stumbling into a cluster of shaggy cattle bedded down for the night, he wished he'd thought to relieve the dead android of his holster as well as the hand laser. The relatively heavy weapon dangled awkwardly in his fist, inhibiting his arm swing, making his gait jerky. Loping slightly off balance due to the stride-hindering weapon, he thought about chucking it and scrubbed the notion; it was something he might need.

Several times he skidded on cow flop, nearly falling once. He jogged onward, ignoring the barn smell fouling his boots.

* * *

Off to the left, distant, scattered lights illuminated the buildings of a guest ranch, agristation or whatever. He veered away, giving the farm complex a wider berth. Persephone, the larger of Eden's moons, rose as he panted across the open pastureland. Pale moonlight limned the distant hills in faint, silvery outline; it was offensive to Klavik despite the fact that it made it easier to distinguish occasional groups of clustered cattle. A quarter kilometer farther on he applauded the dim radiance for revealing a cattle fence he would have plowed straight into with only starlight to guide him.

He halted, went down on one knee to let his breathing become more regular, and tried to invent the simplest means of getting over the fence without touching a possibly electrified strand. He chastised himself for muddy thinking; the uppermost strand was less than two meters above the meadow grass. In Eden, where the acceleration of gravity was constant and forgiving, he was not kneeling at the bottom of Kraan's massive gravity well.

Checking to make sure the hand laser's safety was engaged, he tossed the weapon over the fence, moved back a few paces, took two quick steps and dove headfirst over the topmost strand of wire, careful to roll on his uninjured shoulder.

An animal snort alerted him to a reason for a fence. A shaggy bull humped to its feet ten meters distant. Indistinct in the moonlight, the beast pawed the grass, chuffing and snorting in a display of contempt for trespassers.

Klavik scrambled through the grass searching for the hand laser, relieved when his fingers closed over the weapon. He had no desire to dispatch the bull, but neither could he afford to play dodge and scamper games out in the open, away from cover. Sidling around the animal one slow step at a time, he flipped off the safety, switched the laser to its lowest power setting. Ducking close to the ground, he let go a sweeping, quarter-second burst that caught the taurine roadblock just above the hooves.

The scorched bull bellowed indignantly. Klavik trotted away, head turned to keep the animal in view, hoping the brief laser flash had not been seen from afar.

Reaching a gentle rise at the base of the foothills, he repeated the earlier performance, diving over what he hoped would be the final cattle barrier. Huffing uphill toward the line of trees, he slowed his pace when the moonlight dimmed, snuffed out by a curtain of cloud rolling across Persephone's bright three-quarter disc. Eden's nicety of weather control was a factor he hadn't considered. Cloud cover presaged the diurnal predawn shower, which meant first light was not very far off. The notion of impending dawn spurred him. *Yin and yang*, he thought, increasing his pace trotting uphill. A little bitter always seemed to mingle with each dollop of sweet.

Revealing dawn light might not be imminent, but neither was the space terminal that close. His lope turned into a hard uphill run. Panting, he decided a rain shower might provide a different but welcome variety of cover, and slowed to a fast walk on a steep, tree-clad slope shrouded in near palpable gloom. Wending his way between the boles of towering evergreens, he emerged in the hillcrest saddle and again broke into a fast trot.

His destination came in view. Panting from exertion, he sagged against the bole of a medium-sized conifer just as raindrops began whispering in the branches overhead. Below the forested hillside stretched a flatland studded with parked ground-to-orbit shuttles of one

planetary origin or another. Easily the largest ship in view, what could be seen of *Kolodaan's* pinnace resembled the upper thirds of a football plunked down in a widely separated forest of more slender candles. Squatting near the floodlit hardstand's periphery, the pinnace was isolated from other ground-to-orbit vehicles by a hundred or more meters of barren concrete.

Resting after his trek, he bent and massaged his calves. The terminal's stark, utilitarian aspect, sharply at odds with Eden's otherwise recherché elegance, consisted of a sea of reinforced concrete stretching away in the drizzle dotted with shuttles, elephantine propellant vans, cargo-handling flatbeds, ponderous vehicle-spotting trak-truks and the like. Eden's southern hemisphere port of entry presented the usual dingy, about-to-be-used but presently useless aspect characterizing service equipment exposed to the weather, indifferent abuse, and the endemic tedium of space terminals everywhere.

Klavik wiped the dampness from his face. Hustled downhill, eager to board the pinnace and learn whether orbital surveillance had determined where the hostages had been taken, he intended to do something about the kidnapping, something drastic and massive.

Halfway down the slope, a sunburst of consternation fragmented in his mind.

Foolish one! You failed to heed our warning. Your impetuosity places your entire venture in dire jeopardy.

Below him, as if in a vision from one of the induced nightmares, ice formed in Klavik's veins as squads of armed android proctors erupted from the space terminal's central underground complex. Spreading out in a loose circle, the units interdicted *Kolodaan's* pinnace with quasi-military efficiency.

THIRTY-THREE

Klavik swore softly, frustrated in a way that made all previous frustrations pale to insignificance, and sank down on the damp turf. Here he was, sitting on a rainy hillside with the ogive prow of the pinnace in plain sight, but he was hopelessly barred from gaining access to it. If only there was a way to communicate with the crew, some method of alerting the phalanx of Royal Elite Guardsmen Kurani had insisted upon stationing aboard.

Footsore, he ignored the pelting rain, leaned against the bole of a tree and put his mind to work while gazing steadfastly at the starcruiser's unattainable pinnace. Trying to get past a cordon of android proctors would be futile, hence the primary objective would be to extend his hard-won freedom as long as possible, perhaps long enough to use his ingenuity, invent some unforeseen edge. But, what edge? For that matter, did an "edge" exist? Dawn came swiftly in Eden's sub-tropical climes. The automated weather control schedule specified clearing by sunrise in order to avoid inconveniencing the resort world's super-wealthy clientele. A gray wash born seaward, beyond the abbreviated roof of cloud, told him the rain shower would begin to dwindle and dissipate before the system's golden primary peeked over the horizon directly behind his tree.

The dawn meant exposure, and exposure meant inevitable recapture. Or could sunrise somehow be turned from a deficit into an advantage? He thought about it at length, unable to imagine how it could become serendipitous, how it could play a role in alleviating his

predicament. No, wishful thinking solved nothing. His frustration doubled, redoubled. What would be possible other than to passively await recapture? A defensive approach, he realized, would tend to worsen the dilemma. Better to confront the quandary head on than shrink from it, and attack it aggressively. The problem grew more immediate with every passing moment. Therefore the solution, should one exist, also had to be immediate. Nothing would be gained by wasting time planning his next move. He would have forget planning, and just *do* it.

But do what?

Concede defeat, Klavik. The harsh imperative crashed into his mind. *Your destruction will serve naught. Surrender and your trespass will be forgiven.*

Mental contact with his nemesis jerked him to his feet. Trotting back uphill, he circled the saddle between rises until coming upon a spot where the tip of the pinnacle's floodlit prow was visible over the treetops. The watch officer on duty would surely have roused his legate when a small army of androids charged out and cordoned the vehicle. He searched for some indication of change high on the ship's gleaming flank, and was shortly gratified to see a small recon panel slide open. With squads of androids congregated about the vessel for whatever reason, the crewmen had likely as not gone to general quarters. A scanning head poked through the recon aperture and began nutating back and forth, up and down.

Good lads! The Guards legate in command was on his toes. Yet scheme as he might, devising a method of alerting the ship eluded him. An urgent need to be succored drove him toward a fit of desperation, but there was no obvious way a rescue could take place. Any attempt he made would mean throwing himself into the arms of several dozen android proctors.

Your situation is hopeless, was the exotic's discouraging summation. *Give it up. Attempting to flee would be useless.*

Unheeding of the distraction, he kept his thought stream turbulent, his mental focus dodging from one fleeting topic to another. Waiting tensely and indecisively, sudden movement caught his eye where no movement should have been: below him on the hillside.

Klavik shook off the onrush of panic. A row of winking lights worked their way upward from the pastureland he had fled across in darkness. At the same moment, roughly half the android proctors interposed between his hillside vantage and the pinnacle began moving uphill in his general direction, trapping him between the pincers of a two-jawed vise.

* * *

Unwilling to wait quietly and let himself be taken, he gave in to a rare fit of impulsive behavior and jogged off along the line of hills, moving at right angles to the pursuers closing in on either side. After running no more than a dozen meters, he halted. Postponing the inevitable would be irrational. As the exotic had suggested, there was no chance of evading or outdistancing the pursuit. The only course would be to *think* his way out of the quandary.

A deadline has been established. You will be allotted ten standard minutes in which to surrender. Squander this final opportunity, and you will be destroyed. Take heed, Klavik. This poor creature does not indulge in idle threats.

Miserable worm! riposted Klavik. A tentative inspiration made him null his thoughts. It was not a good answer, and in fact dangerous, perhaps infeasible since it courted disaster at the hands of his own people. Shifting his thoughts rapidly from this to that, he strove to misdirect the exotic's incisive mental scrutiny.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately as time would tell, doing what he had in mind involved climbing a tree. Choosing an evergreen soaring strategically on the verge of the downslope, he shoved the hand laser beneath his belt, crouched low and leaped straight up in Eden's moderate gravity. Catching the lowermost branch, he disregarded the jolt of pain in his injured shoulder, chinned himself despite additional twinges and gingerly stretched upward to grasp a higher limb. Pulling himself up ladder wise, he scrambled to find secure footholds.

The rain had ceased, but the fragrantly needled evergreen foliage was dewy, the limbs wet, deceptively slippery. The cloudbank had receded, programmed like everything else in surreal Eden to roll back out to sea on cue. Klavik pulled himself higher, clambering from flaring branch to drooping limb, his palms sticky with resin. The ogive prow of the pinnace appeared between layered branches. Balancing himself on a not completely trustworthy limb, he leaned back against the trunk.

Four minutes Klavik. Your extinction will cause this poor creature immense distress. Surrender at once, have done with this derring-go adventure.

The amoral worm had obviously locked on to his mental frequency. A single inadvertent visual slip would give away his precarious perch. Bending his gaze on the tree's bark, he concentrated on its texture, blocking all else from his mind. The sky grew steadily lighter, but did so incredibly slowly.

Three minutes, announced the exotic. You force us to do something we have no wish to do. Give yourself up.

Leaning outward, he searched the sky behind the tree, trying to estimate how long it would be until sunrise. The receding clouds hung like a somber cloak far out over the Southern Sea. He resumed a diligent study of the tree trunk.

Two minutes, Klavik.

Spotting movement beneath him, he froze against the tree's slender trunk. A quartet of androids from the posse that had tracked him all the way from the Village prowled the forest floor, laser rifles at high port, searching for him in the predawn gloaming. Having discarded their night goggles, a pair of proctors turned round and round as they walked, scanning the wooded slopes but not bothering to lift their eyes. He watched the androids until they were out of sight, heard the calls of others nearby.

A single minute remains. Turn yourself in, or perish. The choice is yours.

Minute by minute the sky grew steadily lighter. His thoughts flicked from random item to inconsequential concept to idle vision until he was gratified to see a crimson froth born beneath the distant, receding cloudbank. The first sunlight touched the pinnace, turning its burnished ogive prow to silvery flame.

Klavik tugged the hand laser from his belt. A minute or two more, and Eden's primary would be shining directly in the eyes of the android squads below on the flatland, cordoning the pinnace. Time to act! He began to appreciate how touch-and-go the potential solution would actually be. He could easily end up charred to a crisp in a flaming tree. Kraan firecontrolmen, drilled to react instantly to any threat, were trained to retaliate to any form of what might be considered an attack. No Royal Elite Guardsman worth his salt would hesitate to return fire if and when fired upon.

Thanks to his encounter with the shaggy bull, the hand laser was still turned to its lowest power setting. He thumbed the beam-width control to 'needle,' carefully balanced his weight on the tree's sagging limb, leaned his torso against a branch. Sighting the weapon at the pinnacle's scanning eye, wondering if the cone of divergence would necessitate perfect aim, or whether short pulses of lased energy would overload and burn out the sensor head before anything cogent could be interpreted.

Win or lose, there would be no second chance. Hoping the crewmen realized they were not under attack, but rather being zapped by friendly fire, he took a firm grip on his nerves, depressed the firing stud repetitively and tapped out the rehearsed message:

K-L-A-V-I-K-H-E-R-E-M-A-Y-D-A-Y

His breath caught in his throat when a midships weapons port slammed open and the parabolic emission bell of a laser cannon turned like a malignant eye, looking directly at his tree in full deflection. In extremis, he waited, heart pounding, to be incinerated.

Drawing a ragged breath, he steadied the hand laser, tapped out a repeat of the message, adding:

C-O-M-E-G-E-T-M-E

He and the laser cannon stared at one another for an eternity lasting all of three or four seconds.

He nearly fell out of the tree with elation when the pinnacle's main hatch rumbled open, the access ramp extended to the hardstand like an impudent tongue.

Clad in light, power-assisted body armor, the entire phalanx of Royal Elite Guardsmen spilled from the pinnacle at double-time; behind them, an armored null-grav heavy weapons sled floated down the ramp, crossed the tarmac off to one side, careful to stay clear of the guardsmen. Programmed to fearlessness, impossible to intimidate, the interdicting android proctors turned in concert, faced the threat and stood their ground.

Instantly engaged in a no-holds-barred mental battle, remaining conscious was all Klavik could do, or for that matter remaining sane. In a fit of vengeful fury, the exotic besieged him with devastating force, each mental barrage threatening to tear his psyche to shreds. Preoccupied with the mental assault, he saw only the start of a very one-sided firefight taking place below at the space terminal.

He felt the tree sway beneath him, dropped the laser weapon and seized the nearest limb in a death grip. Embroiled in an unrelenting mental maelstrom, he dimly perceived the null-grav weapons sled rise and force its way alongside his perch. Accompanied by the snap and crackle of breaking branches, the tree swayed as the sled edged in toward the trunk.

Armored gauntlets seized his outstretched arms, dragged him aboard.

THIRTY-FOUR

The android proctors, grievously mismatched against the vastly superior firepower and iron discipline of a Kraan Royal Elite Guards armored phalanx, were scythed down like a standing field of wheat. Carrying Klavik toward the pinnacle, the sled circled, passing over one side of the battleground. Eden's southern hemisphere space terminal had become a scene of

carnage. Dazed by the exotic's relentless mental assault, Klavik paid scant heed to the dead and wounded androids littering the hardstand. A few scattered proctors still returned fire here and there, but the encounter had effectively ended before it began. The sled halted twice to mop up stragglers, ravaging the pockets of resistance.

The sled floated up the pinnacle's access ramp, passed through the enlarged military airlock into the service deck. When the hatch rumbled shut, the exotic's mental assault diminished noticeably. Feeling wobbly, guardsmen helped Klavik disembark. "*Kolodaan's* tracking record on the airborne vehicle," he muttered to the officer who approached. "Is it available?"

"In the database, sir." The subaltern looked puzzled. "The skipper was ready to pipe the data to your quarters groundside, but when he didn't hear from you he —"

"Order the data brought on line. I want to view it after I talk to the *Kolodaan*."

"Aye, aye, sir. May I ask the nature of . . ? Beg pardon; are you feeling poorly?"

If you only knew, thought Klavik. Groggy from desperately fending off the Parvon's incessant mental battering, he waved off further questions, told the subaltern he wanted to go belowdecks to a vidicom terminal in the power compartment. "Have an encrypted uplink opened to *Kolodaan*. Order the comm rating on duty to stand by to record."

"At your orders, sir. But there's a terminal here in the service area if you want to —"

Not now," Klavik said brusquely. "Do it smartly, Mister. Patch me through to the uplink as soon as I get belowdecks."

He soon learned his guess had been correct. Enclosed in shielding not all that dense, the pinnacle's mini-fusion service chamber further attenuated the brunt of the Parvon's mental barrage. The vicious mental slings and arrows coming his way faded to a background susurrant, a sporadic mental noise level like a distant, partly garbled communications transmission.

Klavik closed and dogged the power compartment hatch; it helped a bit more. Not acknowledging the questioning look of the nuclear engineering officer, he stepped across the deck matting to the energized vidicom panel, waiting impatiently until an image of the starcruiser's grizzled commanding officer condensed in the display, his features wavering slightly due to signal encryption.

"Klavik here, sir, alerting you to a critical emergency. His Royal Highness and Prime Minister Kurani have been abducted, and are being held hostage."

Marshal Kurani's former spacefaring crony blanched. "Abducted by whom?"

"Those who operate this place."

"Where are they being held?"

"I hope to learn the answer shortly, after reviewing the tracking data on an airborne vehicle that departed the Village periods ago. There is no way to be sure, but I have reason to believe the prince and PM are in no immediate danger. The local unfriendlies act as tools of Eden's controlling syndicate, and at least one exotic is in residence here. The PM vetted me to order your compliance with a Class I Directive."

His features solemn, the skipper's image wavered. "Say on, Mr. Klavik. I'll have the ship transition, alert Kraan via ultraband?"

"Negative, sir. In the Prime Minister's name, I order you to stay out of hyperspace."

“Pardon my presumption,” said the other stiffly. “*Kolodaan* stands ready to record a Class I Directive.”

“In my view,” said Klavik, “an overwhelming probability exists that the hyperspace vessel you’ve monitored is of Parvon origin. As I said, a representative of Parvo, possibly one of their syndicate officials, has apparently been here on the ground for some time. *Kolodaan* is directed to maintain general quarters watch-on-watch until Prime Minister Kurani or I rescind the directive, which is to be carried out at all costs. *All* costs, Captain, up to and including the loss of your vessel if it comes to that. Maximum force is hereby authorized. *Kolodaan* is to go weapons-free as of now, now, now! You are authorized to react and defeat any attempt by the vessel in hyperspace to transition into the normal continuum and succor the Parvon in residence. Do you copy, sir?”

“Class I Directive acknowledged and recorded, Mr. Klavik.” The captain turned aside and began issuing orders. “Any idea what type and magnitude of firepower we can expect from the opposition?”

“Negative, sir. I doubt whether any shipboard data exists on Parvon armaments or tactics?”

“I’m aware of none,” said the captain. “To the best of my knowledge, no exotic species has thus far engaged neohuman forces. I will have my tactical officer research the onboard database to be sure, but I’m fairly certain it will be useless.”

“Understood, Captain.”

“Anything else, Mr. Klavik?”

“Again invoking the PM’s authority, per a second Class I Directive the pinnacle’s commanding legate is ordered to move ship and interdict the Village and underground chamber where the Parvon is known to be holed up. *Kolodaan* is to hold station on-orbit. Absent any form of hindrance, I believe a reasonable chance exists of finding and liberating the captives.”

“*Kolodaan* acknowledges the second Class I Directive,” assured the captain. “If the vessel in hyperspace pokes its nose into the Einsteinian continuum, it will be hit with everything we’ve got. I take it you are going in search of the hostages. Do you require backup, Mr. Klavik? If so, the reserve Guards can be dispatched groundside along with a pair of self-propelled heavy weapons sleds.”

“Negative, Captain. For the moment, slaughtering innocent guests and android sheep would only worsen the situation.”

“Copy that, Mr. Klavik. Luck to you! May the First Principle guide your steps.”

“Thank you, sir. I promise to keep you informed. Klavik, out.”

* * *

The starcruiser’s orbital tracking data, though stale by a score of periods, graphically depicted the flight of Shatterhand’s private verticraft. The revelation heartened Klavik immensely, forcing him to assume the hostages had been aboard. If so, the odds seemed favorable that Shatterhand would have little reason to move his captives a second time. Ultra high-resolution optical pix showed the distinctive white verticraft airborne over the Southern Sea, touching down beside a pair of green-striped emergency airbuses parked on the greenery-studded quay of a mid-ocean undersea habitat. The surface marina, snugly protected by a floating breakwater, harbored a collection of sleek pleasure craft.

He opened a vidicom channel to the conning bridge, offered his compliments to the pinnacle's commanding officer, and invited him to meet below decks. When he appeared, the officer seemed puzzled over the rescuee's peculiar infatuation with the ship's power compartment. Ignoring the officer's quizzical expression, Klavik asked if curvilinear coordinates had been established for the ocean site where Shatterhand's aircar had landed

An affirmative nod. "Lat and lon are locked-in automatically, Mr. Klavik. This particular subsea complex, one of several habitats in those waters, is about two hundred and fifty clicks offshore from Eden's —"

"Later," interrupted Klavik. "Have you any data on the habitat itself? Its layout, how deep beneath the surface it's situated, staff complement, guests in residence, anything like that?"

"Not . . . a lot," admitted the other. "I was curious, and monitored the tracking data as it was being recorded. I also uploaded a holovision blurb from the Village — a come-on touting the ocean spa as a haven for marine vacationers. Judging from the soft-sell data, it's a medium-sized undersea structure, ten or twelve meters below the waves, perched on the peak of a seamount. The video showed it to be a deluxe submarine playground for scuba divers, with an ingenious closed-loop ecology system."

Preoccupied, still partially engaged in deflecting the exotic's weakened mental thrusts, Klavik's attention had strayed. "An ecology what?"

"A clever installation, sir," the officer told him. "It eliminates a fusion power source by making use of differential temperature gradients between recirculated cold water lifted from the seabed, and tropical surface water. Refrigerant gas cycles through the cold isothermal water at the seamount's pelagic base and gets pumped topside, where it expands when warmed by the surface temperature and drives turbine generators. Pumping up cold water from the deep also brings up rich bottom nutrients. Marine life flourishes in and around the —"

"Thank you." For some reason annoyed by the unanticipated lecture, Klavik tempered his response. "I hope to learn more about the habitat, but now there's something else on my mind. Are you aware of the directives I just issued?"

"Aye, sir. You ordered my ship to sit on top of the, uh, whatever-it-is."

"Correct. Now hear a Class I Directive, and remember: due to the emergency, I speak with the voice of Prime Minister Kurani. Once the Guards phalanx arrives back aboard ship, you are directed to light up and transport the entire force to the Village. The guardsmen are directed to disembark there and interdict the site.

"But that comes place later," continued Klavik, not pausing for breath. "Right this minute, I want you to get the ship's navigation computer humming and calculate a ballistic maneuver. Lift off on null-grav per local regulations, then light up and vector into a suborbital trajectory that will take us directly over the targeted subsea habitat. The pinnacle is to make one full swing around the planet for a look-see and then, depending upon whether or not the white verticraft is parked on the quay, I mean to use a parafoil and leave the ship in flight."

"In midair, sir?" The CO frowned. "That could get pretty dicey; the underjets might —"

"I'm aware of the risk. Now listen closely. As soon as I'm away, the pinnacle is to return shoreward and ground on the mainland per the directive, as close to Eden's administrative tower as possible. The tower is impossible to miss; it's the Village's only high-rise structure."

“Whew!” The CO was beginning to think Klavik might have a need for psychiatric counseling. “Ship’s fairly heavy, sir. We’ll make one helluva hole landing near the, uh . . .”

“This is not the occasion,” Klavik said impatiently, “to lose sleep over property damage. A greenbelt encircles the Village. Touch down in the pastureland, and your principal worry will be scorching a few beeves. The crux of your assignment will be to use any and all means at your disposal—hear me, *any and all* means—to forcibly repulse any attempt by the Parvon to leave the tower, or by the suspected unfriendlies orbiting in hyperspace to effect its rescue. Is the directive clear?”

“Clear, sir. How will we recognize the, uh . . .?”

“An exotic alien, its natural environment is a hydrosphere, the major constituent of which is liquid methane. It cannot survive in an oxygen-rich atmosphere, and would have to emerge, if it chooses to emerge, in a bioregenerative capsule of some kind. You are to attack anything attempting to enter or leave the tower that remotely resembles such a capsule. Any questions?”

The officer most likely had several dozen questions in mind. If so, he kept them to himself.

“Good! Now make it march.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Exhibiting disciplined energy, the CO hustled out of the power compartment.

Klavik closed his eyes and resumed the task deflect the alien’s weakened yet omnipresent mental barrage.

THIRTY-FIVE

Though not an entirely adequate self-defense hideaway, Klavik stayed in the power compartment fighting the exotic’s attenuated mental harassment until the pinnacle lifted off.

Ascending under nulled gravitation, the weakening telepathic barrage gradually diminished, ceasing abruptly when the ship’s mini-fusion torch thundered to life. He made his way up to the conning deck, heavy-footed under acceleration, hoping the Parvon would bite on the ploy and assume the pinnacle was vectoring up toward rendezvous with the orbiting starcruiser.

The pinnacle arched upward, arcing out over the Southern Sea toward the fringes of atmosphere. Klavik reached the communications alcove abaft the conning bridge just as the thrusters died. In suborbital ballistic trajectory, microgravity enveloped the ship momentarily until pseudo-gravity took over.

“Target’s coming in view, sir,” announced a rating belted in place before the communications console.

Klavik peered over the spaceman’s shoulder. The surface quay atop the undersea complex looked as it had in the hi-res orbital pix, except relative proximity rendered superior image definition. The white rectangle of Shatterhand’s verticraft was still parked on the quay alongside two larger emergency vehicles. He studied the image and schemed, trying to think of a means of gaining covert entry to the habitat. On the face of it, entering the facility on the sly presented a pair of major obstacles. Swooping in by parafoil meant he would have to land nakedly, like a fly

on a plate, in full view of any number of guests sunning themselves and ubiquitous androids attendants. The alternative would be to ditch in the water a distance away, and swim.

He stretched, restively shifting beside the comm console, his mind working to resolve the problem. At sub-orbital velocity, the pinnacle would pass over the undersea habitat rapidly, a fact becoming evident when the monitor's glowing nomenclature shift from VIEW FORWARD to VIEW MIDSHIPS, then to VIEW AFT. His objective faded in the distance.

Klavik was preparing to tell the crewman to switch off when something caught his eye. "The objects directly below us, can we see what they are?"

"Aye, sir," The crewman stepped up magnification. "Looks like a medium-sized ship with a dinghy or small boat riding alongside."

The seagoing vessel sprang into sharper focus, doubled again in apparent size, its outlines slightly blurred due to magnified optical distortion. No wake was visible; the rakish vessel was hove to, bobbing in the swells. A few meters from the craft's starboard hull was what looked like the hull of an overturned dinghy, or perhaps a lifeboat.

Klavik lost interest and turned away, meaning to head below decks and get ready to leave the ship. The truth struck him like a physical blow. He went back, bent forward and studied the scene intently. "Chatham," he breathed.

"Your pardon, sir?"

"Er, nothing." He had forgotten Chatham's intention to go back to sea and re-film what the holovision director had called "the shipwreck scenes." Could a way be found, he wondered, to solicit Chatham's aid in penetrating the undersea habitat?

The CO commanding the pinnacle appeared in the communications alcove.

"Look here," said Klavik, pointing. "Can you have navigation pinpoint this ship's coordinates?"

"Aye, sir." The youthful skipper was getting used to Klavik's mysterious orders. After a second glance at the display, he issued an order to comply.

"How far would you say the ship is from the undersea habitat?"

The crewman thought it over. "I'd guess no more than twenty or thirty klicks, sir."

Klavik nodded. *Far enough, but not too far*, he thought. Boarding the ship would put the habitat over Eden's short horizon. "Forget what I told you earlier," he told the CO. "Our objective is now the ship down there, not the habitat. Instead of a ballistic outside the mesosphere, have us boost exoatmospheric and come on around in a sub-orbital loop. It will save time."

Puzzled, the other said, "Time, Mr. Klavik? You're talking about a difference of maybe eight, ten minutes."

"Precious minutes," assured Klavik. "I'd like a nice, quiet skip-glide reentry, a retrofire at high altitude to kill lateral velocity a few kilometers from the ship's position. Would you be able to let the pinnacle freefall to five or six klicks above the water before energizing the null-grav drivers, and braking?"

The officer puffed his cheeks, showing concern over the prospective maneuver. "It can be done, sir, except . . ."

"Except?"

“You’d be wise to take the parafoil out the topside hatch, Mr. Klavik. If you should happen to glide under the ship, get caught in the null-grav field, you’d be swatted awfully hard, maybe get fried by induction.”

“Good point. The topside hatch it is. Order a crewman to break out a parafoil and stand by.”

“Aye, sir. Once you’re away, we’re to boost back to the mainland, ground the pinnacle and take up station to interdict the tower?”

“Exactly. Use your discretion about where to ground. If you believe it necessary, reinforce my orders to the Guards commander in the strongest terms. I want the Parvon bottled up tight, no excuses.”

The CO nodded. “Aye, Mr. Klavik. We’ll keep it in the jar.”

* * *

A low-pitched groan conducted through the hull announced a shutdown of the pinnacle’s mini-fusion torch. Once thunder from the thrusters died, the vessel started dropping like a stone. Webbed in support harness, the furred parafoil leaning over his uninjured shoulder, Klavik felt the familiar endless fall sensation grip him. Seizing the handrails on either side of the inner airlock compartment hatch, he waited for the ready light to wink green. A crewman secured in safety harness stood poised behind him, prepared to make sure the parafoil’s lanyards stayed unfouled when Klavik exited the hatch.

The pinnacle quivered, rocking gently back and forth as it was buffeted by denser, more turbulent air rushing past the hull. Brief nudges from the attitude control thrusters kept the vessel aligned stern-first toward the up rushing Southern Sea.

Klavik’s knees buckled when null-grav braking was initiated. The ready light turned from amber to green. He settled the goggles on the bridge of his nose as the outer hatch cammed open, admitting a furious blast of air.

Taking one short step, he dove headfirst into space, was racked by slamming into the wind stream, and tumbled. He yanked the “D”-ring, keying a small gas squib. The parafoil blossomed with a loud snap, the shock of it opening transmitted through the body harness, rudely jolting his thighs and lower back.

The flimsy parafoil stabilized. Klavik found himself soaring above tufts of patchy, fair weather cumulus high above the Southern Sea’s rippled sheen. The rarefied air made extra work of breathing. He glanced backward and downward. The pinnacle, still braking, slowed its plunge off to the north. He searched for the ship, picked out a white speck halfway to the horizon. The quay above the subsea habitat was out of sight, lost in nacreous haze along the sea girt horizon.

Wheeling in a shallow bank, he took a heading directly for what began to look like a three-hulled vessel, dropping toward the water in a gentle glide, the wind keening in his ears. When he thought the parafoil had descended low enough, he began visually integrating altitude versus distance, assuring himself of going into the water within a short swim of the motionless vessel.

When he judged it time, he doffed the goggles and let them fall away. Manually deflecting the parafoil’s leading edge, he dipped closer to the mid-ocean swells, picking up speed.

The boom of Chatham's null-grav crane extending over the ship's starboard rail supported a holovision blimp. The boom rider, a matchstick figure, leaned toward a pair of swimmers clinging to an overturned small boat. Even as a matchstick figure, Klavik recognized Victor Chatham.

On the trimaran's deck, clusters of startled faces craned upward as the parafoil cut a dido overhead, swept back around the vessel and flashed past on a path taking it between the overturned boat and the triple-hulled craft.

The bullhorn's amplified, "Cut, cut!" registered distantly. Klavik unsnapped the clips of his harness, raised his arms and slid free of the parafoil, plunging feet-first into the briny, getting salt water up his nose. He surfaced sputtering and coughing, meters from the shipwreck victims.

Her eyes round in disbelief, Cheryl Brooks dog-paddled toward him. "Klavik! What in the world?"

Bel Monde's premiere leading man, his hairpiece plastered to his forehead, looked like a handsome drowned rat. Miles let go the side of the overturned shipwreck prop and began treading water. Grinning his patented heroic grin, he called, "Crater Man, you sure as hell know how to screw up a take."

* * *

Victor Chatham, Steve, his assistant director, and other members of the holovision troupe crowded around Klavik as he clambered up a short Jacob's ladder to the trimaran's deck.

"Some cockeyed entrance you made." Grinning, Chatham shook the former Great White Hunter's wet hand. Telling his wardrobe maven to scrounge a set of dry clothes, he led Klavik below decks. "Where did you drop from? I mean, showing up like this, out of the blue — literally out of the blue — is the goofiest —"

"Chatty, can we talk privately? It's urgent, plus."

"Damned if I don't believe you're serious." Bel Monde's holovision auteur closed the stateroom door in the face of a curious entourage gathered in the companionway. He listened as Klavik filled him in on recent happenings, but omitted any mention of the Parvon.

"Shatterhand, a kidnapper? Um-m-mm, hate to say it but that is one tough scenario to swallow."

"True nevertheless. How long have you been out here on the water?"

"Four periods off and on. Winding things up in the Veldt took longer than I anticipated. We overnight in the undersea habitat, sail out here every morning."

"Have you seen Shatterhand in the habitat?"

"No-o-o, but me and my gang have been too busy to scratch."

"Any sign of my companions?" asked Klavik hopefully.

The director shook his head. "Nary a glimmer, sorry."

"I'm not surprise. They're probably well hidden. How about Ramyn?"

"You saying that five-star hunk of pulchritude is mixed up in this?" asked Chatham. "Klavik, mind telling me what's going on?"

Klavik disregarded the question. He asked if Chatham would smuggle him into the habitat.

"Sure, no problem," said the director. "I'll order this bucket turned around the minute we finish a retake of —"

“Would you think me selfish,” said Klavik, “if I asked you to take me in now? It’s literally a matter of life and death, Chatty. Otherwise, I wouldn’t dream of asking you to interrupt your filming.”

The director pursed his lips and glumly weighed the request. He consulted his wrist chronometer, vacillated, and nodded with obvious reluctance. “Okay, priorities are priorities, and life-and-death is as high as they get.” He opened the stateroom’s door. “Steve,” he told the assistant director, “tell the skipper to drop a sea anchor and buoy to mark the shipwreck prop. We’ll let it drift overnight.”

“We’re scrubbing this early?” Steve sounded surprised.

“Uh-huh. Have everybody pack it in chop-chop. The light’s going fast, so no harm done.”

His expression neutral, Steve nodded and went up the companionway ladder.

“It won’t be possible to thank you enough,” said Klavik, realizing the director’s rationalization had been for the benefit of cast and crew. In early afternoon, the light was not only perfect, it would remain so for hours. “When this is over,” he promised, “His Highness and Kurani will find a way to show their appreciation.”

“Forget it. You scratched my itch when I needed it, now it’s my turn. I see you’re no longer wearing the sling. Shoulder all better?”

Klavik flexed his arm. “Still a bit sore, but . . . Listen, I have another favor to ask. Is a makeup artist handy?”

“Only two or three. What do you need?”

“I want to slip into the habitat mixed in with your crew. The simplest way is probably to get myself decked out like an android extra.”

“Easily arranged,” said Chatham. “But I’d appreciate learning your plans.”

“You will,” said Klavik evasively.

On deck, grips, juicers and deckhands scurried about snugging down equipment, getting the trimaran made ready for sea. The holovision blimp was craned back on deck and stowed, the null-grav crane retracted, the boom secured. Near the stern, a makeup artist sprayed near-naked Klavik from head to foot with bronze body paint. A hexagonal android “beauty mark” appliquéd on his left cheekbone, he donned a tattered loincloth, a wig of dark, curly “native” hair.

“There!” The makeup woman stood back. “Your own mama would think you’re someone else.”

“I feel like someone else,” said Klavik. He thanked the woman.

The trimaran’s deck shuddered underfoot. The ship got under way with a surge, rising on its sponsons, foaming through calm seas.

Shielding his eyes against spindrift, Klavik posted himself on the forward deck and expended the excess nervous energy built up inside him by offering curt, meaningless responses to the feminine flutterings of Cheryl Brooks.

The metal quay rose above the watery horizon, and the sleek trimaran’s progress slackened and decelerated more sharply as the triple hulls dipped deeper into the water. The ship was less than a kilometer from the wide opening in the breakwater when Klavik’s heart skipped a beat. The gorge rose in his throat.

“No!” he whispered.

Shatterhand's private verticraft lifted from the quay, rotated on its vertical axis and vectored away northward toward the mainland.

THIRTY-SIX

In the blackest of foul moods, Klavik could not sit still. Maddened by the cul-de-sac into which he'd unwittingly plunged himself, he prowled Chatham's quarters in the undersea habitat, utterly discouraged despite the consoling efforts of his showbiz friends and acquaintances.

He had missed his quarry by a matter of minutes; and worse, had stranded himself in mid-ocean, cut off from potential aid from the pinnacle or orbiting starcruiser. The ground-to-orbit shuttle and mother ship were acting under directives issued by he himself, standing at their respective stations to prohibit the Parvon's prospective rescue or flight. That was small comfort in light of the way he'd imprisoned himself.

Chatham and his ill-mated starring couple meant well, but their sympathetic entreaties and encouraging comments had been galling rather than soothing his savage temper. His spirits at low ebb, he glanced at the mirrored closet door; his an android "native" get-up and bronze makeup made him look ridiculous. Asking to be excused, he had isolated himself in the two-room suite trying to reconcile his predicament. Running through hypothetical explanations for Shatterhand's sudden departure, he invented scenario after scenario. Had Shatterhand actually been aboard the verticraft when it rose, supposedly whisked the hostages away, or had the exotic warned him of his "pupil's" escape and ordered them moved?

The pinnacle's drop-off trajectory naturally been tracked by Eden's traffic controllers, hence the Parvon must be aware of his current whereabouts. It seemed the most likely reason for having Shatterhand duck and run with the hostages. He wondered if his spur-of-the-moment android disguise had been penetrated, or had his secret presence been divulged by some informant aboard the trimaran or in the habitat, or, or, or . . .

The original rationale, he decided, offered the most reasonable explanation, an inference that Shatterhand abandonment of the undersea habitat had been no coincidence. Yet if the exotic knew where he was, why hadn't he been fingered mentally? Mental communication over relatively short distances could be taken as a given, obviously something accomplished with facile ease. Although telepathic range was an unknown quantity, contact at long range was a viable assumption. The induced nightmares he'd experienced in the Veldt, hundreds of kilometers from the Village, made him believe the conclusion acceptable. Another point to consider was whether the habitat's overlying seawater inhibited the exotic's mental prowess. Be that as it may, the Parvon might have assumed that he was now safely aboard the orbiting starcruiser.

The whirlpool of suppositions, inferences and postulates spun giddily, leaving him precisely where he had begun, except more discouraged. Spitted on the horns of a dilemma, he dismissed the guessing game, left the compartment, hustled down the deserted companionway and tapped on Chatham's door.

Miles and Cheryl lounged in the director's suite. Chatty got up from in front of the vidicom terminal. "Sorry, Klavik; nary a peep from any quarter. My people are keeping a sharp lookout."

Klavik thanked the director for having had the presence of mind to tell his film crew to roam the undersea complex, see what there was to see. Steve, the assistant director, and a wardrobe mistress were stationed on the riparian esplanade topside, sunning in deckchairs, watching for the white verticraft's return. Thus far, they had nothing to report.

The actress studied Klavik with round, anxious eyes. "Come sit down," she invited, patting the cushion beside her.

"Yeah, plant the bod," advised her megastar mate. "Beating yourself up over a goof won't fix anything."

Matson's words of wisdom irritated Klavik. His next move had to be twofold. First he would have to learn whether the hostages were still in the undersea habitat, and then find a way to communicate with either the *Kolodaan*, or the pinnacle grounded at the Village. Something else bothered him deeply. If, as he suspected, the hostages had been flown to the mainland, his only means of exit from the submarine resort would be via the tube transit system, an action tantamount to outright surrender. The access and egress galleries in the habitat and at the tube's other end were under close, continuous surveillance, as were many if not all passenger capsules. His android disguise would never begin to hold up under professional scrutiny. Even if it did, a monumental tall-tale would be required to convince the androids that one of Chatham's rag-tag android "natives" had a reason for riding around the planet in costume.

Stay holed up, or flee via the tube?

Hobson's choice! he thought.

Chatham broke his lengthy silence. "I think you're missing a bet, Klavik. There is another way to sneak back to the mainland."

"I already thought of that, Chatty. As the crow flies, the Village is only a few hundred clicks from here. How long would it take the trimaran to reach the mainland?"

The director looked troubled. "Um, not sure; I'll ask the captain. I hesitated to suggest it because the clock's ticking on our epic. By rights, I should get my crew back on the water ASAP, wind things up out here."

"If Kraan's government were to guarantee recompense for your lost time," proposed Klavik, "would you let the captain run me to the Village this evening?"

"Go for it!" urged Cheryl.

"Hell yes, Genius!" Miles sounded pleased with himself. "This brouhaha smacks of the real goods, not one of your screwed-up cliffhanger scenarios."

Chatham cut a stern glance at his superstar. He mulled the proposal, and was about to say something when a light tap on the door made him for Miles to open up. A Bel Monde property man poked his head inside. "Hey, Rube! Place's swarming with android cops, Chatty, and they're heading this way. Best tuck in and hide The Man quicklike."

The news galvanized Chatham. "Okay," he said, "we'll play it by ear. Everybody grab a script. Let's take it from the top of page eighteen. Klavik, you read the part marked 'Barney.'"

* * *

The pocket door of Chatham's suite whiffed into the wall without benefit of a knock. A pair of husky android proctors shouldered into the room, their crowd-control tasers holstered. Cheryl was emoting vigorously, castigating a "native" called Barney for the sloppy way he had attended to her personal needs..

"Whoa! What's this?" demanded Chatham, waving a shooting script indignantly. "You can't bust into our private quarters when we're in the middle of a rehearsal?"

"Sincere apologies, sir." Without asking permission, the lead android panned the suite with a mini-vid camera while his companions performed a thorough, efficient search of the spacious rooms, opening closets and drawers, checking out the autolave cubicle.

Klavik felt relatively safe in his loincloth, bronze skin and aboriginal wig, but being unarmed caused a flare of apprehension. He had surrendered his throwing knife and dirk upon being taken captive in Shatterhand's tower suite; the hand laser lifted from the dead android was still aboard the pinnacle. Eyes lowered, he pretended to consult the script, knowing the video scan spelled eventual disaster. Remote surveillance could at that instant be evaluating the suite's occupants, comparing the video image with Klavik's description.

"Shatterhand will hear of this," threatened Chatham.

"Again, sir, our most sincere apologies." The proctor holding the mini-cam followed his companions into the hall and used an electronic master key to open the adjoining suite.

Klavik expelled breath. "I'd better trot, Chatty. Things won't hold together here. Not now."

"I doubt if those deadpan goons made you," said Miles Matson.

"Probably not, or they would have grabbed me. But it's only a matter of time until the right wrong person sees the video record."

"Makes sense," agreed Chatham. "Hate to say it, but I'm pretty sure the trimaran's crew came ashore for the night. Miles, do yourself a favor. Go see if you can locate the skipper. Tell him it's an emergency. Have him to round up a skeleton crew and stand by to cast off."

"Yah, can do." Smirking, the actor ducked out of the suite, obviously relishing the notion of a real-life cloak-and-dagger role.

"Listen, Chatty," said Klavik, "your offer is greatly appreciated, but I can't leave the habitat without learning whether or not His Highness and the PM have been airlifted away, or are still somewhere in the habitat."

"Understand." The director scowled. "Answering that question won't be easy."

* * *

Miles Matson had been gone no more than five minutes when the vidicom terminal bleated and the assistant director's image formed in the flat-panel display. "News flash." Steve sounded excited. "That all white fly buggy just grounded on the quay."

Electrified, Klavik shouldered Chatham aside. "Did you see who got out of the verticraft?"

"Best guess is the cripple and a pair of androids who helped the old-timer into a wheelchair. Could be your guy, but he was surrounded by proctors and we were too far away to catch more than a glimpse."

"It has to be him," said Chatham.

“Probably,” said Klavik, “but it doesn’t mean my friends are with him, or here in the habitat. What it does mean is that the right wrong person I mentioned will soon review the habitat search record. The opposition may be less than sure about where I am, or how I got here, but logic says it’s where I would try to go.” He turned his attention to the vidicom terminal. “Steve, did you follow the wheelchair?”

“Far as we could. Proctors’re stopping guests from moving level-to-level until others finish searching the place. At least that’s how I pegged it.”

Klavik left the vidicom. “I’m getting out of your hair, Chatty. Thanks for everything. I deeply and truly appreciate what you’ve done.”

“You’re taking off alone?”

“Have to. I’ll check back, see if your people turn up anything. It isn’t fitting for you and your company to become involved in our private mess. Shatterhand would be vindictive if he felt you were . . .”

The door chime caused Klavik to break off and shrink back against the wall. He nodded to Chatham, who commanded the door to slide open.

A familiar nasal tenor said, “Good evening, Mr. Chatham. Emil and I returned a moment ago. He asked me to convey his regrets for any inconvenience the androids may have ——”

His temper flashing near the ignition point, Klavik reached out, collected a handful of the operations manager’s beautifully tailored tunic and yanked him bodily into the room. “Your resurrection is to a major miracle, Mr. Buford.”

The operations manager’s eyes bulged half out of his head.

“Where are my friends?” demanded Klavik, cringing inwardly at the bubble of clear-quill terror bursting from the other’s mind.

“N-now believe me, K-Klavik, I had nothing to do with ——”

“Where are my friends? Where is Shatterhand holding them?”

“Don’t blame me,” whined Buford. “I had no part in any grief Emil may have ——”

“Tell me where they are!” Klavik lifted the manager bodily and shook him like a limp doll. “Where are my friends? Tell me, or by the sacred First Principle I’ll snap your neck.”

“Ab-board the . . . y-yacht,” stammered Buford, looking as if his sphincters were about to let go.

“A yacht? Here in the marina?”

“A large . . . catamaran. White hull, blue trim.”

“Where aboard the yacht?”

“Aft . . . staterooms,” faltered Buford. Half strangled, he squirmed in Klavik’s grasp.

Klavik roughly shoved the operations manager away. “Chatty, do me one last kindness. Sit on this pimple until I come back. If he’s lying, I’m going to snap what I promised to snap.”

“I’m t-telling you, uh . . . It’s the truth,” insisted Buford.

“That will be a first from you, Mr. Buford.”

“We’ll be happy to entertain the gentleman,” Chatham said amiably. “But think about what you’re doing, Klavik. It’s foolish to think you can take on a passel of androids single handed. Why not let me ——?”

“I don’t plan to take them on,” assured Klavik. “I’ll *put* them down. First I want to go aboard your trimaran, Chatty, to scout the marina. Are there binoculars on board?”

“Top bureau drawer.” Chatham described the location of his stateroom.

“Don’t, Klavik. This’s crazy,” objected Cheryl. “You can’t just stroll out there and pretend to —”

“How else?” Commanding the door to slide into the wall, Klavik scanned the corridor in both directions, and left Chatham’s suite with hasty strides.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Halting at sight of the beefy, towheaded android stationed at the lift compartment, Klavik decided a bold lie might open the way. When he approached, the expressionless proctor held up his hand, barring access to the lift.

Klavik woodenly explained his errand to retrieve paperwork the holovision director had left aboard ship. His “native” get-up, and the hexagonal android stigma partially concealed by makeup, became his passport to the surface.

Riding upward in company with an android waiter dexterously balancing a tray holding a silver ice bucket, napkins and champagne flutes, he emerged on the gardenlike riparian esplanade at the forefront of the marina. A handful of guests were taking their ease, enjoying the air, the seascape garnished by a roseate sunset blossoming across the water. Looking neither left nor right, he strode past the scattered guests, his size and outré “native” garb attracting curious stares, and not a few hushed comments.

A sextet of middle-aged scuba aficionados had emerged from the emerald waters, chatting as they doffed the underwater gear. More accomplished divers would have used one of the shallows airlocks to gain access to the habitat. This group looked and sounded as if they consisted of neophytes.

The trimaran leased by Bel Monde Holovision was tied up where Klavik had disembarked the previous afternoon, its hawsers stretching and relaxing on gentle swells rolling in through the breakwater. Going aboard, Klavik was accosted by an android standing watch on the weather deck.

He repeated the lie in very few words, explaining his errand tersely, and stepped around the android without waiting for a rejoinder. He ducked down the belowdecks ladder, spent an anxious minute searching for Chatham’s stateroom along the narrow companionway, and found the electronic binoculars in a bureau drawer. He hurrying back topside, he climbed the stern ladder to avoid the deck watch and stepped to the trimaran’s port rail.

The spectacular tropical sunset had faded to a pinkish afterglow as dusk settled over the tranquil Southern Sea. The yacht Buford had described, a rakish forty-meter catamaran, rode at anchor near the center of the marina. In the azure twilight, the visible portion of deck was deserted except for one lone figure moving about. As he studied the craft, its ruby running lights winked on.

Lowering the binoculars in alarm, he thought the running lights meant the yacht was preparing to get under way, but that did not seem to be the case. He realized getting aboard would mean going through the water; there was no other way. Tugging off the curly black “native” wig, he tossed it behind a hatch cover, set down Chatham’s elix binoculars where they

were sure to be found, and kicked off his sandals. Easing over the rail, he dropped to the trimaran's portside hull near the stern, and slipped over the side with minimal splash.

* * *

The sea inside the breakwater was glassy-smooth, the water pellucid, slightly phosphorescent and refreshingly cool. He breast-stroked toward the catamaran, swimming as quietly as possible. Approaching the vessel, he decided to diminish the likelihood of being spotted by someone on deck and surface dove, intending to swim the final meters under water. He quickly discovered the precaution had been a waste of breath. The glow he'd mistaken for phosphorescence was actually luminosity cast by the undersea habitat's scores of lighted windows. He worried about swimming through the opalescent shallows that were diffused to a thin, milky texture by plankton haze which, though dim, would silhouette any objects on or just beneath the surface. A school of tiny fingerlings drifted between him and the deeper radiance, moving past like a glittery, living wall.

He broached the surface, flicked the hair out of his eyes with a headshake, and treaded water, then swam aft along the yacht's waterline. Several portholes were illuminated, but curtained. Rounding the starboard hull's stern he spotted a midships Jacob's ladder, but a back lighted torso was visible on deck, a silhouetted figure holding a laser rifle.

Klavik stroked around to portside, the sound of his splashes disguised by the lap of water against the catamaran's twin hulls. The quandary he faced was finding a method of getting aboard unnoticed. The darkened portholes above his head were not only too high to reach, but closed and most likely dogged; nor did any stray lines trail into the water from either hull. That left a quadrate of chains securing the ship's sea anchors, and he dismissed that potential pathway to the deck. Taut or slack, links in a chain had a habit of rattling and clinking when disturbed.

He was debating the risk involved in clambering hand over hand up one of the anchor chains when he sensed movement in the opalescent depths beneath him, and assumed it was caused by scuba divers, a school of dolphins, or some other variety of benign marine life. He ducked underwater when a pair of shadowy shapes above him leaned casually on the rail and began conversing in low voices.

Surfacing, he sucked in lungfuls of air and submerged again, somersaulted head downward, swam deeper to get beneath the near hull, and surfaced in open water between the cat's twin hulls. He meant to stay out of sight until full darkness shrouded the marina, then search for an opportunity to climb aboard.

Looking down, he was shocked to discover that the "benign" marine creatures swimming upward toward him were man-shaped.

Divers! A half-dozen or more, rising fast.

* * *

Klavik dove again and left the catamaran, doubling his exertions stroking across the marina with an efficient overhand crawl. He was halfway back to Chatham's leased trimaran when a hand closed about his thrashing ankle. Pulled under, he twisted about and put the full weight of his body behind a rigid-fingered thrust to the diver's throat, then tore the rebreather mask from a second android's face and was scrabbling for a death grip on a third diver when strong hands seized him from several directions. The hands belonged to five or six other gargoyles-masked divers.

Knowing further resistance would be useless, he let himself to be dragged to the surface, pulled through the water toward the dual-hulled yacht.

Panting and coughing, he saw a null-grav boom extend outboard above the ship's starboard rail. Seawater drained from a perforated platform that rose beneath him and his android captors. Firmly gripped by four divers, he made no move to resist when the platform lifted him and his captors out of the water, swung them over the rail and deposited them on deck.

The catamaran now crawled with armed android proctors. Escorted roughly below decks, he was ushered, dripping, into an untenanted stateroom and offered a towel.

"Tenacity is your most endearing virtue, Klavik." A powered wheelchair glided into the stateroom bearing Shatterhand clad in a green paisley robe, and slippers. Regarding the captive coolly, he added, "Your secondary genius seems to be inducing complications."

"I trust His Royal Highness and Prime Minister Kurani are well."

"Both are in splendid health, thank you."

"You went to considerable trouble baiting this trap."

"Allowing yourself to become ensnared mounts to a rare mistake on your part. The 'bait,' as you call it, is not even present. Your friends are comfortably ensconced in suites a stone's throw from Petite Palais."

"You flew them back to the mainland?"

"They never left the Village," said Shatterhand drily.

"This particular set of panes in your hall of mirrors is hardly surprising."

"Had you the wit to look in the proper place," said the planetary director, "the images in my hall of mirrors would have been visible."

"I don't believe one word that comes out of your mouth."

"Your belief or lack thereof is immaterial."

"Buford told me they —"

"Buford," interrupted Shatterhand, "told you precisely what he'd been instructed to tell you. I once mentioned that nothing happened in Eden without my knowledge and consent. Perhaps now you realize it was not an idle boast."

"I still don't realize it. It was your master who set me up, not you."

"Call it a test of resourcefulness," said Shatterhand, his tone sardonic. "A test, I admit, during which you surpassed beyond all expectations."

"That particular mirror in your hall," said Klavik, "is badly cracked."

Shatterhand let the remark pass. "Your escape from Petite Palais was a foregone conclusion, of course. My 'master,' to borrow your droll term, predicted that you would overpower the guards and strike for the space terminal. At that point, however, all orthodoxy vanished from the prediction. The tactic you used to secure the aid of armed forces aboard the shuttlecraft was quite brilliant. And when the vehicle successfully lifted off with you aboard, my, er . . . master was displeased to think you had been lost. Would you mind explaining how you managed to locate and board Mr. Chatham's vessel in mid-ocean?"

His eyelids drooping ominously, Klavik did not reply. The impotent heat building inside him threatened to turn into an unquenchable firestorm.

“No matter.” The wheelchair rolled backward. “Be advised that the mental exercises you were engaged in had all but concluded when the sessions were truncated by your rash departure. In the morning, you will be returned to the Village and complete the examinations.”

“What plans has your master for my friends?”

“That is not for me to say. Rest well.” Shatterhand motioned imperiously. An android backed the wheelchair toward the companionway, and closed the stateroom door.

The proctors let Klavik use the autolave, where he scrubbed off the “native” makeup, accepted fresh linen and an ill-fitting tan jumpsuit a half-size too small for him. He surprised himself by attacking a lusty serving of shrimp *rémoulade*, a tossed salad and a glass of deliciously dry white Burgundy. Faced with a situation he could do nothing to rectify, he drifted off to sleep with a quartet of armed proctors in attendance. The androids standing watch with stoic solemnity had been programmed to never look away, never allow any type of distraction, and hold their tasers in readiness.

* * *

At first light, before any guests were liable to be up and about, Klavik was conducted to the far end of the quay by four android proctors. Shatterhand, waiting impassively in the verticraft cabin, watched to make sure Klavik had been strapped in, immobilized.

The vehicle lifted off, transitioned to horizontal flight and accelerated toward the mainland. Lulled by the muted propeller thrash of twin-ducted fans, Klavik studied the rippling, blue-green sea sliding past below. He speculated about the inhibiting effect *Kolodaan's* grounded pinnacle and a full phalanx of Royal Elite Guards must have exerted on the exotic's plans. He was sure the youthful CO had scrupulously followed orders, grounded his ship in the greenbelt surrounding the Village. With that in mind, surely an upcoming negotiation with the Parvon seemed reasonable. He was certain having a heavily armed force standing by amounted to a strong bargaining chip.

The pilot slowed the verticraft to a hover, rotated it on its yaw axis and it descended toward the roofpark atop Shatterhand's administrative tower.

All the blood drained from Klavik's face when something he never expected to see slammed into his consciousness. What was left of the pinnacle, a gutted, burned-out shell, was tumbled on its side across a swath of crisped brown pastureland dotted with the carcasses of incinerated cattle.

Shatterhand coldly appraised Klavik's reaction. “Such a waste. You and your high-level associates might keep one facet of the coming contest of wills in mind. In addition to vast commercial and economic holdings, the Parvon Syndicate controls phenomenal resources of another kind entirely.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

“Your obstinacy is demeaning.” The exotic waited for the goad to find its mark.

Detecting a grace note of sublimated pique in the Parvon's transliterated, uninflected voice, Klavik held his tongue.

“Delude yourself if you wish. While precocious, your faulty belief of being sufficiently adept to halfway contest our mental abilities is not a cause for celebration.”

Klavik did not respond.

“A reluctance to conclude our mutually beneficial exercises,” declared the exotic, “amounts to another signpost of your immaturity. Why prolong the discord? We verge on completion. The longer you procrastinate, the longer the span until you are reunited with your friends.”

Isolated in Shatterhand’s tower office suite, Klavik did not respond.

The Parvon altered its plea, electing a telepathic instead of a verbal gouge. *Cooperate*, came the rapier-like mental thrust. *Time passes. Your obstinacy wearies this poor creature.*

Klavik nulled his mind, responding neither verbally nor mentally.

Neither of us can abide lassitude and inactivity. Cooperate.

From the picture window of Shatterhand’s high-rise tower, Klavik could see the near boundary of a ragged blotch of charred, darkened meadowland. An ugly scar marring the Village’s bucolic perfection, it offered mute testimony to the pinnacle’s fiery end.

“Ah, now we perceive the root of your misdirected hostility.”

The droning, characterless voice set Klavik’s teeth on edge. “Your psychotic version of ‘cooperation’ could be called giving aid and comfort to the enemy. You destroyed our ship, slaughtered the guardsmen and crew, an infamy known as the shot heard round the galaxy. You have fired the opening salvo in an interstellar conflict. Since my betters are absent, I speak for Kraan, and Kraan intends to loose the final bolt.”

“To even suggest the childish scufflings you envision will take place between our disparate cultures is arrant nonsense. Meaningless slaughter is not our way. Your warriors and crewmen are being detained in safety, pending the disposition of their unwholesome crime.”

“Their crime . . . ?”

“Verily. In good conscience, a gross offense this poor creature cannot overlook. A total disregard for planetary regulations became evident when your reaction motor-powered vehicle grounded. It was an infraction not to be lightly dismissed.”

“Ah, now it becomes clear.” The irony of the exotic’s statement would have amused Klavik had he been less infuriated. “Minor peccadilloes like assassination, kidnapping and the destruction of our starcruiser’s pinnacle are acceptable to the Parvon moral code, should such exist, whereas landing the pinnacle under power in open meadowland constitutes a heinous crime.”

“Perhaps not heinous, and yet —”

“I don’t believe the crew and guardsmen are alive and well, or my friends either for that matter.”

“Your obtuse cant drives an arrant disbelief when told of things as they are. That is most disconcerting. We shall do whatever is necessary to convince you otherwise?”

“I’m convinced that I’ll never see my companions again, talk to them.”

The dead voice remained silent for seconds. “Conferring with your friends is a minor concession withal. A vidicom conference shall be arranged.”

“No, no!” Klavik was adamant. “There are too many ways to doctor electronic transmissions. I want to stand face-to-face with His Highness and Prime Minister Kurani, feel their presence, evaluate their overall condition.”

“Your demand exceeds the bounds of reason.”

“So it’s as I suspected. They are no longer with us.”

“Your companions,” insisted the Parvon, “are unharmed, quite well.”

“Then why not grant my request?”

“Our refusal is dictated by your amply demonstrated resourcefulness, Klavik. The attributes with which you are endowed are worry making. Nor can your sincerity be taken at face value.”

“We of Kraan,” declared Klavik, “trust Parvon sincerity a good deal less.”

“Alas, your unreasonable attitude mocks our good intentions. Once again your juvenile outlook comes to the fore, and we despair.”

“Alas,” mocked Klavik, deciding mockery the proper tactic, “once again your criminal activities tarnish the cosmic outlook of which you boast so proudly.”

“We of Parvo are guiltless of anything resembling criminal activity.”

The statement sent Klavik into a state of towering indignation. “Within the scope of my narrow, provincial view,” he said, drawing out the words, “it’s not possible to overlook assassination, kidnapping, outrageous deception, armed aggression, or a blatant act of war by destroying our pinnacle, as anything but the acts of a criminally insane alien intelligence. How, and by what brand of skewed logic, can you dare declare yourself and your kind ‘guiltless’?”

The seconds dribbled away silently. When it came, despite a lack of inflection the alien’s transliterated rejoinder held an overtone of resignation. “Very well, splendid, mistrustful neohuman specimen that you are, in this singular instance our desire to bring the affair to a successful conclusion overweighs our reluctance to grant your wish. You may convene with your associates for fifteen standard minutes, not one second longer. But only if we have your solemn pledge to subsequently cooperate.”

“I hereby solemnly promise,” said Klavik, opting for the Parvon’s brand of truthfulness, “to cooperate fully after a brief visit with the prince, prime minister, and Ramyn.”

“So be it. Stay where you are. Your friends will be conducted to the tower.”

* * *

“Klavik!” Her head held high, looking confident and lovelier than ever, Ramyn was first to enter from the loggia. Clad a classic white himation gathered at the waist with a golden belt, she was trussed in body harness, her arms loosely pinioned.

Klavik returned her smile, and bowed to Kewart as the youth strode boldly into Shatterhand’s office suite. “Your Royal Highness.”

His dark eyes flashing defiance, the prince acknowledged the salutation with a brusque nod. Prime Minister Kurani, secured like the others in loose-fitting body harnesses, brought up the rear.

Kewart’s state of intense agitation caromed from one corner in Klavik’s consciousness to another, setting off alarms. His future sovereign’s expressionless features were at odds with the intractable hostility radiating from his mind in like a psychic firestorm. All too aware of the youth’s impetuous nature, a trait evident since childhood, Klavik sensed how dangerously short-

fused the royal youth was. He had obviously endured as much cavalier treatment as he could stomach, and unbanked fires of resentment burned within him.

Kurani also trod an emotional knife-edge. The PM was ready to explode, the urge to kill written large in every seam and furrow of his weathered countenance. “How fares it with you, Klavik?”

“Not good, sir. I trust you were treated well.”

“Except,” said the PM, biting the word short in a basso rumble, “for the way they’ve worked hard to bored us to death. Kept apart, we’ve been served elegant meals, coddled and told fewer lies than we’re accustomed to hearing.” The confining body harness inhibited Kurani’s body language, but Klavik sensed that his inner rage had blossomed to monumental proportions.

Is reassurance yours? The exotic’s query rang hollowly in Klavik’s mind.

Not yet. Do not interfere. Having assimilated the basics of mental communication better than the exotic realized, he snapped the connection, shutting the Parvon out of his mind.

With a pair of android proctors toting laser rifles marching rigidly on either side, Shatterhand’s geriatric chair glided into his office suite. Before the portal’s double-doors whisked shut, Klavik took note of a second pair of armed androids posted in the loggia.

After surveying the trussed captives without emotion, the planetary director’s stolid gaze drifted to Klavik. “Your time together is short,” he said. “I suggest you make use of it.”

All of Klavik’s alarm circuits jangled simultaneously. Prince Kewart stared fixedly at Shatterhand, and his glare of red rage unnerved Klavik. “You murdered my father,” accused the youth in a savage whisper.

The picture of self-containment, Shatterhand literally looked down his nose at the youth. “Your Royal Highness, obtuse remarks like that do not warrant a response.”

The prince began tensing and relaxing, tensing and relaxing in a slow cadence deeply alarming to Klavik, all the while drawing deep, lung-filling breaths in the self-psyching rhythm he had learned in personal combat school.

Klavik’s scalp tingled. His enhanced sense of esthesis, complemented by the wordless rage emanating from Kewart, shrieked a loud, silent warning. Shatterhand’s unfeeling words had pushed the youth close to the edge, his urge for vengeance conquering whatever vestige of adolescent common sense he retained.

“No, Highness!” bellowed Klavik, the only unfettered captive present. He made as if to lunge toward Kewart, and stopped short, torn between the opportunity he intuited had taken shape, and a desperate need to intercept the youth’s suicidal purpose.

Klavik’s shout, coupled with his tentative, unanticipated lunge, drew the android proctors’ attention away from Kewart. The emission bells of both laser rifles swung toward Klavik, standing poised in a strangling silence broken only by the prince’s stertorous, rhythmic breathing.

His arms loosely pinioned at his sides, Kewart could not restrain himself. He took two gliding, panther like steps, left the floor in a high bound in Eden’s gentle gravity, and twisted sideways in midair. Shatterhand stabbed a switch plaque on the armrest of his chair, thinking to surround himself with the protective shell of force.

He was too late.

A pair of booted feet lashed out, snapped the executive's head violently sideways. Flying feet-first through the air, Kewart's bonds prevented him from using his hands to cushion the fall. His collided with the geriatric chair, his knees coming down across the armrest, toppled backward, landing on the base of his skull, and crumpled.

* * *

Pure instinctive drove Klavik's instant reaction — a leap, a lightning kick sent one of the laser rifles skidding across the lush carpeting. Rising from a crouch, he dealt the proctor a punishing, crushing blow. Blood spurted from the android's nose and mouth.

Charging the second proctor in an all-out dive aimed at bowling the android off his feet, he caught a flashing impression of the laser rifle's emission bell at full deflection, threw himself sideways. Blinded by laser flash, he ignored the white heat searing his left arm, rolled under the pencil of coherent energy and slammed into the android's knees, knocking him down with body inertia.

Leaping to his feet, he stomped the downed proctor with fatal precision.

"Your arm!" Ramyn's cry was shrill.

There was surprisingly little pain yet. His left forearm was gone below the elbow. Knowing intense trauma couldn't be far off, he stiffened his resolve to cope with the trauma certain to ensue. Kewart's impromptu act had established a roadmap for future moves. He made an go-for-broke snap decision. "Get behind Shatterhand's chair," he told Minor and the PM. "Move!"

One-handedly scooping a fallen laser rifle from the carpet, he brought it up just as the portal dilated. His vision blurred by laser flash, he knew his aim would be erratic and scissored the fuzzily seen doorway with a lance of coherent energy, scything it back and forth, catching both android proctors in the act of rushing to Shatterhand's aid.

Stumbling, he dropped the laser rifle, fell to his knees. In less than ten seconds, the immaculate office suite had become a charnel house. The thick, nauseating stench of ozone and burnt flesh hung in the air.

In a daze, Klavik struggled to rise. Using his remaining hand, he dragged the dead androids one by one into the loggia, commanded the portal to close, and clumsily freed Kurani and Ramyn from bondage, then rubbed his eyes and knelt beside his future sovereign. He felt for the carotid pulse at the prince's throat, satisfied himself that he'd merely been knocked senseless, and muttered something reassuring.

"You're the bravest!" The PM came to kneel at Klavik's side. "Reckless, yet so very brave. Will the lad be all right?"

His mind suddenly under an all-out siege, it was all Klavik could do to halfway shut out the exotic's violent mental thrusts. "I'm not . . . a medic. But, yes." He heard Ramyn being sick in the adjoining autolave. "A concussion, likely. His breathing's shallow, but regular." He peeled back one of the prince's eyelids. "May be unconscious . . . some time. Let him rest quietly."

"What has occurred?" Stifled in his attempt to penetrate Klavik's unexpected defenses, the Parvon's uninflected voice echoed hollowly in the office suite.

Klavik put a finger to his lips. "Say nothing," he whispered.

* * *

Deathly pale, her vivid hazel eyes misted, Ramyn came out of the autolave. She stared aghast at the missing sleeve of Klavik's tunic, the bloody stump of his forearm, and tried to say something, but couldn't find her voice.

"Laser injuries have . . . one virtue," whispered Klavik, his head spinning as he fought against the mounting agony. "Wounds . . . partially self-cauterizing."

"But, your arm . . ." managed Ramyn.

He shushed her, put a finger to his lips. "More scar tissue. We'll take care of it later."

Kurani whispered a request, asking Ramyn to help him carry Kewart to a lounge. They struggled with the prince and deposited him gently, making him as comfortable as possible.

Riding an emotional rollercoaster oscillating between an abyss of worry and a pinnacle of elation, the PM whispered, "You did splendidly, Klavik. What now?"

"I'm going below."

"To that . . . thing down there? Surely not until your wound receives attention."

"There's little if any pain," lied Klavik. "Kewart's sacrifice presents us with a classic opportunity we dare not waste."

Kurani frowned. "Aching for a showdown is one thing, but the slimy worm's volatile environment renders weapons useless."

"Not . . . all weapons, sir."

Kurani's eyes narrowed. "Surely you don't mean your, uh, mind?"

"This could be our one and only chance to learn what we came here to find out."

"But, by the exalted First Principle! I can't imagine how you could feel up to doing battle with that thing. There's your injury, as well as —"

"The Parvon schooled me better than it realized."

"But, can it . . . ? Isn't it able to, uh . . . read your mind?"

"Not for the moment."

An uncertain nod. "How will you get down there?"

"I watched Shatterhand closely when he escorted us below. A hidden control in his wall safe opens the way to the shaft. When he keyed the private lift, I memorized the cipher combination."

A barely audible groan issued from the man in the geriatric chair.

"Here now, what's this." Kurani sounded surprised. "The cripple lives?" He stepped over to the geriatric chair.

"Don't touch him, sir. It might kill him."

"Good riddance!"

"In one sense I agree, but in another . . ." Klavik glanced at Ramyn and looked away quickly. "Shatterhand," he whispered, "is blameless."

"Blameless! Him . . . ?"

"For decades he's been a programmed instrument of the Parvon Syndicate."

"Programmed!" Ramyn's gasp told Klavik more than he wished to know about her former relationship with the executive, a topic he would have given anything to avoid.

Unfortunately, there had been no way to spare her.

THIRTY-NINE

The dead voice echoed hollowly in the office suite. “Desist in your feeble evasions, Klavik. You will now make the happenings aboveground known to us.”

“Ignore whatever you hear,” whispered Klavik.

“It doesn’t . . . It can’t touch your mind?”

“Not if I block the most forceful intrusions.”

Slumped flaccidly in the geriatric chair, Emil Shatterhand’s head lolled at an unnatural angle. Eyes half-open, he said weakly, “How long . . . have you known?”

After a grimace of distaste, Klavik said, “Since the beginning. Neohumans do not — cannot — possess your degree of emotional self-control.”

“Emil, you and I . . .” Ramyn was close to tears.

“Androids,” mumbled Shatterhand, “can be . . . programmed in . . . many different ways. My life has been one . . . long, unpleasant . . . comedy transcending . . . the ludicrous.”

Sobbing, Ramyn buried her face in her hands. Klavik and Kurani had to bend close in order to catch the stricken executive’s all but inaudible words.

“Parvon motivational . . . psychology favors . . . the carrot-and-stick approach, yet often neglects the carrot. First they took away . . . my legs, then my . . . Ramyn. Numberless androids replaced her, but for Parvon . . . amusement, not mine.”

“Stop it!” Ramyn was becoming hysterical.

Klavik knew anything he said might make matters worse. He suppressed an urge to go and comfort Ramyn.

A long, wheezing rattle issued from the geriatric chair. Klavik used two fingers to check Shatterhand’s pulse, and found none. He used his remaining thumb and forefinger to close the dead android’s eyes. Turning, he met Kurani’s sober gaze. “Take care of her, sir.”

“I shall, never fear.”

Handing a laser rifle to the PM, Klavik stooped to collect the other fallen weapon and leaned it against the wall. Tearing aside the oil portrait of a younger, much more debonair planetary director he lifted the weapon. A two-second laser burst reduced the wall safe’s lock to a blob of molten metal. Prying open the steel door with the weapon’s stock, set the rifle aside and felt for the activation stud.

“Down there, a weapon will be of no use,” warned Kurani.

“My weapon is with me always.”

“I can’t believe you’re up to it,” objected the prime minister. “Not in your condition, not with an arm off at the —”

“Keep a close watch on the portal,” advised Klavik, heading into the alcove. “If the Parvon has summoned more androids, they’ll be here soon. When Ramyn’s herself again, teach her to use the other laser rifle. If there’s a lull, you might search the office for our communications transceiver.”

Kurani nodded mutely. Head bowed, standing over Prince Kewart’s recumbent form, he voiced a solemn benediction in Kraan’s archaic High Tongue.

“Rest serene, O Prince. Having slain the malefactor in righteous wrath, thou’rt no longer a princeling, but Kewart ab Kraan, His Omnipotence Twenty-fifth, Esemplastos . . .”

* * *

The lift compartment grounded with a mild jolt. The doors rolled apart, and automatically extinguished the blinding actinic glare. The exotic greeted Klavik in its customary authoritarian manner. "Such rash actions were totally unnecessary."

Klavik stepped to the edge of the alien well. Looking down, clutched the blood-oozing stump of his arm, he regarded the writhing Parvon coldly.

"More importantly," added the exotic, its transliterated voice echoing in the limestone chamber, "your injury requires immediate attention. Go to the Village infirmary and —"

"Shatterhand," said Klavik, "is no longer with us."

"As this poor creature surmised." The flat, inhuman voice conveyed no iota of sympathy. "As a pragmatist, you must realize the unit designated Shatterhand had outlived its usefulness. Hundreds wait to take its place, thousands. As you have already judged, sentimentality is not an attribute we Parvons hold in high repute. Nevertheless, this poor creature feels a need to —"

"Neither," said Klavik, "are we of Kraan overly sentimental."

"So?" Gentle fingers attempted to begin probing Klavik's mind. "For all your derring-do, my superb neohuman specimen, the stalemate you envision will be short-lived. Violence begets naught but violence, answering nothing. Your rash deed has achieved no more than the senseless destruction of four valuable android units."

"Five," amended Klavik.

"We stand corrected, five. But at what atrocious risk to life and, in your instance, limb. Your foolhardiness knows no bounds."

"You happen to be gravely mistaken," declared Klavik, "about a stalemate. Whether absent of sentiment, or drowning in sentimentality, you are far too intelligent not to appreciate the fact that further imprisonment of my friends will trigger an interstellar conflict."

"Far too intelligent . . ? You dare patronize us? No, we will not have it."

"Oh, you will have it," assured Klavik. He stepped to the gray console nested in a granite alcove, and single-handedly ripped loose the cables.

"Ah, we do sense an unwholesome degree of overpowering rage," mused the exotic. "It is ethnic in its intensity, its purity of purpose. We are reluctant to disillusion you in emotional and physical state you presently find yourself, but a supposition that communication with our vessel in hyperspace is limited to electronics is erroneous. At any time, we are able to —"

"— be truthful for a change," supplied Klavik, poised above the "poor, wretched creature" ceaselessly undulating in the pool of liquid methane. "I'm going to make certain you are truthful."

"What? You presume to contest our strength of mind?"

"I do so presume," said Klavik. "On your ground, on your own terms."

"A ludicrous concept at best, a fatal one at worst. Engaging in such a contest would be like entertaining a duel with a one-armed . . . Your pardon. Under the present circumstances, we opted for an ill-chosen neohuman simile."

Klavik did not respond verbally. Gathering himself within himself, he stoked the furnace of his inner rage, forcibly thrust his essence into the exotic's mind. *En garde, poor wretched creature.*

* * *

The exotic's mental riposte staggered Klavik physically as well as mentally. Stumbling back against the subterranean vault's jackhammer-scored stonewall, he learned that his relatively untested defenses had been effortlessly brushed aside. The Parvon bore down with merciless intensity, gathering a second mental bolt.

Klavik's brain ignited as if it preparing to explode. Unable to deflect the avalanche of mental barbs, he felt the agony inside his skull swell to exquisite proportions. Quivering in spastic shock, he made a supreme effort to remain conscious, in some isolated compartment of his mind realizing that going under meant losing everything, including his life.

Rocked internally, battered by forceful mental thrusts the magnitude of which made him appreciate the fact that he was indeed a neophyte, his defenses sagged, collapsing again and again whenever and wherever he fought to shore them up. His mind nakedly exposed to the exotic's assault, he tottered on the brink of obliteration.

Reaching deep into the depths of his innermost being, he held on grimly, tenaciously, dredging forth untapped reservoirs of psychic strength he had not known existed. Tenacity, and a sheer, indomitable will to survive, bred a renewed surge of psychic energy. Steeling himself against a continuous barrage of onslaughts, he no longer feeling nakedly vulnerable, sensing a return to some form of shaky equilibrium between himself and the exotic.

Klavik suddenly knew himself to be indomitable, invincible, and counterattacked with every quantum of psychic power he could muster. He probed deftly for a chink in the Parvon's mental armor, stumbled across one or two tiny, sliver-like apertures and strained to drive wedges into cracks that widened gradually, a bit at a time as they were forced open.

The battle began seesawing back and forth in a deadly dance performed on a mental plane, fought in a silence broken only by Klavik's ragged gasps. It became a game of give and take, feint and thrust, engage and retreat, riposte and counter-riposte.

He was approaching a state of total exhaustion, and knew it, but heartening to sense a barely perceptible weakening in the exotic's counterattacks.

He strained, tried to redouble his efforts. The cracks he had labored to widen elongated, gradually spread apart, and then narrowed again as the Parvon erected fresh redoubts of resistance. Eventually the openings became crevasses, opened farther into windows, and then doorways that nanometer by nanometer revealed a maze of interrelated, labyrinthine vistas.

Flushed with exhilaration, Klavik began explore the maze, tracing chains and linkages to bifurcated memory branches, hastening through galleries alive with fleeting images — a convocation of undulating Parvon exotics within their planet's hydrosphere, a much younger Shatterhand dallying with a voluptuous android maiden, a conversation between Buford and His Omnipotence . . .

His Omnipotence!

The vision seared him. Intuiting what lay beyond the barrier the exotic was desperately trying to erect, he pursued the memory link with relentless purpose and arrived at a revelation so utterly dismaying that the mental connection ruptured in a flash of brilliance.

Crashing to the uneven granite floor, semi-conscious, totally depleted of psychic and physical energy, he panted in short, agonized gasps. Deluged by rivulets of perspiration due to the stark chamber's intolerable temperature and humidity, tears of anguish welled in his eyes.

No, he thought weakly, it can't be . . .

Everything suddenly went black.

Consciousness returned sometime later a little at a time. Summoning what residual strength remained, he made a vain attempt to gain to his feet, and gave up. On hands and knees, he crawled toward the lift compartment, the stump of his arm oozing crimson droplets marking his slow progress. Before reaching the lift compartment, the rough floor rose up and struck him in the forehead. Again, as it had in Chatham's holodrama, everything faded to black.

He came around later, and found himself sprawled on the granite floor, fuzzy-minded, unable to reorient himself in space and time. He eventually belly-crawled into the lift compartment, leaving behind a trail of bloody droplets all the way back to the brink of the exotic's methane pool.

He had learned the truth, and fervently wished he hadn't.

FORTY

Deeply worried that too much time had elapsed for hope to remain, Ramyn began to fear the worst. Waiting anxiously, pacing back and forth in front of the alcove, a laser rifle in hand she was not sure she knew how to use, she willed the lift to ascend.

When it finally did, and the doors rolled apart, she screamed. Looking more dead than alive, glassy-eyed, crumpled in a corner of the compartment clutching the stump of his arm, Klavik did not appear able to recognize her or his surroundings.

Kurani brushed past Ramyn, knelt beside Klavik. "What took place?"

Semi-conscious, Klavik muttered, "Parvon . . ."

"What of the filthy worm? Pull yourself together, talk to us."

Klavik stirred. He failed to respond.

"Things are looking up," encouraged the PM, hoping the news would revive Klavik. "I found our transceiver in Shatterhand's desk and summoned help from the *Kolodaan*. The captain dispatched a lifeboat groundside, and the ship's security detail should be here any second." After a negative headshake, he glanced at Ramyn. "No use, lass; he's completely done in."

Ramyn strained to help the PM levitate Klavik. Doggedly, putting one foot ahead of the other, his struggling friends helped him stagger into the office, where he fell into a lounge, tried in vain to speak. But darkness encroached once again, threatening to carry him into the long, badly lit tunnel about to swallow him. With a detached lack of interest he watched the tunnel walls converge, and oblivion descended.

When he revived sometime later, Kurani and Ramyn were huddled beside the lounge. The PM, his laser rifle aimed at the closed portal, noticed Klavik stir, saw his eyelids flutter.

"Hang on a tad longer," said the PM. "The flight surgeon shuttled down from the *Kolodaan* along with the ship's security detail. He'll be here any moment now."

Klavik had trouble uttering a single word, "Kewart . . .?"

"The lad's still unconscious. As you suggested, a concussion seems likely. But he's young, robust. He'll mend, never fear. It's you who's causing us grave concern. Can anything be done about your arm?"

“Later . . .” Klavik reached up feebly, took Ramyn’s hand and squeezed gently. “Can you leave us . . . for short time? Need . . . private word with . . . Kurani.”

Ramyn’s hazel eyes narrowed in puzzlement.

“Important.”

Letting go his hand, she went despondently to a lounge across the office, sat down and turned her back to them.

“Out with it,” urged Kurani, speaking softly, averting neither his gaze nor the emission bell of the laser rifle from the closed portal.

“Fill you in . . . later. Close to . . . blacking out again. Thorium,” he murmured, unable to say more.

“Thorium . . . ?” Kurani leaned close. “You’re rambling, not that I blame you. We must stay on course; a legion of androids could pour down on us at any —”

Klavik said weakly. “When . . . assassination news broke, I was investigating . . . theft of thorium isotope.”

“Aye, but what has that to do with —?”

“Payment,” murmured Klavik. “Thorium paid . . . for assassination.”

Kurani sucked in breath. “Someone in Kraan plotted the abomination, paid the Syndicate to arrange it?”

“Yes, and . . . no . . .” Klavik trailed off, too weak, too choked with emotion to continue.

Kurani flushed. “Who, Klavik? Did you learn who did it?”

“Won’t . . . believe me.”

“Try me! Come, spit it out!”

“His . . . Omnipotence.”

The Prime Minister flinched, recoiled in wide-eyed disbelief. “What are you telling me?”

“True. His Omnipotence . . . arranged it . . . himself.”

“Your wound has left you delirious.”

“Think . . . about it. His Omnipotence, the Kraan . . . Esemplastos, ‘he who knits . . . disparate elements into a . . . whole. Into . . . unity.’”

“That thing down there has tricked you soundly, Klavik. You’ve swallowed a scurrilous lie. More fool you for succumbing to —”

“It told me . . . nothing. I ripped . . . knowledge from its . . . mind.”

Kurani suddenly looked much older. His breath coming in ragged gasps, he said, “His Omnipotence *martyred* himself?”

“Afraid . . . so.” Klavik felt himself slipping away. The prime minister’s stunned, defeated features wavered in and out of focus.

“Grew to manhood together, we did,” said Kurani. “He left on holiday, ill and exhausted in mind and spirit over escalating strife in the homeworld. What he did was . . . He accomplished his aim in his own fashion, on his own terms, fused the warring Kamala and Kaolin factions, united our world.”

The one time Royal Aerospace Forces Grand Marshal wept openly, unashamedly. Tears of grief rolling down his cheeks, he murmured, “Now all becomes clear. When we departed for this accursed place, vengeful graffiti decorated buildings and bridges in every city and town.

‘Death to the Regicide’ was scrawled on walls and fences. But, why, Klavik? Why would His Omnipotence even dream of the ultimate self-sacrifice? Can you hear me?”

Klavik lacked the strength to respond. Shadows in the corners of Shatterhand’s sumptuous office crowded closer, clotting and condensing until darkness again flooded over him, engulfing him in a vortex sucking him down into black nothingness.

FORTY-ONE

“How says Parvo’s insidious syndicate?” Prime Minister Kurani harsh demand was spoken harshly. “How?”

Despite the astringent quality of the exotic’s transliteration, its speech was laden with self-pity. “Confronting this poor creature with an ultimatum is an absurdity surpassing all previous absurdities. We must contact our senior hive in order to —”

“Your fellow worms have left you here to rot,” announced Kurani with no small degree of satisfaction. “The vessel laboring in hyperspace to effect your escape vanished rather hastily. As you once told Klavik, Parvons are not overly sentimental.”

Aware of the abandonment, but hitherto loathe to advertise the fact, the exotic changed tactics. “The continued existence of this wretched creature is in doubt. Sustenance is no problem. Certain marine creatures, while less than delectable, are nevertheless ingestible. However, sustaining the necessary environment will become a thorny issue unless replenishment of —”

“The *Kolodaan*’s science officer,” declared Kurani gruffly, “advises us an unlimited supply of cattle droppings will generate more than enough liquid methane to satisfy your needs.” The PM snorted in contempt. “Living in a byproduct of manure seems appropriate under the circumstances.”

The alien fell silent.

“When your vessel took to its heels in cowardly fashion,” added the PM, “by default you became spokesperson for your ridiculous culture, if any. I ask again, how says Parvo to Kraan’s declaration of war?”

“Abandonment ‘in cowardly fashion,’ to borrow your quaint term, is semantically null and void,” objected the Parvon. “No such term as cowardice exists in our lexicon. Since our actions were driven by practicality, not —”

“How *say* you?” demanded Kurani more forcefully. “Answering that question will be in the best interest of Parvo, I assure you. Should no response be forthcoming, every starcruiser in Kraan’s grand battle fleet, save one, will shortly arrive circum-Parvo. You will either agree to the cited terms and conditions, at which point our task force will be recalled, or the grand marshal in command will be directed to do his duty. It’s not our way to allow an infamy like regicide to go unpunished.”

“The ‘infamy’ of which you speak was inspired and funded, nay, contracted in good faith, by your ruler. Therefore we do not feel any need to —”

“Good faith! This, from *you*? You do not know the meaning of that term. In no way does the self-sacrifice of His Omnipotence mitigate the overt act of war committed by Parvo. I will put the question to you only once more. For the very last time, how says Parvo?”

“The imposed conditions and terms are not merely illegal, but inordinately severe, and we shall therefore —”

“May legality be banished to the Putrid Pit! Do you wish to speak to the matter at hand, or do you wish to stand mute and endure the consequences? Either way is entirely acceptable to Kraan.”

“The neohuman code of laws, Lex Galacticum, prohibits such flagrant —”

“Citing neohuman law,” bellowed the PM, “is a jot more asinine than the ‘absurdity’ indictment you tried to foist off.” On inspiration, he said, “In this instance, perhaps we should invoke Parvon law, if such exists. You assured Klavik that the end always justified the means. Were recent events to be viewed in that brightest of bright lights, the destruction of your homeworld would be wholly justified.”

Throwing its words of wisdom back in its faceless face left the exotic momentarily speechless. “The grossly excessive reparations demanded by Kraan,” it ventured to say, “are not only prohibitive, but non-productive. Our beloved Syndicate has roots and tentacles, branches and shoots entwined in numberless neohuman enterprises, thereby accumulating more gross wealth than can be imagined. Nevertheless, were we to agree to these harsh terms, the loss of Eden would be —”

“This cesspit,” broke in Kurani, “is no longer a honey trap for ultra-wealthy neohuman sybarites. Whether or not Parvo concedes to the imposed conditions, your resort world ceased to exist the instant your ‘beloved’ syndicate agreed to aid and abet regicide. Shuttles depart hourly from the space terminal in either hemisphere. Within a few standard weeks, all guests and neohuman staff members will be gone. The pack of greedy worms guiding your destiny will find their pleasure pit under new management.”

“An outright theft,” protested the exotic. “Piracy of that enormity will cause Kraan to be condemned, made a pariah, an outcast of the civilized portion of the visited —”

“With the exception of your android slaves,” declared Kurani, “everyone will soon be gone. Android programming has ceased forthwith. Your former chattel will undergo therapy and re-education. They will live out their lives as free citizens of New Kraan, and doubtless beget future generations of superior neohumans. His Royal Highness has endorsed the recommendation forwarded by Kraan’s Lord Regent. Klavik has been appointed interim Governor-General of New Kraan.

“Furthermore,” continued the PM, “word of Parvo’s mind-reading chicanery has been disseminated to business center everywhere. You and your ‘beloved’ syndicate may soon be afloat in a sea not of methane, but red ink.”

“Your vindictiveness is unreasonable,” accused the exotic.

“By no means unreasonable,” denied Kurani. “It is you and your acquisitive fellow worms who have demonstrated a lack of reasoning ability. Were one to judge in depth the substance of Parvo’s commercial crimes, our reparations demands would seem exceptionally reasonable. Had resolving the matter been left to me . . .” The PM trailed off. “The choice,” he said with an air of finality, “is yours. You will either agree to the tendered concessions and reparations, or stand mute. But I warn you; the latter course will lead to the decimation of Parvo. Once more, and for absolutely the final time, I put to you the question of questions: How says Parvo?”

“Kraan strikes an indecently harsh bargain,” protested the exotic.
“Realistic,” said Kurani, “not overly harsh. Parvo is getting off lightly.”
Resentful to the end, yet its resentment tempered by pragmatism, the exotic ungraciously capitulated.

EPILOGUE

The balmy afternoon breeze tousled Kewart’s dark hair. Looking downcast, the prince scuffed a boot on the lifeboat’s corrugated access ramp. “I’ll miss you,” he said plaintively.

“The Karnofsky Process,” said Klavik, “takes time, Your Royal Highness. I’ll be staying in Bel Monde the full standard cycle it takes to grow a new forearm.”

“Is it like cloning?”

“Similar,” said Klavik. “I hope to once again be ambidextrous.”

Ramyn quipped, “Don’t count on him making a full recovery, Kewart. The only thing holding him together now is scar tissue.”

Kraan’s future sovereign smiled wanly. “Afterward, you’re returning directly to Eden?”

“New Kraan, Your Royal Highness. Like the mythical garden of antiquity that gave name to this world, Eden is a fading memory. But I must come back here. There is a tremendous amount of work to be done.”

“New Kraan sounds strange,” said Kewart. “Listen, will you and Ramyn at least stop off in the homeworld after leaving Bel Monde? I’d like to see you, you know, sit down, talk things over with you.”

“Your wish, Highness, will always be my command. By then, of course,” added Klavik with a twinkle, “the coronation will be far behind you. Ramyn and I will probably have to file a formal petition, then cool our heels for weeks until you grant us an audience.”

The prince grinned. “I promise to make you wait no more than one standard week.”

Kurani appeared in the lifeboat’s hatchway. “Ready to lift, Highness,” he called impatiently.

“Bossy old fussbudget!” muttered Kewart. He glanced from Klavik to the lovely woman. “I’ll look forward to, uh . . . I mean, I hope to see you again in a few . . . Wait, let me say it properly.”

Kewart ab Kraan, Princeps, a youngster about to become His Omnipotence, Twenty-fifth, Esemplastos, leaned on the coaching he’d received from Kraan’s Protocol Minister. Proudly erect on the lifeboat’s canted access ramp, he said formally, “Our warmest compliments to Milady Ramyn, and of course to you Governor-General Klavik. You have earned our undying gratitude for truly outstanding service to the Crown.”

Klavik bowed low. “Your kind words will be treasured, Highness.”

Refusing to settle for a simple farewell, Ramyn stepped up on the ramp, embraced Kewart and kissed him tenderly. “Until then, Sweet Prince. You and I will always have something special to remember.”

Kewart blushed.

From the hatchway, Kurani clucked in mock disapproval, a feeble attempt to seem displeased by Ramyn's display of familiarity. Nevertheless, a mischievous grin tickled the corners of his generous mouth as he saluted in farewell.

The access ramp retracted, the lifeboat's outer hatch slid closed.

Klavik led Ramyn away to a safe distance, where Victor Chatham waited in an electric tram. The director had shown his respect, allowing his friends say their goodbyes in private. He ushered them aboard the tram that would carry them to the ground-to-orbit shuttle carrying the holovision troupe's cast and crew.

"Klavik," said Chatty, "a niggling glitch in this do-gooder scenario bothers me."

"A *what* bothers you?"

"Sorry, a glitch, a problem. Losing access to this spectacular lump of mud," said the director, "hurts real bad. In my peculiar line of work, Eden has the most glorious series of standing sets ever devised. A glorious backdrop for my action flicks, it's saved Bel Monde from traipsing all over the known galaxy in search of appropriate locations."

Klavik watched *Kolodaan's* lifeboat warp the local spacetime continuum and fall upward under nullified gravity. "New Kraan, Chatty," he told the director, "not Eden. I once promised Kraan would find some way to repay your good works on our behalf. As the appointed Governor-general, it's my turn to scratch your itch. The services of New Kraan will at your disposal whenever you choose, absolutely free of charge."

Chatham clapped his hands loudly. "Now there's a scratch that'll cure any itch." He grinned. "Mean it?"

"Of course."

"The android herd's kaput, but what the hell! We can recruit citizens."

"Aren't extras for hire a better bargain than wooden, preprogrammed semi-slaves? I see no harm," said Klavik, thinking of the jaglon attack, "in programming animals as long as it's done properly."

"Fantastic!" Chatham handed Ramyn down from the tram. "With that in mind, Great White Hunter, let me fill you in on a hot flash that came over me during the wrap party. Miles, Steve and I put our heads together. We were kicking what came down here in Ed . . . sorry, in New Kraan . . . and came up with the grandest, the most glorious romantic action-thriller tale of all time."

"Interesting," said Klavik, trying not to sound disinterested.

"Hey, pay attention," urged Chatham. "I mean to sell our brainstorm to the studio under a single-word title, EDEN. It'll be *your* story, Klavik."

"What do you mean?" asked Ramyn.

"Picture this, just picture it!" Chatham launched into a capsulized version of the proposed holovision epic. "An ultra-deluxe resort world owned by distant, mysterious exotics; a royal assassination; a gorgeous Mata Hari masquerading as an android; a telepathic Parvon wriggling around behind the scenes — well, below the scenes — not to mention oodles of blood-and-guts action, intrigue, sinister androids and sabre-tooth jaglons skulking about. It can't miss! While you're growing a new wing in Bel Monde, I'm going to talk you into playing the lead, Klavik. You're going to play *yourself*!"

A bilious expression transformed the rugged features of New Kraan's appointed Governor-general, drawing a giggle from Ramyn.

She tittered, then threw back her head and abandoned herself to hilarity. "Just because . . . you're paranoid," she managed between gasps, "don't think we're . . . not out to get you."

Klavik said wearily, "Only the paranoid survive."