

Drake Maijstral walked on soft leather buskins down the center of the Peleng City ballroom and never made a noise. He was light-footed by trade.

Above him, ideographs for "long life" and "welcome, travelers" floated below the high ceiling. The glowing holos lit the room more brightly than usual, mainly to provide sufficient light for the large number of media globes that also floated over the assembly. Individuals, human and not, found themselves reacting to the unexpected brightness in accordance with their character and purpose. Some did not wish their business to be known, and these shrank into the shadows and mumbled with their faces turned to the wall. Those wanting to be seen promenaded beneath the hovering globes or floated on a-grav fields toward the ceiling in hopes a globe might condescend to interview them. Some promenaded in the light, but being self-conscious, blushed. Others tried their best to behave normally and ended up asking themselves what normal was, particularly under these conditions.

Maijstral did none of these things. He had been schooled in ways of maintaining assurance under unusual conditions, was used to a certain amount of media attention, and

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though his business was not entirely legitimate, he felt no urge to hide in corners and mumble.

The formal stance adopted by most of the guests featured the shoulders pulled back and hips tucked under a slightly curved but nevertheless rigid spine. The pose was natural to a Khosalikh but required training in a human. That Maijstral managed to add a supple grace to this posture was to his credit. He was only a few inches above the human average, but he looked taller. Also to his credit was his dress, which managed to make the most of the monochrome scheme demanded by High Custom—black being the mourning color of most of humanity, and white of the Khosali. He wore little jewelry save the silver pins used to hold back his long brown hair, and the large diamond on one finger. His eyes were a pleasant and unassuming green, and half-closed lids gave the impression of laziness. He appeared to be in his midtwenties.

Maijstral approached a tall, elegant, somewhat older man, who walked the ballroom unaccompanied. The man had a glass stuck in one eye, and was one of three hundred humans who bore only a single name. His skin was black, his ruffles and boots scarlet.

"Etienne," said Maijstral.

"Maijstral. How delightful."

Formally they sniffed each other's ears. A waxed mustachio point jabbed Maijstral's cheek. "Still in mourning, I see," said Etienne.

"My father's still dead," said Maijstral.

They spoke in High Khosali. Most humans managed the strange intonation and nasal vowels easily enough, but it took training to make proper use of the shifting syntax wherein the structure of each sentence makes a comment on the previous sentence, paragraph, or idea, and in one

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difficult parsing even makes a relation of the subject of the conversation to the state of the universe as a whole.

"I remember hearing the news about your father a year or so ago. There's no hope of recovery, I assume?"

"I'm afraid not. He sends me frequent letters complaining about his condition.\*"

"The dead can be a burden, I'm sure. But mourning suits your figure well, Maijstral."

"Thank you. You look elegant, as always. Though I'm not sure the eyeglass suits you. I don't think you're old enough for such a major affectation."

Etienne lowered his voice. "It's cosmetic, I'm afraid. Pearl Woman challenged me on Heath Minor and ran me through the eye. My boot slipped, damn it. There are still a few bruises around the implant." He paused a moment, as if troubled. "You hadn't heard?"

"I'm afraid not. I've just ended a long passage, and I haven't caught up on the news."

"Ah." Etienne seemed comforted. "Take my arm and walk with me. The citizens seem a bit shy."

Maijstral fell into step with the other man. Locals parted before them in a certain awe. "I am not surprised," Maijstral said, "How long has it been since members of the Diadem visited here?"

"Forty standard. And from the looks of this burgh, I can see why."

Maijstral was diplomatically silent. It is a credit to his teachers that he did not so much as glance upward to see if one of the media globes had overheard this remark. Etienne went on, his parsing indicating irritation.

"It's not so much the reception as the degree of eagerness, if you know what I mean. Too much reverence."

"They will soon learn to relax in your company, I'm sure."

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"My dear Maijstral, I don't want them to relax. I'm not supposed to be a neighbor, I'm supposed to be a god."

Anyone, Maijstral reflected, who has got a rapier through the eye and then discovered that an old acquaintance hasn't even heard about it might be forgiven a certain amount of peevishness, even inconsistent peevishness. Maijstral shrugged.

"In that case reverence is only your due," he said.  
"Relish it, it is the coinage of godhood." Spoken in the difficult parsing relating the subject matter to the condition of existence.

Etienne wasn't so peeved he didn't know when someone had scored a point, but his recovery was graceful. He bowed to a tall blond woman who was approaching them at a lazy walk. She was elegantly dressed in blue and silver, and looked younger than her thirty-two years.

"Ah. Nichole. Maijstral was just asking about you."

Her scent was familiar and struck him like a silken glove. "My lady. I am ravished." Maijstral brushed her knuckles with his lips before sniffing her ears. She was taller than Maijstral, and pale. She, like Etienne, bore only a forename. She smiled at Maijstral whitely.

"Drake. Such a joy to see you after all this time. Mourning looks well on you." She spoke Human Standard.

"Thank you. And thanks again for the kind note on the death of my father."

"How is he, by the way?"

The media globes were beginning to jostle one another above Nichole's head. Etienne made his excuses, sniffed ears, and departed. Nichole took Maijstral's arm. Her nearness to him conveyed old intimacies, suggested new hopes. Linked, they strolled the length of the ballroom. At least fifty men turned red and mentally assassinated Maijstral on the spot.

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"Etienne seemed disturbed I hadn't heard of his duel."

"His share was going down, you know. This mandated an affaire de coeur with a protege of Pearl Woman, an affaire d'honneur with the Pearl herself, and then the new eye. A silly business. The second duel among the Diadem in a twelvemonth. Pearl Woman was furious."

"He told me his boot slipped."

"Perhaps it did. One hopes it will cure him of martial ambition. Dueling is habit-forming, though luckily suicide is not."

Even the Khosali, who had reintroduced to humanity the twin fashions of dueling and suicide, had mixed feelings about this part of High Custom- There is a Khosali saying, "Any fool can die in a duel." (They have a similar saying about suicide.) The tone of Nichole's comments (though spoken in Human Standard, which does not have the contextual modes of High Khosali) somehow managed to convey the essence of the Khosali expression without actually saying it.

Nuance, nuance. The globes, such as heard, loved it.

"How is Roman? Is he well?"

Maijstral smiled. "Roman is Roman. He'll be pleased you asked after him, but he will be secretly pleased."

As they spoke they watched each other, listened, touched. Explored, in their minds, possibilities. Each in search of a conclusion, a resolution.

"He's much the same, then. And yourself?"

Maijstral cocked his head while considering the ques-

tion. "Well enough, I suppose."

"You're too young for ennui. That's more my line."

"Did that sound like ennui? I intended rather a becoming modesty."

"You're not a modest man, Drake. Don't assume vir-

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tues you don't possess." Said lightly, but still with a touch of vinegar. She had changed in four years-

"I have to assume at least a few," Maijstral said, "else I'll have none at all."

She put her free hand on his arm. "Now that's more like the Drake Maijstral I remember."

The second hand on his arm was an external sign of an inner process. She had come to a resolution regarding Maijstral, a resolution similar to that which he had reached himself some moments before. It was perhaps impolite, and certainly assumed much, for him to reach such a resolution so soon.

She looked at a group of Khosali standing a short distance away. "Are those Imperials snubbing us? They stand facing the wall."

"That is Baron Sinn and his friends. He was always deep in conspiracy with my father. I suspect he is a spy. He probably regrets being here at all, considering the media attention this is getting."

"What is there here worth spying on? A provincial planet, sufficiently far from the border to have little military value."

"He must earn his wages somehow."

Trumpets sounded from the a-grav orchestra suspended near me arched ceiling. People began sorting themselves out into couples and lines. "Ah," said Maijstral, "the Pilgrimage to the Cinnamon Temple. Will you partner me?"

"Delighted, sir."

The Pilgrimage was originally a sprightly dance called

Going to Market, but eight hundred years before, during the reign of an elderly, arthritic Emperor, the pace had been slowed down and a more stately name applied. The change proved to have unexpected benefits. Because the

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dancers changed partners frequently, the slower tread gave everyone in the line the chance to sniff ears and exchange introductions and witticisms—and if you were short of witticisms, you could repeat the same one over and over without fear of being a bore. Cinnamon Temple was, therefore, the perfect get-acquainted dance.

The trumpet call repeated, and the dance began. Maijstral advanced toward his partner and sniffed.

"Will you come see me tomorrow?" Nichole asked.

"I'd be delighted," he answered. She was circling him, stately, her arm crooked to hold an imaginary market basket.

"Can you come at sixteen? I have to witness an Elvis impersonation at eighteen, and you can be my escort."

Maijstral did a caper. "I'll dress formally, then."

"God knows what it will be like." Nichole sighed- "He probably won't even be able to get 'Heartbreak Hotel' right."

Maijstral faced the man on his right and introduced himself. The dance spoke on.

"I don't like it, Pietro. Baron Sinn being here."

Pietro was a young man, gangly, of medium height. His partner was a few years older, with dark, short-clipped hair and a serious mien. Pietro was the taller, but only by virtue of high-heeled boots.

"I don't like it, either. Miss Jensen," Pietro said. "Perhaps he intends to interfere in the auction."

"Damn it. We can't outbid him. If only Tartaglia were here. I sent him a message, but no reply as yet."

"Oops. Sorry."

"You shouldn't dance in heels unless . . . Oh, hell.

Later, Pietro."

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"Baron, a word." Sinn was a Khosalikh; tall, with a pointed face and ebony skin beneath his dark fur. His interrogator was a human; short, fair, with intense blue eyes that glittered like diamond-bearing sand. She was in her fifties but looked ten years younger.

The Baron touched his warm nose to her cheek.  
"Countess."

Her ears pricked downward. "There may be a complication. I noticed that Maijstral is here."

"He has the contents of a planet to choose from, ma'am. I would not be concerned. The chances of our interests being similar are not great."

"Perhaps the simplest way is just to ask."

"I don't wish to betray our intentions to such an uncertain character. We shall simply watch, and wait."

Her mouth hung open, her tongue lolled. A Khosali smile- "Still. I haven't seen him in years. Will you join me, Baron, at the bottom of the set?"

"With pleasure. Countess. Take my arm."

"Drake Maijstral, sir." Mutual sniffs.

"Lieutenant Navarre, sir. I see we're both in mourning." He was a tall man, copper-skinned, about thirty, in uniform with a mourning cloak.

"I'm afraid I don't recognize the uniform. A local unit?"

A dismissive laugh. "No. I'm from Pompey. I just inherited some property here, and I have to inspect it."

"Substantial property, I hope."

"Oh, no. Just a house and some land. A lot of bric-a-brac—my uncle had eccentric tastes, but he wasn't rich. I'm selling it all."

"I hope you don't think me impertinent for asking."

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A shrug. "Not at all. What else is there to talk about, between strangers?"

". . . Yes. My boot slipped, damn it."

"It was such a beautiful eye. I think it was your eyes that made me fall in love with you, years ago when I was a child."

"Er. Yes. To be sure."

"Drake Maijstral, sir."

"Pietro Quijano, sir. Say, are you the Drake Maijstral?"  
"Ah ..."

"Oh. I'm terribly sorry, sir. These are new shoes."

"Think nothing of it, sir. The answer to your question, I'm afraid, is yes."

A pause. "Sir? What question was that?"

"Hello again, Nichole- That was a lovely turn you just did."

"I had to try something new. I've done this dance so many times. . . ."

"Now who's filled with ennui?"

A wry laugh. "I just danced a measure with the most appalling woman. Countess Anastasia. You blanch, Drake."

"She must have arrived late, else I would have seen her." Maijstral's hooded eyes could not entirely conceal his disquiet. "A spectre from my youth."

"She must have found out that Baron Sinn was here. I don't suppose she came to see you."

"My father was terrified of her. and with reason. Truthfully, so was I." He craned his head down the set. "Possibly she won't notice me."

"I wouldn't count on it, Drake. I would guess that woman notices everything."

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"Hullo, Pietro."

"I'm having a good time. Miss Jensen-

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Here we are, involved in a serious intrigue, and with all these famous people around . . . it's just like the Magic Planet of Adventure."

"The what?"

"Didn't you watch Ronnie Romper as a child? I did."

"Of course. I'd forgotten."

"Do you know who's here. Miss Jensen? Drake Maijstral.

The Drake Maijstral."

"I'm sorry to be dense, Pietro, but I'm not sure who you mean."

"Don't you follow sports? The Khovenburg Glacier?

The Inside Straight Affaire?"

"Ah. I remember now. Which one is he?"

"Over there. Talking to the onion-head. I was thinking. ... He might help us with our, uh, problem."

"Oh. "A tone of surprise. "That's a good idea, Pietro."

Two beats' pause. "Is it really?"

"Yes. Bad tuck. My boot slipped."

"Drake Maijstral, sir."

A high-pitched voice composed of glorious harmonies. "Count Quik." The Count was a Troxan, less than four feet tall, with a large, round head composed of translucent layers of alternating brain tissue and cartilage. There were no external ears, as the structure of the head produced a resonance that had much the same purpose. Maijstral had to make approximations during the get'acquainted sniff.

"On unbusiness I am innning this system," the Count

explained. "Humanity is me interested. I big tour taking am. Am on Earth big finishing, acquaintance making."

Maijstral wondered if teaching implants for Human Standard had never been developed for Troxans. "That sounds , delightful," he said. "I have never been to Earth."  
"You touring should. Home of Elvis and ancient Greeks."  
"It's near the border, too, and I'm heading that way. I should make plans. Yes. Definitely."

"Lieutenant Navarre, ma'am."  
"Nichole. The Pompey High Seas Scouts, I see."  
"You recognized me uniform? I'm astonished at your breadth of knowledge, ma'am. Have you been to Pompey?"  
"Alas, no. But I've always liked a man in uniform."

"Drake Maijstral, madam."

"Amalia Jensen, sir. Are you the Maijstral of the Mirrorglass BellBox?"

"I'm afraid that was Geoff Fu George, madam."

"I beg your pardon."

"Think nothing of it. The comparison flatters me."

Briskly, "I was wondering, though . . . perhaps we could discuss business."

"I am rapt attention, madam."

"An antiquity. About to be sold at auction. I'm afraid I might be outbid."

"I shall be happy to hear you- Please continue when next we share a measure."

"Delighted."

"Such a shame. I hope you've acquired a new pair to go with the new eye."

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"Maijstral, sir."

"Paavo Kuusinen." He was a slight, cool man, entering middle age-

"That coat is cut Empire-fashion. Are you with the Sinn party?"

"I travel alone, sir. On business."

Maijstral could think of no reply to that, and the man's manner discouraged intimacy. He danced on.

"Drake."

"Nichole."

"Do you know that four hundred lives are lost annually on Pompey, in accidents relating to the sea?"

"Ah. I see you have been talking to the man in uniform."

"He is full of facts, Maijstral. How long has it been since I've actually heard a fact? Not a supposition, or a rumor, or a piece of gossip, but an actual clear-cut fact? Four hundred lives. A fact."

"It is a fact that you are beautiful."

"It is a fact with which I am distressingly familiar."

"Pietro Quijano."

"General Gerald. Marines. Retired." The General was a broad-shouldered man, erect, his face set in an expression of permanent fury.

"Your servant, sir."

"Ridiculous business, this dance. I've sniffed so many dirty necks tonight it's scandalous. Yours could use a little wash, by the way."

"Ah—I'll attend to it straight away. I say, do you know who I just met? Drake Maijstral. You know, the Khovenburg Glacier. The Swiss Cheese Incident."

"Maijstral? Here? Where?"

"There. In mourning."

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"Hah! An outrage. And here, in this company."

"Oh. Sorry, sir."

"You shouldn't be wearing heels, young man. you don't need the extra height."

"Oh." Beat. "Do you really think so?"

"Nichole."

"Paavo Kuusinen. Your servant, ma'am."

"Are you traveling from the Empire?"

"Yes, ma'am. Is it that obvious?"

"If you wish to remain anonymous, you should have that coat altered."

"I am chagrined. I am a student of human nature, and I had hoped to blend in, the better simply to watch the rest of humanity at their games. My tailor assured me this was the latest style."

"Our fashions no longer come from the Empire. There are some here who would count that a loss."

"Drake Maijstral."

"General Gerald. Marines. Retired. Come after anything of mine and I'll kill you."

Astonishment. A caper terminated at the halfway point.  
"I beg your pardon, sir, but I have no intention—"

"I don't give a damn about your intentions. It's results that I'm after. Move in my direction and I'll kill you, or have it done. That's fair warning."

"Fair enough, sir."

"I don't need your judgments as to my fairness either, damn you. Go sniff that lady's neck and get the hell out of my sight."

"Miss Jensen, if all is as you say, my fee would be at least sixty. More if the job is difficult."

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"Do you doubt my information?"

"Your information may not be up to date."

"Your price is ... high, Maijstral."

"You aren't allowing me media rights. If you change your mind, the price will go down."

"Sorry. I'm Firm on that point."

"Then I'm firm on my price. My apologies, miss."

"I saw that fight of yours. Damn bad business."

"Yes, General. Unfortunately my boot slipped."

"Hah. You're a liar, or perhaps an idiot. She dropped a foot on your instep, you lost your concentration, she caught your blade in forte and you were done for. A midshipman could have done better."

"Sir"

"Don't play the outraged man of action with me. I may be past retirement, but I know better than to fall for tricks like that. I'd cut you to ribbons."

"Maijstral."

"Countess." There was a distressing wail in his nerves, a tendency in his limbs to tremble and betray his resolution. It is not pleasant to discover that a childhood ogre still has teeth, still possesses the ability to quicken the pulse, tighten the diaphragm, weaken the knees.

"Allow me to express my thanks for the kind note on

my father's death."

"He was the worthy son of a great man. You could do no better than to emulate him." She spoke in High Khosali,

her pronunciation impeccable.

Maijstral drew his ears back into the High Custom expression of qualified agreement. (High Custom demands mobile ears. Pity Count Quik, deprived of such a valued means of expression.)

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"Given the nature of the times," he said, "that is impossible." He answered in Khosali Standard, which he suspected might throw her off balance somewhat.

Her eyes glittered like chips of polished blue stone.

"Given your nature, you mean."

Maijstral shrugged. "Perhaps. If you like."

"You are here on business connected with your . . . occupation, then?"

He smiled- "Of course not. Countess. I am here to visit

the zoo and see the methanites."

"The zoo." Countess Anastasia's face never seemed to change expression; she regarded him with an intensity he found not only frightening but somewhat embarrassing.

"Your rather was a steady man."

"He moved steadily into debt."

"I could find you employment, if that's what you want."

"I prefer not to impose on old connections. Countess." Longing for the measure to end.

Ears turned downward, the Khosali mark of disdain. "Pride. Pride and unsteadiness. It is not a fortunate combination."

"It is not a fortunate time. Countess. To our mutual regret, I'm sure."

The measure ended, and Maijstral faced the man on his right. His nerves were still singing. Honors, he thought, were about even. Not bad for a man forced to relive the tenors of childhood.

"Baron Sinn."

"Ah. The spy."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"General Gerald. Marines. Retired. You're the Khosali spy."

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"You are mistaken, sir." Coldly. Drawn up to his full height, which was not quite that of the General's.

"You are a military officer, traveling under commercial cover, with two Khosali as military in appearance as yourself. If that ain't a spy, I don't know what is."

"I do not believe, sir, we have anything further to say to one another."

"You mistake me. I have plenty to say. But I'm willing to defer it, if you like."

"Ah. The last measure. I trust the room is brimming  
with new acquaintances."

Nichole looked at him with an amused smile. "You  
seem pleased with yourself, Drake. Did you conduct some  
piece of business?"

"I managed to hold off the awful Countess, and without  
being any more offensive than she."

"Ah. True cause for rejoicing." The dance ended and  
the set tapped their toes in a pattern of approval. (High  
Custom again. At least they didn't have to rotate their  
ears.) Nichole put her arm in Maijstral's and they began  
strolling through a dispersing, particolored cloud of couples.  
"Etienne looks out of sorts," she said. "I wonder why?"  
"Perhaps he's promised Countess Anastasia the next  
dance. May I offer you refreshment?"  
"Thank you."

Media globes hovered nearer, their close-up lenses mak-  
ing soft whirs as they focused on the two faces. Some-  
where in their controllers' headquarters, expert lip-readers  
leaned closer to their video screens. Their concentration on  
this single inconsequential conversation caused them to  
miss three choice syllables from General Gerald, who was  
looking after Maijstral with an expression of disgust on his  
high-colored face.

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Maijstral fetched Nichole a sorbet and took a glass of  
rink for himself. He glanced over the crowd again, seeing  
the Countess in intent conversation with Baron Sinn. Both  
of them looked abruptly in his direction, then away. He  
wondered whether he had it in him to face the Countess  
again tonight, decided not.

"I think I shall retire, Nichole," he said. "I just arrived  
on Peleng this morning, and it was a long trip. I've missed  
siesta entirely. I came only to see you."

If Nichole was piqued, she didn't show it. In light of  
Maijstral's last remark, she mentally reviewed the resolu-  
tion she had made earlier, then confirmed it.

"I will see you, then, tomorrow morning," she said.  
They exchanged sniffs. "I'm delighted you're here, Drake.  
Old friends always increase one's pleasure in new scenery."

"At your service, Nichole. As always."

The orchestra began to tune again. Floating holograms announced the Pathfinder. An eager young man tottered on high heels toward Nichole and bowed.

"Pietro Quijano, miss. Perhaps you remember. May I have the honor of the dance?"

If Nichole felt dismay at this apparition, she concealed it well. She smiled. "But of course." Media globes floated after them.

Maijstral finished his rink, abandoned by the media and feeling better for it. He strolled along the wall toward the exit, spoke briefly to Amalia Jensen, confirmed their earlier conversation, and promised he would be in touch. He strolled for the exit, and was about to walk through the cool hologram-patterned door when he was intercepted.

"Pardon me, sir." A man in uniform, Maijstral recognized, and a bearer of facts.

"Lieutenant Navarre."

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"I wonder, sir, if I might beg your indulgence in the answering of ... well, an insolent question."

Maijstral regarded him with his lazy green eyes. "Speak on, sir."

"The young lady you were just speaking to? An old friend, perhaps?"

"You mean Miss Jensen. We just met, on the Pilgrimage."

Navarre seemed relieved. "There is no attachment, then?"

"None. sir. The field is clear."

The man grinned. "Thank you, sir. Please forgive the impertinence."

"Your servant." Maijstral bowed and walked into the warm Peteng night. A media globe asked for an interview but was refused. He had all the publicity he needed.

If you have to be conquered by aliens from outer space, you could do worse than be conquered by the Khosali. The Khosali have conquered dozens of species and have had lots of practice at it, and this ensures that a minimum number of lives will be lost during the conquest and that the readjustment can begin right away.

There wasn't much of a fight when the Khosali conquered Earth. Humanity had barely got off its little rock in space, and when a hundred thousand alien warships suddenly appeared around the planet, their missiles and beams trained on the inhabitants, only a few hundred humans, crewing military battle stations, chose to resist, and once these were disposed of, the sensible majority sensibly surrendered.

Most Khosali conquests work that way. They've encountered only a few alien races that weren't as sensible as humanity, and these were, with regret, extinguished down to the last individual, and sincerely mourned afterward. The Khosaii, admirable as they may be in other respects, do not see the humor in other species' independence. The whole point of the Imperial System is universal allegiance to the Emperor, and without that everything goes down the drain.

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The Khosali, as conquerors go, are fairly enlightened. They don't interfere with local institutions or religions if they can help it; their taxation is, on the whole, light; they import tens of thousands of teachers and missionaries to elevate the subject race to a useful near-equality and an appreciation of High Custom. When a race is sufficiently advanced, members will begin appearing on the Imperial Council and in positions of importance throughout the

Empire,

There will, of course, be a few changes. There are garrisons; the news gets censored—Khosali are stuffy, but not stupid. High Custom defines what the Khosali consider best about themselves: their formality, their elegance, their rigid idealism. The Khosali consider High Custom a universal, but the reality of High Custom is that it's a test. If an alien can master the intricacies of High Custom, she proves herself someone the Khosali can talk to and deal

with. That's what the missionaries and teachers are really about; they're fishers of men, dipping their hooks into the oceans of alien races, searching for those capable of standing as intermediaries between the Khosali and their own race, capable of communicating with both, interpreting

one to the other.-

Such lucky individuals often find themselves ennobled. Silly, really, but the Khosali insist. What's an Imperial System without a hereditary aristocracy? Earth had gone through one convulsion after another trying to get rid of its own hereditary nobility, and now they were back, counts and barons and dukes and all the rest, and to make it even more ridiculous, most of them turned out to be aliens.

High Custom might not be a universal, but the behavior of aristocrats certainly is. Earth's new aristocracy proved itself capable of grandness, enlightenment, inspired rule, the cultivation of worthwhile art and talent. Witness the

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achievements of Viscount Cheng or Solomon the Incorruptible. The aristocrats also proved capable of brutality, shortsightedness, dissipation, avarice, and gay folly—witness Robert the Butcher or Mad Julius. Humanity rejoiced or suffered under conditions created and maintained by its new nobility; much that was grand was contemplated, much that was ignoble was suffered. It was all quite predictable.

What was less predictable was the volatile mixture of human and Khosali. Each race bore traits the other considered admirable; each found the other frustrating.

Humanity, once it got to know them, found the Khosali high-minded but dull. The black-furred, long-nosed, square-shouldered conquerors revered the Emperor, practiced moderation, were fond of parades and military music, raised their offspring to be courteous, well-behaved, and productive citizens. They tended toward stuffiness and fussiness and were masters of niggling detail and Imperial regulation. There was nothing really objectionable in any of this—everyone has an uncle who behaves just that way, and he's a fine enough fellow at heart. But you don't invite your stuffy uncle to your good parties, now, do you? The Khosali in general do not find irreverence amusing;

neither are they inclined to trust frivolity, irresponsibility, freakishness, overt creativity, or individuals born with the

gift of laughter and the sense that the world is mad. They don't trust people who whistle in public or make bawdy jokes or get drunk at sporting events. High-minded Khosali believe such individuals would be mightily improved by putting their shoulders to the wheel and taking the Emperor Principle seriously for a change.

Their sense of humanity, sad to say, is that they're all like that. Frivolous and amusing, possibly, but not to be taken seriously. Their stereotype of humanity is unjust—

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there are of course zillions of individuals who would fulfill every Khosali idea of a responsible citizen, and a lot of them found their way into Imperial service and won commendations from dutiful and exacting superiors. Some were more fanatical Imperialists than most Khosali—look at the excesses of Robert the Butcher, who indiscriminately slaughtered hundreds of thousands of humans in the name of the Emperor, something no Khosali governor ever

contemplated.

Our own stereotype is likewise incomplete. There are Khosali who behave with frivolity and irreverence, and a lot more who would be frivolous and irreverent if they ever got the chance. In their secret souls, the Khosali dance drunkenly in the moonlight and sport with wet-muzzled damosels. They just don't talk about it much.

For the Khosali are not without their own secret depravities. They have a large popular literature involving rebels and tricksters, and possess a sneaking admiration for those who can flout convention and actually get away with it. They are kinder to their wayward cousins than the cousins probably deserve, and are no less vulnerable to charisma than humanity.

There is a place for waywardness in High Custom, and anyone who has ever seen a Khosalikh do an Elvis impersonation can scarcely disagree. There are places in High Custom for drunkards and charlatans and fools, provided that their behavior is suitably outrageous and performed with sufficient style. Style is largely the point—no one enjoys a drunkard who is not witty or a charlatan whose schemes do not entertain. There's a lot more to High Custom than ear-sniffing and stately dances.

If you can do it with adequate style, the law will even let you steal for a living.

Maijstral left his flier on the lawn of his rented villa and walked through the sonic screen that served for a front door. On his way he unlaced his jacket as far as the design would permit—an unwritten rule of High Custom insisted that clothing should not allow itself to be put on or removed without the help of a servant. Most used robots these days, at least in the Human Constellation.

Maijstral, however, had a servant, a Khosalikh named Roman. Roman was large, even for a Khosalikh, and very strong. The annual rings around his muzzle showed his age to be forty-five. His ancestors had served Maijstral's for fifteen generations, and Maijstral had inherited Roman from his father. He used Roman on errands of a physical and sometimes sinister nature, the character of which Roman often disapproved. Roman's disapproval, like much else, was kept to himself. He prided himself on being a loyal and incorruptible family retainer, even though the family in question was sometimes the despair of him.

Roman appeared from the hallway and glided toward Maijstral, moving with a silence and stately ease that Maijstral admired for reasons both professional and aesthetic.

"Is Gregor back?"

They spoke in Standard. Roman's voice had a suggestion of still waters about it. "Not yet, sir."

"No problems, I trust."

"I wouldn't expect any."

Roman unlaced Maijstral's jacket, helped him off with his buskins, and collected his gun, his knife, his collar and cuffs, doing it all with a supreme competence and economy of gesture that were as familiar as an old sofa. Maijstral felt his tension ease. Roman was the sole fixture in his scattered, uncertain life, less a servant than a sign of home, and home was a place where he could unbend. He

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dropped onto a sofa and put one foot up, wiggling his toes gratefully in fuzzy gray socks.

Holographic works of art rotated slowly on pedestals set into the walls, casting gentle light on Maijstral as he

stretched on the couch. He looked at Roman.

"Nichole was there. She asked after you."

"I trust she is well." Maijstrai looked at him. Roman's eyes were glittering, his nostrils a little dilated, Secret pleasure, Maijstrai thought, happy in Roman's predictability. No doubt about it.

Nichole had always been one of Roman's favorites.

"Yes, she's very well. A little . . . jaded, perhaps. I'm escorting her to an Elvis recital tomorrow. That'll put me in the public eye again. Good for business."

"A letter has arrived, sir. From your father."

Maijstral's heart felt a touch of resigned despair. His father's communications had two themes, and both of them were sad.

"I will read it."

Roman brought it on a tray from the sideboard. It had, been sent VPL, which meant it was written on paper, sealed in an envelope, and delivered by hand. All at great cost. Maijstral opened the letter and read it.

"I do not understand your migration toward the border- Surely you will spend the season on Nana, in connection with your eleemosynary duties. If you are on the border before the season begins, you must pay respects to the Countess Anastasia. Perhaps you will be able to assist her in some endeavor relating to the Cause, If necessary, the Kapodistrias plots might be sold.

"I have been approached by Lord Giddon, from whom some years ago I borrowed the sum of 450n. I must have told you about the obligation, and am dismayed

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that you have not met it. If you had not frozen my access to family funds I would not have mentioned this, but the situation demands that you uphold the family honor and redeem the debt. If you are temporarily short, the parcels on Kapodistrias might be sold.

tt! hope you will attend to this forthwith.

"Your reproachful father,

"Ex-Domier, etc.

"P.S.: The maintenance on my coffin will be due in two months. I hope I will not once again suffer the embarrassment of its not being met in time."

There it was, both themes at once, and in detail: the Cause, and old debt. Both interlinked for as long as Maijstrai could remember.

He replaced the Very Private Letter in its envelope and held it out to Roman. "Bum it, please," he said. Roman moved silently toward the disposal. Maijstrai frowned and lapped his teeth with his diamond ring.

The debt to Lord Giddon was new to Maijstrai, but not unexpected—old lenders turned up with fair frequency these days. The parcels on Kapodistrias were hopelessly mortgaged; Maijstral's father had done it himself years ago and forgotten it since. His memory for money matters had never been good; death had worsened his recollection—There was no money for Maijstral's eleemosynary duties, none for Lord Giddon, none for Maijstrai himself.

Maijstral's mode of life was expensive; his household was small, but moving in the highest circles cost. He -looked at his ring, held the stone up to the light. It was a very good forgery; he'd pawned the real diamond two months before in order to finance this journey. Not even Roman knew the original stone was gone-

Perhaps he should take the Countess Anastasia's offer.

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He considered himself in that light: a pensioned dupe in a hopeless cause, uttering sentiments in which he did not believe. Someone, in short, very like his father.

No. Not that.

Roman returned with a glass of cold rink. Maijstral took it and sipped thoughtfully.

Roman's ears flicked back at the sound of another flier humming to a stop on the front lawn. He turned, looked through the polarized windows, and announced, "Gregor." He stiffened slightly as he spoke. Roman disapproved of Maijstral's irregularities, and considered Gregor one of them-

"Good." Maijstral wiggled his toes again, thoughtfully, "I can tell him about our commission."

Gregor Norman entered, pulling a dark blue cap off a mass of bright red hair. He was twenty, lanky, and in-

tense. He was dressed entirely in dark colors and his coat had a lot of pockets, most of them filled with electronic gadgets- He smiled. His words came rapidly, and he spoke with a cheeky accent. Definitely Non-U.

"Mission accomplished, boss. Only too."

"Only too" was a form of slang of which Gregor was fond. It was shorthand for "only too easy" or "only too likely" or "only too happy" or any other handy phrase beginning with that versatile pair of words.

"Good. The media globes broadcast me with Nichole tonight, and the panic should start first thing tomorrow."

Gregor laughed. He was feeling pleased with himself. He had committed four acts of breaking-and-entering in the last four hours, and he'd done each seamlessly and without a hitch, leaving scores of little electronic gadgets behind in each case.

Roman looked from one to the other- His nostrils flickered. "You mentioned, sir, a commission."

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"Yes." Maijstral rose, put his feet on the floor, and leaned toward the others- "Sit down, Gregor. I'll tell you about it." He knew better than to offer a seat to Roman—it was not a servant's place to sit in the presence of his employer. He waited for Gregor to seat himself and then went on.

"A woman named Amatia Jensen wants us to locate an artifact within the estate of one Admiral Scholder, HCN, retired, deceased. There's going to be an estate auction in a few weeks and Miss Jensen fears she might be outbid."

Roman's ears pricked up. "The current owner, sir?"

"Scholder's heir is his nephew, a Lieutenant Navarre. I met him tonight. I don't think he's very interested in his uncle's estate—certainly not in its security. He seemed to find the whole situation fraught with personal inconvenience."

Gregor grinned again. "They might not notice for weeks that the thing's missing." His fingers were tapping his thighs in some private rhythm. Usually some part of him or another was in motion.

"That's a good point. We should continue with our other plans. But tomorrow, Roman, I'd like you to initiate some inquiries about Miss Jensen. I doubt she's an agent or a provocateur, but one never knows. And she declined to give us media rights, which I suspect means there are undercurrents here we don't know about."

"Yes, sir."

"She also had a companion, a young man named Pietro Quijano. He might be a part of this and he might not. At any rate he might be worth an inquiry."

"First thing tomorrow, sir."

Maijstral turned to Gregor. "I'd like you to fly over to the Scholder estate and take a look at it. Check for—well, you know."

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Gregor gave a breezy, two-fingered salute. "Only too, boss."

Maijstral thought for a brief moment. "Oh. Yes. Our other business. If any of your surveys turn out to be of property owned by a General Gerald of the marines, disregard it. He's filled with unnecessary complications."

Roman gazed at him levelly. "May I inquire their nature, sir?"

Maijstral took a breath while he considered what manner of lie to offer. "Security matters relating to the defense of the planet," he said. "I would prefer not to be involved with counterspies. It would be contrary to the image I wish to present here."

"Certainly, sir. I understand."

Maijstral put his feet up on the couch and pillowed his head on his hands. "And while you're off having fun, I'll be laboring at the El vis recital."

"It must be hell, boss."

Roman's diaphragm spasmed once, then again, the Khosali equivalent of a deep, heartfelt sigh. Definitely

Non-U.

Maijstral's irregularities were sometimes completely incomprehensible.

### CHAPTER 3

The Elvis was human and dressed in white and sequins. His movements—the way he leaned into the chrome microphone, the pelvic thrusts, even the gesture used in wiping sweat from his forehead with a red silk handkerchief—all were highly stylized, as ritualized as the steps of a Balinese dancer.

A holographic band stood in partial shadow behind. Stacks of obsolete and highly unnecessary amplifiers were placed on the wings of the stage, and the sound was arranged to boom from them as though they were real.

"Hunka hunka bum love" sang the King of Rock and Roll. The screaming of debutantes centuries dead wailed up around the stage in answer to the meaningless pre-Standard lyrics. The Elvis leaned forward, mopped sweat from his brow, and presented the handkerchief to one of his assistants in the audience. The assistant brought it to Nichole, the guest of honor, who bowed and accepted it graciously, momentarily illuminated by spotlights. The audience offered polite applause.

"Now what the hell do I do with it, Maijstral?" Nichole asked, drawing her hand across her mouth so the ever-present media globes could not read her lips. "I'm

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not going to sit here all night with a wet rag in my hand."

Maijstral looked at her with sympathy. Her costume, a bluish thing composed of several semitransparent layers of pseudocarapace, did not allow for pockets. "I'll take it, if you like," he said. "Or I can tie it around your arm."

The spotlight on Nichole faded. Her diamond earrings and necklace dimmed. "I'll send it to Etienne," she decided. "It suits his coloring better." She signaled one of her coterie and whispered instructions. Etienne, in the next box, yawned behind his hand. He had decided to be bored by Peleng.

Before the concert Maijstral and Nichole had an enjoyable luncheon, discussing their lives, their times, old friends. He had discovered she had a tendency to assume he knew more about Diadem affairs than he really did, but he managed, he thought, to cover his ignorance fairly well. He really didn't keep up with gossip.

Maijstral leaned back and felt his chair adjust to his contours. He glanced across the hall and saw Countess Anastasia sharing a box with Baron Sinn. She gazed at him intently with her ice-blue eyes. A brief alarm sang in his nerves. He bowed to her, and she nodded back.

She calls me irregular, he thought. It was the Khosali who made Elvis a part of High Custom and left Shakespeare out. Probably, he reflected, because there were too many successful rebellions against monarchs in Shakespeare. And Elvis was a mock rebel who became, in the end, a pillar of the social order.

Maijstral liked Shakespeare a good deal, having read him in the new translation by Maxwell Aristide. The comedies, he thought, were especially good. This was, he supposed, an indication of his low taste. Most people found them unsubtle.

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The lobby bar was padded in red leather and featured more polished brass than was necessary even for ornamentation. Media globes bounced uncomfortably along the low ceiling and stared at the intermission crowd. Half the audience, having stayed long enough to make certain they were noticed, took the opportunity to slip away from the incomprehensible performance.

Maijstral sipped his cold rink. His lazy eyes passed slowly over the crowd, taking in clothing, accessories, jewelry. Making mental notes.

"Yes," he said. "A playwright, a very good one. The Constellation Practices Authority rediscovered him and had Aristide translate him."

"I shall look for it, sir," said Pietro Quijano. His brow wrinkled and he tugged at his lower lip. "Do you think it's political, sir?"

"Nothing overt that I could see- But the Khosali buried him for some reason, so who knows?"

Pietro tugged at his lower lip again. Maijstral followed the direction of his gaze and saw Amalia Jensen talking to Lieutenant Navarre. Navarre nodded and smiled in answer to something Miss Jensen said. Pietro's frown deepened. Maijstral finished his rink.

"If you will excuse me, sir," he said, "I should see if Nichole need refreshment."

"Certainly," Pietro murmured, and then he tore his gaze away from Jensen and brightened a bit. "She was a most stimulating dance partner, sir. Please give her my compliments."

"Of course."

Maijstral made his way to where Nichole was giving an exclusive interview to one persistent media globe. "We're old, dear friends, of course," she was saying. "I'm afraid

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it would be inappropriate for me to comment further." Said with a hesitation, a little flutter of the eyes. Nuance, Maijstral thought. Once he'd thought her very good at this, but in the last four years she'd become an artist.

After the interview the globe drifted away and Nichole took Maijstral's arm. Maijstral gave her Pietro's message. "A dreadful dancer," she said. "He kept tripping over his own damn boots."

"You made him look good, I'm sure."

Her eyes glistened. "I'm sure I did." She tapped his arm. "Do you see our High Seas Scout friend over yonder?"

Maijstral gazed once again at Lieutenant Navarre, who was still intently listening to Amalia Jensen. "Certainly."

' 'Would you do me the favor of asking him to sup with me this evening? I'd do it myself, but the globes are sure to notice, and they' 11 never leave off harassing the poor man."

Nichole, Maijstral reflected, would never have asked a man on this kind of errand four years ago. This was the sort of thing she had an entourage for. He reflected again on his earlier resolution and was thankful it appeared to complement hers.

"Of course," he said, "What time?"

"Thirty or so." Nichole smiled. "I'd invite you, but I'm sure you'll be off on business,"

He answered her smile. "I'm afraid it would be inappropriate for me to comment further."

"As I thought." Knowingly. She patted his forearm. "I'd love to see you tomorrow, though. Luncheon again?"

"Delighted."

She glanced up and saw more media globes moving in. Her face did not exactly fall, but grew more controlled, less spontaneous. Less delighted. "Please fetch me some champagne, Drake, will you?" she asked. Her voice was silky. Maijstral sniffed her ears—this was a High Custom event, after all—then bowed and withdrew.

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"Not much pelvis," said a high, wonderfully resonant voice. "Troxans cannot Elvis do well."

Maijstral bowed in Count Quik's direction as he strolled by the tiny round-headed alien- Amalia Jensen's laughter hung in the air. She was finding Lieutenant Navarre amusing. Maijstral glided toward them and touched the copper-skinned lieutenant on the arm. "With Miss Jensen's permission, a word, sir."

Miss Jensen gave her consent. Maijstral gave Nichole's message. Navarre looked confused.

"Oh. I'm flattered. And delighted. But I'm afraid"—he looked toward Amalia, who smiled, more at Maijstral than at Navarre—"I'm committed for this evening. With Miss Jensen. Please give Nichole my sincerest regrets."

Maijstral glanced up at a clattering noise and saw Pietro, standing about ten feet behind Navarre, trying to extricate himself from the rubble of a spilled drink tray while a hostess looked at him with purse-lipped annoyance,

"I'll convey your apologies," Maijstral said. "I'm sure Nichole will understand."

He walked to the bar and asked for champagne. Receiving his glass, he turned to stare into the intent eyes of the Countess Anastasia. Looming over her was the bulk of

Baron Sinn. MaijstraTs blood turned cold—that old reflex again—but he smiled and exchanged sniffs.

"Champagne, Countess?"

"I have sworn not to drink champagne within the boundaries of the Constellation," she said, "till the Empire be restored."

"I fear you will have a long wait," Maijstral said.

"Your father—" she began. Anger surged in Maijstral's

heart.

"Remains dead," Maijstral said. He sniffed her and excused himself.

The woman had always got to him, damn it. He had to

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wait some moments before Nichole was sufficiently clear of media globes to convey Navarre's regrets, and he used that time to calm himself. Nichole, when she heard the message, was astonished-

"He turned me down, Maijstral! What am I to do with myself this evening? It's one of the few free moments allowed in my schedule."

"I would offer to keep you company, but . . ."  
Maijstral's heavy-lidded eyes gave the impression of slyness. "I really do have other plans, my lady."

"I don't suppose I could watch."

Maijstral kissed her hand. "I'm afraid your presence would attract unwelcome attention."

Nichole sighed. "I hope you'll send me the vid, at least."

"Perhaps I'll be able to send you something interesting before you leave. My general run of jobs aren't very enthralling, though."

She pointed at the white stone on his finger. "I can always recognize your videos by the ring. When I see it, I cheer."

Maijstral smiled. "The ring is my trademark. They alter my face and body in the vids, but I need something noticeable to keep my place in the standings."

"Do you like the way Laurence is playing you, by the way? He looks more like you; but I thought Anaya seemed

to capture your personality better."

"Truth to tell, my lady, I never watch them." Nichole gave a skeptical laugh. Maijstral looked at her. "I've lived through it once," he said, "I have no desire to see an imitation."

"If you insist, Maijstral."

Maijstral touched the clusters of diamonds hanging from one of Nichole's ears. His eyes widened with professional interest. "These are lovely, by the way. Are you certain you should wear them in such dangerous company?"

"If I can't trust you, Drake, who can I trust? Besides,

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they're not mine—the Landor Company lets me use them in return for a credit. They might even be delighted should they disappear—it could attract attention to their wares."

"We might discuss that," Maijstral said.

"Luncheon. Tomorrow."

He kissed her hand again. "Of course." The screams of a holographic audience began to echo from the theater, the signal that the second half of the performance was about to

begin.

Nichole linked her arm in his. "I'll simply have to resign myself to a lonely evening tonight. No one would credit it."

"Cherish it, my lady," Maijstral said. "An event of such rarity must be savored."

"Pah," Nichole said as they began to stroll toward their box. "It just means I'm getting old. Or passe." But she seemed pleased.

One of the consequences of the odd and complex relationship between humanity and the Khosali is that, deplore us though they may, many Khosali find irreverence and irresponsibility interesting, and the human style of irreverence and irresponsibility of particular fascination. A human will perform what the stodgy Khosalikh only dreams about. Humans dance till five in the morning and show up late at work, suffering from hangovers. Humans write satires about Imperial officials and farces in which scores of people end up hiding in closets or under the bed.

Humans engage in passionate relationships with people to whom they are not married, sometimes proclaim these relationships actually improved them, and frequently (and most tellingly) fail to kill themselves afterward in a display of proper social atonement. Some even commit the profounder sin of living happily ever after. Though the

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Diadem was created for human consumption, their joys, scrapes, and follies have a small but devoted following among the Khosali.

Even when the Khosali influence over humanity was at its height, the conquerors often had the unsettling impression that the humans were laughing at them behind their backs. Little did the Khosali know but that when Earth's children served up the punch line, it was going to be a doozy.

The punch line was, of course, the Great Rebellion, in which we got rid of the Imperial System, the Imperial caste, and the unfortunate Pendjalli Emperor, Nnis CV1, whose luckless person was seized at pistol-point in his very own palace by Scholder's Death Commandos. As part of the peace treaty, a pledge was extorted from poor Nnis to let the Human Constellation alone, a pledge which thus far he has been scrupulous to honor. This was the only rebellion, let alone the only successful one, to be perpetrated by a subject species once it had got over the trauma of its initial conquest. The whole precedent-breaking affair was such a shock to Nnis that he moulted and retired prematurely to his cryogenic vault, whence he still lies, heirless and alone.

The Emperor's termination of the war doesn't keep individuals on both sides of the border from wishing things were different. To the dismay of human ideologues, there is a large human minority in the Empire who live seemingly happy lives under the Imperial system and have no desire to emigrate to the Constellation. And on the human side, a large Khosali minority seem to lead contented and productive lives in the Constellation, expressing no more than a sentimental longing for the Imperial System.

And of course there are the troublemakers. The Human Constellation is blessed with a small but noisy Imperial party who claim the revolt was a mistake. For the most part they are a despised and ignored group of (largely

human) malcontents, but they did win nineteen percent of the vote in the last election on Baroda, a figure so disturbing that the victorious Symbolist-Commonwealth party decided to do away with elections altogether until the Barodans developed a more refined sense of social responsibility.

On the Imperial side of the border there are a number of voices loudly proclaiming the Constellation an insane aberration, proclaiming as well the necessity to reincorporate the Constellation within the borders of the Empire. Thus far the City of Seven Bright Rings can afford to ignore these noises, as they come mostly from the humiliated descendants of those leaders who lost the revolt in the first place—many Imperial military positions are hereditary, which is offered by human partisans as a major reason for the revolt's success. The Reconquest Party's constant agitation serves, however, as a continuing pretext for the Human Constellation's rate of taxation, which is far higher than was the Empire's due to the necessity of keeping a large fleet in being to prevent an Imperial resurgence.

For the most part, however, the Reconquest Party is ignored. Nnis does not wish another war—the first was shocking enough—and for the most part the rest of the Empire has not yet recovered from the surprise of the human action. New possibilities have been awakened here, and other subject races are beginning to realize it. Odd though it may seem, revolt hadn't even been considered before.

Despite the revolt and its consequences. High Custom continues on both sides of the border—there is no acceptable alternative, no agreed-upon human standard of behavior. There is, however, a constant search within the Constellation for a true culture based on universal human principles—the report of the Constellation Practices Authority has been widely anticipated for the last generation, and is said to be in the final stages of the preparation.

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Until the CPA finishes its work, however, Imperial law and custom prevail in most of the human sphere. Even Imperial titles and grants of nobility are used as a matter of courtesy, though they have no official basis in law. The high Imperial caste has been thrown on its own resources for the first time in its history, and its members rise and fall by their own abilities. It is something they'd got out of the habit of doing. Within the aristocracy there is still a prejudice against working in trade, but some have been reduced to it. Many lost souls wander from place to place, living in High Custom as much as possible, looking for a

home.

There are a lot of wanderers- After all, if through a fluke of ancestry you were saddled with being Baron Drago, Viscount Sing, Duke of Dornier, Prince-Bishop of Nana, and Hereditary Captain-General of the Green Legion, you could hardly ignore it, and neither, you would discover, would anyone else. It could hardly have escaped your attention that you were the hereditary exemplar of a social system that had no function or even relevance, that existed only because of cultural inertia—and then what would you do? Yeam for the past? Try to reach an accommodation with the present? Try to create a future more agreeable?

You might even decide to steal for a living. Who knows?

A new set of holographic representations rotated in the niches. The day art was pleasantly different from the night pieces—brighter, more cheerful.

"Trouble, boss." Gregor's eyes twitched as he sucked on a smokeless hi-stick. "We were followed today. Roman and me both."

Maijstra's ears were still ringing from the aftereffects of

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the concert. He frowned as Roman began to work on the complicated knotting of his jacket. "Police?" he asked.

Gregor grimaced. "Can police afford Jefferson-Singh high-performance fliers?"

Maijstral's brows lifted. "Indeed?" He looked over his shoulder at Roman.

"Both shadows were Khosali," Roman reported. "Mine was female, about twenty. I didn't notice her until after I had begun my inquiries about Miss Jensen. Then I gave her the slip."

"I spotted mine right away," Gregor said. He shook his long hair out of his eyes. "He was another Khosalikh, a mate. A big bastard, too, which was how I saw him so quick. He was easy enough to lose, though."

"Thrill seekers, possibly," Maijstral said. He shrugged out of his jacket, and Roman took his pistol and began unlacing the side seam of Maijstral's tight trousers. "Per-

haps they want the credit for catching us. Or maybe they just want to watch us work."

"Mine didn't look like he was out for fun," Gregor said. "He looked like he wanted to dismember me with his bare hands."

"Maybe police after all."

"He had that look. But I think he may have something to do with the commission." He sucked on his hi-stick again. "Tell him what you found out, Roman."

"Miss Jensen is the local head of Humanity Prime," Roman said carefully. His ears trembled with the repressed urge to turn downward in disapproval. "Mr. Quijano is the treasurer."

"I see," Maijstral said. Humanity Prime was a group formed to assure human domination of the Constellation, and its membership ran from perfectly respectable citizens to denizens of the gutter. The more respectable among

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them supported good works such as the Constellation Practices Authority, issued propaganda questioning the absurdities of High Custom, called for larger human families so as to keep the aliens outnumbered on human turf, and promoted expansion toward new worlds. They made a point of keeping up-to-date on the latest advances in Imperial weaponry and tactics, and supported the Constellation military in its never-ending quest for funding and expansion.

The less reputable elements of Humanity Prime were something else again, and included paramilitary groups formed to resist alien attacks and groups that spread scandal about prominent nonhumans—"inhumans" being their preferred term. Their activities included active harassment, the sending of thugs to disrupt Imperialist activities, and sometimes actual violence.

Humanity Prime's main branch never ceased to deplore such crude tactics, and to explain that they were not representative of their goals or membership. But somehow the parent organization never seemed to withdraw the characters of any of their groups who brought them disrepute.

Maijstral's own ears almost twitched downward. He'd had his own problems with humanity's partisans in the past.

"You think a Khosali group is monitoring Jensen and her contacts?" he asked.

"That may be possible, sir," Roman said.

Maijstral left his trouser laces dangling and went to the front window, holding up his pants with his left hand. He touched the polarizer control and gazed out into the late afternoon. The sun cast blue tones onto the grove across the sward, giving the chrome-yellow leaves a greenish cast. "Are they still out there?" Maijstral asked.

"In the grove, sir? Yes."

Maijstral indulged his irritation. "Blast them, anyway. What could they want?"

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Roman's voice was hesitant. "If I may offer a suggestion, sir?"

"Certainly."

"Jensen's group is almost certainly aware of your family's history. They may intend to embarrass you, and will have informed the police of your commission. You may be walking into a trap."

"So the Khosali in the grove may be our friends?"

"That doesn't make any sense, Roman." Gregor's voice was loud in rebuttal. Roman's nostrils flickered. "If that bastard who followed me around this morning is a friend, I'll eat my boots. And if they don't like what Jensen's up to, why don't they just warn us instead of keeping us under surveillance?" He snapped his used hi-stick in half, then doubled the fragments and snapped them again. He looked around for a place to put them and found none, so he stuck the fragments in his pocket. "They want the damn artifact, if you ask me. They're going to try to snatch it from us as soon as we've got it."

Maijstral considered the alternatives and found Gregor's case more convincing. But there were still questions here, unknown factors, unknown quantities. He was not yet at the stage in his career where he could make many mistakes.

"We'll advance our schedule," he said, and polarized the window again. He turned to his servant. "Roman, I'll require you to be very busy tonight. You're going to pay some calls."

Maijstral hung suspended in tenuous a-grav darkness above the house of the late Admiral Scholder. His own private media globes circled around him, recording everything—Jensen might change her mind about media rights. He had neutralized the outside alarm—a simple hemispheric cold-

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field—and was now contemplating his options for gaining entrance.

Skylights, doors, or windows? If he wanted to be dramatic he could cut right through a roof or wall.

His heartbeat was fast and smooth. His muscles moved easily, without wasted motion. Fortunately all the alarms and guards were automated. Even at the thought of a live guard, his mouth went dry.

"Sentients are unpredictable," he had always told Gregor. "Always go for the automated systems. You can trust them to act as they're supposed to." He was never certain whether Gregor believed him or not. Whatever, it was something he needn't worry about right now. He decided to go for one of the skylights. Maijstral dropped weightlessly toward the roof, a wispy opaque night-cloud. He was, even at this moment, perfectly aware of the traditional bulk of High Custom scowling at him from out of the night. For even here he fulfilled one of High Custom's many roles, that of Allowed Burglar.

High Custom allowed a person to steal for a living, provided he followed certain rules: he must do the job by himself; the person from whom he steals has to be able to afford the loss; there can be no serious violence—bopping the odd guard over the head is allowed, but crushing his skull is not. The object stolen had to be of artistic, sensational, or piquant interest (no large quantities of cash or uncut stones, say, although there was nothing in the rules against pocketing same if they happen to be in the same vault as the Costikyan Emerald); the stolen objects had to remain in the burglar's possession through the midnight of the day following the crime; and the burglar must never deny what it is he does for a living—if he is going to steal, he must let everyone know it, and carry his card when working.

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Most importantly, an Allowed Burglar had to practice his craft with style, with grace, with *savoir faire*. Style

counted a full ten points in the ratings, and no wonder. Allowed Burglars were supposed to be a part of High Custom, and if they didn't fit well with the rest of the wayward elements, the gentleman drunkards, the glib, subtle charlatans and bright-eyed tricksters, what was the point in allowing them to take other people's property in the first place?

Maijstral hovered above the skylight without touching it and deployed a pistol-shaped detector, scanning it over the skylight and its frame to make certain there were no electromagnetic emissions. Amalia and Pietro had done some research on security in the Scholder manse and found nothing troubling, but Maijstral believed in double-checking all research. It was his skin on me line, not Jensen's.

A trap. All Roman's hesitations and uncertainties flickered unbidden through Maijstral's mind. He gnawed his nether lip and replaced the detector on his adhesive darksuit. His hand was shaking slightly as he brought out a miniature a-grav unit and stuck it carefully to the skylight. Before he took out his pencil-sized cutting tool and began slicing, he took a moment to stabilize his breathing and calm his nerves. The room below might, of course, be packed with police.

Most likely, however, it was just a room. Maijstral tried to maintain that thought.

Maijstral finished his cut and the skylight floated gently into the air. The a-grav unit would move it toward a preset place on the grounds and set it down. Taking a breath, Maijstral reversed himself and floated headfirst into the room.

His head and shoulders thrust through the skylight, he turned his head carefully left and right. The atrium was

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two stories tall, with a roof access and a balcony around three sides. Slipcovered furniture crouched in darkness. A wide flagstone fireplace yawned against one wall. The view from the back of Maijstral's head was absorbed by detectors and projected onto the optical center of his brain;

his vision was nearly a 360-degree globe, but he turned his head to get the advantage of parallax. IR and UV scanners looked for characteristic police emissions. Audio pickups

listened acutely for the fall of dust.

He slid into the room on midnight holographic wings. Starlight shone on his fake diamond. Jensen's researches suggested that the household's main defenses were alarms triggered by the minute compression waves caused by a body moving through space. This was a very expensive system—in order for it to work, the signals put out by an entering thief had to be distinguished from those created by heating and cooling units, thermal changes in the structure of the house, and those of family pets and robots.

MaiJstral's darksuit was equipped to deal with such alarms automatically, taking a half step back in time and pulsing out waves that precisely interfered with the waves he made as he moved. This was widely regarded as impossible, both that and a miracle of modern physics.

MaiJstral's darksuit was of the best.

MaiJstral's target, the artifact he was after, gleamed in sliver solitude in a niche by the fireplace. Silently, Maijstral made a circuit of the room in search of other items of value. The place seemed to be filled mainly with souvenirs of the Rebellion, weapons, medals in cases, portraits of heroes. A cool shock wave moved through Maijstral. Admiral Scholder, he realized, was the same young Lieutenant Scholder whose Death Commandos had stormed the City of Seven Bright Rings and seized the Emperor in the last battle of the Rebellion.

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Welt, well, Maijstral thought. He was tampering with History, no less.

The souvenirs had little value except to military history buffs, so he floated to the artifact and gazed at it, his visual scanners magnifying its image. The target was the size of a melon and vaguely saddle-shaped, a pleasant-appearing geometry made of silver and engraved with fine, precise lines. Maijstral saw the Imperial seal—the scrolled N for Nnis CV1 interwoven with the skuhl vines of the Pendjalli, ideographs for "good luck" and "happiness." all encircled by the figure of the Zoot Torque—Maijstral realized that he was looking at something looted from the Imperial precincts themselves.

Interesting.

Maijstral made an electromagnetic scan and found a constant low-wattage background emission characteristic of, among other things, certain alarm systems. He looked

more carefully and discovered that the object was itself giving off the radiation, not anything it was connected to. Odd, he thought. He wondered if the thing would scream "Help, help" if he picked it up, like something in a fairy tale.

It wouldn't be the first time. Alarm systems had lately begun displaying a regrettable tendency toward cuteness.

He scanned the pedestal very carefully and found nothing resembling a trap or alarm, and then gave a mental command to his darksuit that opened a collapsed ruck on his back. Time to finish the job and get out.

His gloved hand reached for the object, closed around it, and perceived its considerable weight. He picked it up and in one swift movement dumped it into his rucksack, which automatically closed around it. He began floating past the level of the balconies, toward the skylight. The object was a cold weight between his shoulders.

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A door opened to an inner room. Maijstral's heart crashed in his chest. His inertialess drift ceased immediately. His scanners deployed at the speed of thought.

A small domestic robot entered the room on muffled wheels. It wheeled to a rack of de-energized Rebellion-era weapons and deployed a feather duster.

Maijstra! calmed his nerves- The robot didn't even see him- Cloaked in his darksuit, he began floating gently toward the skylight again.

The robot finished knocking dust off the beam guns, then began roiling toward the niche. It paused and began to shriek in a hysterical feminine voice.

"Help! Help! We've been robbed."

A masculine voice answered from within the house.  
"What's that, Denise?"

"Intruders! I think he's still here! Bring Felicity and your guns!"

A different female voice. "We're coming, Denise! Any intruders are going to get what's coming to them!"

This conversation would probably have gone on for

some time—the people who wrote security programs for domestic robots really should have been doing soap opera scripts for the Diadem—but Maijstra! silenced the robot with a quick blast from his disruptor, something he would have done more quickly had he not somehow missed the pistol on his first grab. A streaming sable cloud, Maijstral arrowed through the skylight and fled across the sward outside, followed by a bouncing trail of media globes.

His darksuit informed him that his black boxes, placed outside the perimeter, were doing a good job of repelling the mansion's efforts to cry for the police. He passed through the cold-field, his suit neutralizing it automatically, and then fled to where Gregor waited in the flier, manning his own larger black box that was scanning all

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neighborhood communications wavelengths. Gregor looked up with a grin as Maijstral settled into the driver's seat.

"What is that you're always telling me about automatic guards being safer and more predictable?"

Maijstral punched the power button and the flier hissed into the night on its silent repellers. The artifact pressed against his back. Media globes trailed like firecrackers on a puppy dog's tail.

The recordings of this commission, Maijstral decided, were decidedly not going to be sold to the broadcasters.

Maijstral's character was formed, entirely by accident, when he was sixteen. His character was supposed to be formed by then; he was a senior classman at the Nnoivarl Academy, one of the best-regarded schools in the Empire, which promised to develop character or kill the boy trying—but, in common with his classmates, he had learned a lot about High Custom, languages, and the Khosali liberal arts, and damn-all about anything else. His acquisition couldn't really be called character, but rather a surface veneer, handy in many situations, however much lumber it may be in others. Still, many get by with nothing but polish their entire lives, and if their character isn't tested they'll never know the difference.

Drake Maijstral's particular bad luck was to get his character tested before he was ready for it. That's usually the way with character tests—one never realizes what they are until they're over, and by then it's too late to prepare.

As a senior classman preparing for his exams he had been allowed a certain amount of liberty—he could leave the academy without permission, and travel in civilian rig. He took full advantage of his newfound freedom, particularly in the matter of the Honorable Zoe Enderby, the

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bright-eyed daughter of a local nobleman whose thirteen-year-old brother was at Nnoivarl. She was four years older than Maijstral and her character seemed fully formed. He had met her at a fencing match, and her brother was not on the fencing team. Later in his life this was the sort of contradiction that might make him pause. Not at sixteen.

It was midmorning. The place smelled of paint thinner—the Honorable Zoe was apprenticed to a local artist. Subdued yellow light, filtered by the tropical growth overhead, danced in mottled patterns on the windows. Maijstral was in one of the Honorable Zoe's dressing gowns, frowning into a magazine and smoking a cigarette. (He was smoking that year.) Zoe was in another room, talking to her mother on the telephone.

"Darling. I've brought you something."

Maijstral hadn't heard him come in. It occurred to him that he should have locked the door behind him the night before, that he had, with his long hair and Zoe's dressing gown, had been mistaken for her.

"I'm sorry we fought. Look."

Poor boy, Maijstral thought. He stood, turned, and saw Marc Julian, the assistant captain of the fencing team, standing in his stiff, grey Nnoivarl uniform, a package in his long arms, Julian was also Count Hitti, but titles weren't used in the school.

"Beg pardon, Julian," Maijstral said. "I think it's Zoe you wanted to speak to, wasn't it?"

The polish was, as has been noted, already there. Maijstral left the astonished boy standing agape in the front hall and went in search of Zoe. He went into the bedroom, informed her of Julian's arrival, and began practicing a new card trick (he got whatever distinction he possessed at the academy by doing magic stunts). By the time Zoe said goodbye to her mother and went to the hall, Julian was gone.

Zoe wanted to tell Maijstral about Julian over breakfast, but Maijstral allowed as how everything was clear enough, and she didn't have to say anything if she didn't feel like it. He really didn't want to hear the story anyway. He stayed the morning, dressed, and went back to the academy to study for his philosophy exam.

A later Maijstral would have never looked back. But this young Maijstral was trying very hard to convince himself he was in love, and in any case he wanted to make the most of the few weeks before he had to return to Domier and the Human Constellation.

Maijstral was never positive, later, if Julian had help. Maijstral had been leaving his exam cubicle, walking with his friend Asad. Both of them were confident of having done well, were laughing—and suddenly Maijstral's feet were tangled and he lurched sideways. Something shoved him between the shoulders and he tumbled into the proud back of the boy ahead of him.

"You struck me, Maijstral." Marc Julian's eyes gleamed with dull content beneath the lassie of his uniform cap-

"Sorry, Julian," Maijstral said. "Someone gave me a—"

"You'll not get away with that." Coolly. "Zah will act for me."

Maijstral straightened. "And Asad for me." Maijstral was equally cool, and he was quick to note that Zah was right there, the captain of the fencing team, and had been behind Maijstral the whole time.

Maijstral felt Asad's comradely hand on his shoulder. Far from being comforted, the touch startled him, serving : to remind him that behind this polished ritual was a deadly I reality toward which he was now committed. His reflexes

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made him turn away and light a cigarette as he walked, as if he had nothing else to do.

Duels were forbidden between students, but they happened anyway. By way of precaution, the practice was for upperclassmen to vet the encounters of the juniors, but if upperclassmen wanted to fight each other, there was no one

to interfere. The worst that would happen was expulsion.

"Julian wouldn't accept any explanation," Asad said later, in Maijstral's room. "He insists on the fight." Maijstral nodded and blew smoke. "Very well." "It will be pistols, of course. He'd cut you to ribbons if you fight with steel. I'm going to talk to Joseph Bob about the loan of his matched set of chuggers." "Fine. Would you like some brandy, first?" Asad shook his head. "No. Best go now. The fight will be tomorrow morning." Maijstral was startled. "So soon?" Asad gave an uneasy laugh. "Best get it over with, eh? Don't want it to interfere with your studying."

The door closed behind Asad. Maijstral poured himself brandy, lit another cigarette, and went to his terminal. He accessed Julian's pistol scores and a coolness brushed his nerves. For some reason he thought of one of the Honorable Zoe's paintings, a formal piece with a dull-red sun and gleaming nickel-iron asteroids.

Asad was back in a few minutes. He gave an admiring laugh. "You're a cool one, ain't you? Studying for your exams like nothing's happened." Maijstral turned off the display.

"Hullo, Asad."

"Joseph Bob is testing the pistols now," Asad said. "We'll be using the explosive ammunition. It's fairer that way—Julian's the better shot. If you follow my advice, you'll fire as soon as I give the signal. If you hit him first,

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you can take off an arm or leg, and he may not get a shot off. He's better, so if he fires at all he's likely to hit you."

"I'll bear that in mind." Pouring brandy.

"Pity we ain't got access to psych dueling here. You could pick his mind apart. He's got no defenses at all there."

"I was just thinking that. Would you like a game of cards or something?"

"Damned coot, Maijstral." Admiring. "Maybe a short game, then. None of your trick decks, though."

They played Cheeseup for an hour. Asad won forty marks, then stood and said he had to leave. He had some studying to do for his history exam.

"You'll take my marker, yes? My father's damnably late with my allowance." Over a year, truth be told. Lucky his credit was still good.

"I'll take it. Thanks."

"I'm sure my father will redeem it, if . . ." Best leave that unsaid. Asad smiled uneasily.

"I'll pick you up at six-eighty, then?" He grasped Maijstral's shoulder. "See you then." Maijstral didn't want Asad to leave. He didn't want to be alone with his

thoughts.

Maijstral heard the door close. For a long time he watched the brandy tremble in the decanter. There were only two fingers left, he noticed, and he decided he'd better not drink them.

He could protest all he liked, he decided. He could make any number of declarations about how stupid duels were and how ridiculous High Custom was and that wouldn't alter a thing. If he ran away, no one would speak to him.

Explosive bullets. Take off an arm or leg. Or blow his lungs out through his ribs.

He practiced card tricks. His fingers bungled every stunt.

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That night he didn't sleep, just lay sweating in his bed and stared at the ceiling. He ran through his entire supply of cigarettes. Two hours past midnight, he knew for certain that there was no way he was going to face Julian's pistol.

He began wondering what he was going to do about it.

Maijstral crouched silently by Joseph Bob's door and looked at the access plate. He tried to breathe slowly and naturally. To his amazement he seemed cooler than when he'd been writing his exam.

He took one of his playing cards and inserted it between the door and jamb. He'd spent the last forty minutes trying

to crack the dormitory's computer security, and he thought he might have succeeded in unlocking the bolt by remote

control. But he still had to move the bolt, and that might make noise.

The bolt clicked. Maijstral's heart stopped. He waited for several moments, his ears straining. Nothing.

He swung the door in and heard Joseph Bob's breathing. Maijstral crept on bare feet into the room. He was wearing night goggles that he'd borrowed from the gym—runners training at night used them—and he could see the pistol case sitting on Joseph Bob's desk. Maijstral pushed the door almost shut, then stepped to the desk.

Joseph Bob rolled over and muttered something. Maijstral froze, his pulse crashing in his ears. Joseph Bob sighed and began to breathe heavily. Maijstral relaxed slightly. Clearly the Earthman's sleep pattern had been disturbed, and Maijstral would have to be careful. Each motion taking eons, he reached out and opened the pistol case.

The antique chuggers lay on red velvet and were seen clearly in his enhanced-night goggles. Maijstral licked his lips and reached for the first one. The front sight was a

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bead poised atop a delicate piece of silver scrollwork. Maijstral covered the sight with a handkerchief, damped a small pair of pliers on the sight, gave it a slight wrench to one side. He took off the cloth and inspected his work. There was no obvious tampering. He repeated the procedure with the other gun and closed the case.

He was surprised, now that he had time to think of it, how cool he was. It wasn't until he left the room that he began to be afraid. What if Julian fired on instinct and didn't use the sight? Was he that good? Maijstral might only have ruined his own chance.

He didn't sleep at all that night. It took him both fingers of brandy to get him bathed and dressed for the occasion. He tried to tie his hair back, but his fingers wouldn't let him. Asad, when he arrived, did it for him.

Maijstral was dressed entirely in dark colors—a bit of white could show as an aiming point. When he arrived at the dueling ground—a spot of turf behind the Chapel Garden—he saw that Julian had dressed similarly.

Maijstral said nothing at all. He jammed his chin down on his high collar so that his jaw wouldn't tremble.

"Remember," Asad said, "keep the left arm back and out of the way. Stand with your side toward him to narrow the target. Cover your upper body with your bent right arm. And shoot first if you can." He squeezed Maijstral's arm. "Good man."

The thing went quickly. Zah called out "One, two, three," and dropped a handkerchief. Julian's pistol fired before Maijstral's mind could entirely absorb the meaning of the falling white lace. Behind him, Maijstral heard a crack as the explosive bullet detonated against the garden wall.

Maijstral looked in surprise at the startled figure over his sight. Julian's face was red; his jaw worked. Maijstral

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remembered the way Julian had looked when issuing the challenge, and murder entered Maijstral's heart.

He tried very hard to determine how his front sight was off so that he could kill Julian, but he wasn't very good with the weapon and his bullet blew a small crater in the stonework of the old chapel. Then Asad was pounding Maijstral on the back, and Julian was wiping blood off his chin where he'd bitten through his lower lip.

Maijstral reversed the pistol and handed it to Asad. "Give Joseph Bob my thanks," he said. He tried to smile.

"Would you like to see a new card trick? I learned one last night."

"Damned cool," Asad said, and rushed him away.

Relatively few people have such a firm grasp of their own nature as Maijstral on his seventeenth birthday. He was a coward and knew it. High Custom did not allow for cowards—thieves, yes, and confidence men—but Maijstral had a good idea of how to cope with it. He had to know High Custom inside and out; he had to be able to manipulate it to his own advantage. He had to glide smoothly through the High Custom world, frictionless, wary of traps. "Any fool can die in a duel." That was the Khosali

proverb. Maijstral was determined not to be that kind of

fool.

#### CI^ACTEK 4

General Gerald was prepared to repel boarders. Crouched in battle armor in the corner of his living room, he smiled at his own strategy, his own cunning. Remote sensors in various parts of the house fed data through his armor and into his optical centers. He scanned them with chill, happy obsession. Maijstral might win—the General was willing to concede that possibility—but he would know he'd been in a fight. Maijstral was going to be in for the battle of his life.

He knew that no thief of Maijstral's caliber could possibly resist the gauntlet the General had flung in his face. He had threatened Maijstral with death knowing that Maijstral couldn't possibly pass up that kind of challenge. Hah, Maijstral would think, this old fogey thinks he can tell me what to do. And then Maijstral would decide to teach the old man a lesson and sneak into his house to steal something.

Little did Maijstral know that Gerald was ready for him. He had anticipated his enemy's reaction and was going to spring an ambush.

It was General Gerald's misfortune to have spent forty years as a warrior without a war. He had never once been in combat. For decades he had practiced for the inevitable

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Imperial resurgency, honed his skills, studied enemy tactics, waged endless campaigns for funding and battled the Empire only in simulation and exercises . . . and overnight, it seemed. General Gerald found himself facing retirement without the cowardly Imperial fleet having once shown up for the long-awaited Armageddon. It was more than a patriot could stand.

So now the General waited in his old armor, surrounded by weapons laid out in a semicircle, smiling as he scanned the remotes and felt the suit blowing cool air on his brow. He pictured Maijstral's entry in his mind, the thief moving in through windows or doors or even through the chimney, unaware that the General had just spent a fortune on detection apparatus and confident that his darksuit would hide him from the avenging ex-marine crouched in the corner. General Gerald would open the conflict with a

snare rifle, try to catch me thief in its coils. Maijstral's darksuit could probably make itself frictionless and thus slip the bonds, after which the thief might well strike out with a chugger or a stunner, which the General's armor would, of course, repel . . . and then the battle would broaden, higher and higher energies brought into play, disruptors and mappers and spitfires, and then maybe it would even come down to hand-to-hand at the end. General Gerald with his trusty cutlass against Maijstral and his stiletto.

The General pictured his victory, Maijstral prostrate, the General triumphant, the room flaming (what the hell—the house was insured). The first time Maijstral had ever been caught and apprehended, a first-class thief brought down by the General's foresight and cunning.

Maijstral, the General thought. The Allowed Burglar wasn't quite the Imperial Admiral of the Fleet, but in the latter's absence he would just have to do-

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Peleng wasn't any fun at all.

Sergeant Tvi of His Imperial Majesty's Secret Dragoons looked at her communications display in speechless despair. The Scholder manse was calling for help. Unmistakably. The Imperial Relic would not be reclaimed tonight.

Tvi's diaphragm gave a spasm of irritation. She banked her Jefferson-Singh speedster and rose high into the traffic lanes, imitating an ordinary commuter. She glanced over her shoulder at her darksuit and equipment and considered tossing them.

No, she decided. She might yet get a chance to show what she could do.

Sergeant Tvi was, to be blunt, a scapegrace. Her parents had been stodgy Imperial servants, existing in perfect descent from long lines of other Imperial servants, each priding himself on his exemplary dullness. Tvi's childhood had been a tedious one. full of boredom and fantasy. If she hadn't had a good imagination she might well have died of ennui. Trapped in one Imperial backwater or another, her horizons limited by the acidic atmosphere of Vanngrian or the endless bleak deserts of Zynzlyp, Tvi had followed the burglar standings, the confidence-racket broadcasts, the exploits of me Human Diadem, biographies of Elvis ... if only, she'd thought, if only she had the- chance, she'd

show Geoff Fu George or Baron Drago a thing or two.

Her career as a burglar, unfortunately, had not been graced with success. Two standards ago, she'd had the misfortune to get caught on her first job, and her only refuge from Imperial law had been the Secret Dragoons.

As she had contemplated the service from her prison cell on Letharb and listened to the reproaches of her parents, the new work had sounded interesting, even attractive—the chance to visit far-flung worlds, participate in intrigue

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intended to further the designs of the Empire, find Romance, Excitement, Danger. Instead, however, she'd been assigned as a junior security officer at various consulates in the Human Constellation, a job that consisted for the most part in dealing with various human cranks. Imperialists mainly, who insisted they knew of plots against the Empire and exactly what she should do about them. Countess Anastasia was yet another in a long line of maladjusted human contacts, and Tvi had begun to despair of the whole race. Were these the same people who had produced Mad Julius and the incomparable Soderberg Vampire?

After Baron Sinn had claimed her for a special mission, her chances had seemed a bit brighter. The situation had been promising. She would be engaged in a race against the clock with the Fate of the Empire at stake, and her competition was none other than Maijstral—he was in the top half of the standings, and furthermore had style and promise. And now it appeared that Tvi had arrived too late.

Damnation, Now things would most likely be turned over to that unspeakable mug Khotvinn, and she'd find herself playing second fiddle in some sordid job of skull-tapping or breaking-and-bashing.

Drat. Peleng was no fun at all.

Behind Sergeant Tvi, Paavo Kuusinen's matte-black speedster rose into the sky. The Khosati commando's flier was a clear blip on his screens.

Kuusinen had followed Nichole's advice and got a new jacket cut in the local style, the better to blend in. He was, as he had told Nichole, a student of human nature; he was also, as he told Maijstral, visiting Peleng on business.

That afternoon he had been combining both occupa-

tions—he was trying to follow Maijstral. To his surprise he'd discovered that Maijstral was being followed by some-

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one else, the Khosali female. Maijstral had dutifully given her the slip earlier that evening, losing Kuusinen at the same time, and Kuusinen had since been following the Khosali in hopes she'd locate Maijstral again. Instead, the small female had gone off on a pointless excursion into me outback only to turn around abruptly and head back to

Peleng City.

Did these people have any idea what they were doing? Kuusinen was beginning to suspect not.

The whole situation was quite bewildering. Ail he wanted to do was keep an eye on Maijstral, and to his amazement half the Imperial Diplomatic Service seemed to be engaged

in the same errand.

There was clearly a mystery here. And, Kuusinen decided, he was just the man to unravel it—  
Countess Anastasia contemplated her stiff-shouldered image in the reflection of her apartment window. She was dressed in a soft black dress that left her shoulders bare, and billowed around her ankles in a cascading wave of darkness. She touched me skirt, picked at an imaginary bit of lint—how dare common detritus adhere to her clothing,

Neuralgia danced in her spine, and consequent irritation whispered in her mind. Maijstral. the whisper said, and her ears flicked downward. She really did disapprove of

me man.

"That Gregor person was asking about Jensen and her cohort. Maijstral's given us the slip. Your burglar Tvi reports that alarms are going off all over the Scholder house. How much more do you need in order to act?"

Baron Sinn's sharp-faced silhouette appeared next to hers in the reflective surface. He, too, was smoking, the cigaret hanging from the end of his muzzle. It was a vice he normally avoided, but which he indulged in for Anasta-

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sia's sake, an old-fashioned courtesy she seemed to ap-

preciate. "I have only two personnel," he said. "Maijstral has servants here, and connections. If he has the Imperial Relic he's probably gone to ground."

"Damn him, anyway. Why didn't he take the bribe?"

"Perhaps he does not share his father's convictions."

Anastasia sneered. Smoke streamed from her nostrils in elegant little white tracers, and she admired the effect in the glass. "He simply takes pleasure in being wayward," she said. "That's why he took up burglary and that unspeakable Nichole woman, just to annoy the family. I always told his father to be firm with the boy."

"Too late now, my lady."

Her lip curled. A bit of tobacco, she noticed, was adhering to one bright tooth- "It's never too late for firmness, my lord Baron." It was one of the rules by which she lived, but the maxim was spoiled by her having to pick the tobacco fleck off her smile-

Sinn remained silent.

"That Nichole," Anastasia told the glass. "Nichole and the Diadem. The height of Constellation culture. People whose sole profession is to be gossiped about. Can you imagine it?"

Sinn moved the cigarel to the corner of his mouth with his lolling tongue. "We were speaking, Countess, about Maijstral and this Jensen woman."

"Firmness," she said, remembering her earlier tack. Neuralgia stabbed her neck. "If Maijstral is in the public eye, and might be missed, Jensen is not. If Maijstral has no one to deliver the Imperial Relic to, then . . ."

"Quite so."

Baron Sinn looked at the human woman and restrained his diaphragm from an irritated spasm. She was an ally, he reminded himself, and even if she was a grotesque crank

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she was a rich grotesque crank who had personally financed Imperial Party activities here in the Constellation. . . .

He dropped his cigaret into an ashtray. "Very well," he said. "I'll have to call Khotvinn into it. We'll pick up Jensen as soon as she's alone. She seems to be entertaining someone named Navarre right now—he's in the service and we don't want complications."

Anastasia stalked to him and put her arm through his, her palm stroking the smooth dark hair on his upper arm.

"Lovely," she said. Her mouth open, her tongue lolled:

Khosali good humor. The glitter in her eyes was appalling. "Firmness at last."

Politics, the Baron quoted to himself, oft consists in ignoring facts.

He considered himself a practical person and rarely resorted to maxims. It was a measure of how she strained his nerves that he was thinking in clichés at all.

Lieutenant Navarre thought of Amalia Jensen as his flier arched across the night sky. An interesting woman, he decided. Dedicated to preserving the Constellation in her own chosen fashion, and with the facts and intelligence to back up her opinions, she'd proved a most stimulating companion for the evening. Head of a political organization, a third degree black sash in pom boxing, an expert conversationalist, . . . Odd, given all that, she'd turn out to be a garden person. Her house was filled with plants and flowers, all lovingly tended.

Still he was a bit uneasy about turning down an invitation from Nichole. How often did a man, particularly an officer from Pompey, get a chance to be photographed with a member of the Human Diadem? Unfortunate that

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he'd not been in a situation in which he could escape the commitment with grace.

The communicator on his flier gave a discreet chirp, and he frowned. Who would be calling at this hour? He pressed a button and answered.

"Navarre."

"Sir? This is Officer Pankat of the Peleng Police. Apparently your late uncle's house was broken into tonight."

Navarre was astonished. "Really?" he asked. And then, "But why?"

"Upon the success of your actions in the next few hours," Baron Sinn declared, "may depend the Fate of the Empire."

Well, thought Sergeant Tvi, how much better than this can it ever get? The Fate of the Empire—her heart beat faster as the words rang in her mind like bells. This was a definite improvement on spending one's life in the civil service, gazing out the window at the endless deserts and intractable inhabitants of Zynzlyp. Even Khotvinn's dark, looming presence—he was a head taller even than Sinn—seemed less than its usual sinister self.

"Khotvinn will be under your orders," Sinn went on. "If there is trouble, he is trained to get you out of it."

"I don't anticipate trouble, my lord." In what Tvi hoped was a tone of quiet confidence.

Sinn looked at her, his gaze commanding. "Anticipate every possible trouble, Tvi. Then you will be able to cope with each problem as it arises."

Why did officers always talk like this? Tvi wondered. Nothing a subordinate said was ever quite right. Even expressions of confidence triggered a lecture. Her reply was dutiful.

"Yes, my lord."

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Countess Anastasia stepped from the back of the room and laid a hand on Baron Sinn's arm. The Baron stiffened.

"Let no one get in your way," the Countess said—Unlike the Baron, she spoke High Khosati. "This is no time for hesitation or foolish regard for life. There must be no witnesses. You must be prepared to take harsh action." She held up a clenched fist.

Tvi remained silent. She didn't have to take orders from the Countess, but the Baron's group was dependent on the Countess for support on this planet, so there was every reason to treat her with courtesy.

The Fate of the Empire! Tvi thought again. Now there was something worth listening to boring speeches for. She

wondered if, in future generations, there would be video programs about Tvi of the Secret Dragoons.

The Countess went on about firmness and the necessity for action. Tvi knew that when her superiors shifted into High Khosali they were trying to inspire her, and she could successfully drowse through it with her eyes open. She therefore stood in a respectful attitude, her ears cocked forward as if she were listening, and in her mind pictured Video Tvi and watched with cool pleasure as the heroine stole documents, battled spies, saved the Emperor's coffin from sabotage. . . . Then she looked at Khotvinn.

The big Khosalikh was standing with his eyes gleaming, the fur on his shoulders standing. The monster was absorbing the Countess's words with evident pleasure and anticipation, just waiting for the moment when he could crack bones, snap necks, bruise flesh. In their few days' acquaintance, Khotvinn had always given Tvi the impression of something that might choose to live in a cave. Now that impression was enhanced. Tvi's mind snapped to attention. Someone like Khotvinn wasn't in her mental script. The Khotvinn of the videos always sought employment in

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the service of villains, and were usually massacred by the heroine just before intermission.

Khotvinn was going to take watching. Tvi knew that now, and knew it for certain.

In her darksuit, Tvi flowed like black glass over the rolling yellow hills on the outskirts of Peleng City. Her sense of smell, enhanced by her darksuit attachments, brought her the scent of night-blooming bellseed flowers.

Khotvinn stood by the flier like a monument. Tvi had decided not to use him on her reconnaissance—she considered him clumsy, and was certain that he had let himself be seen tailing Maijstral's assistant the day before. Tvi lighted and switched off the suit's holograph projectors. Khotvinn gave no sign he noticed her presence.

"Navarre's flier is gone. There are no security arrangements on the house that I can detect."

Khotvinn was matter-of-fact. "Then let's go." His accent was provincial and hard to understand. He flexed his shoulders in a stiff, businesslike way, and Tvi wondered where Sinn had found this one. Half the Secret Dragoons

joined the military from jail, and Khotvinn might well be some murderer recruited from the prison planets for the impenitent, one of those who hadn't had the decency to commit suicide when caught.

She wondered how he could possibly have understood the Countess's speech. Tvi doubted he could speak High Khosali if it were put to him.

"Not yet," Tvi said. "Wait for light."

Khotvinn flexed again, impatient, but said nothing at all through the long purple dawn. He didn't seem to be much good at conversation.

She sighed. In the vids featuring Allowed Burglars, assistants were polite, amoral technophiles who followed

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orders with clear-eyed efficiency, always ready to pull some new black box out of a hat. Disappointingly, Khotvinn was out of me wrong mold.

Tvi waited till she saw a few early fliers carrying people about their business. Then she put on a battered jacket over her darksuit and motioned for Khotvinn to join her in the flier. It rose into the morning sky.

"I've got a plan," Tvi said, "Just follow my lead."

Khotvinn gave no sign that he had heard. Tvi chose to assume he had.

She didn't bother explaining her plan to him. She had tried to picture this discussion to herself, and the picture hadn't scanned. "We're going to pretend to be broadcast repair personnel, Khotvinn." Then, tactfully, "Do you know what broadcast repair personnel are?" No, best let her do the talking. Khotvinn was supposed to be strictly backup, in case of emergencies.

She'd do it all herself. She was Tvi of the Secret Dragoons, on her first real mission, and the Fate of the Empire - . . . oops.

She had overshot Amalia Jensen's house. She turned the flier in a long loop, making it seem as if the oversight had been a deliberate attempt at reconnaissance. Khotvinn said nothing, assuming he'd even noticed. She dropped the flier onto Jensen's flat roof.

The edge of the roof was decorated with long planters and bright blossoms. A robot was moving from flower to flower with a watering can-

The robot was an ordinary all-purpose domestic, combining the functions of maid, butler, doorman, telephone answering machine, and cup-bearer. It rolled toward the flier. The watering can, Tvi noticed, was painted with little yellow daisies.

"May I help you, lady and sir?" the robot asked.

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What Tvi planned to say was this: "We're from Peteng Independent Broadcasting. We've had reports of interference in your neighborhood, and we'd like to check out your sets." What she said instead was: "Khotvinn! What in hell are you doing?"

For the giant had leaped from the flier, not even bothering to open the door, and felled the robot with a single kick. It went sprawling, its arms flung out, the water can clattering across the roof. Khotvinn leaped into the air, then landed on the robot with both feet. More clattering.

Tvi was jumping too, for the black boxes in the back seat. She triggered them—just in time, she suspected—and saw the little gauges flicker as they began intercepting communications. The robot was alerting the household even as Khotvinn picked it up and began smashing it against one of the planters.

"Sir!" the robot chirped. "Can't we just talk about it like reasonable beings?" Tvi knew exactly how the robot felt. Khotvinn tore one of its arms off.

Panic thudded beneath Tvi's ribs. The Fate of the Empire, she recited to herself. Et cetera. Do something.

She jumped out of the flier and dashed to the roof entrance, then pressed the down button. "ACCESS DENIED," the door reported in four commonly-used scripts.

"Thagger," Tvi swore. She was going to have to get in me house some other way.

Khotvinn tore off the robot's remaining arm and began beating the machine with it.

Tvi snapped on her darksuit and pulled its hood over her head, giving her mental control of its devices. She triggered the hologram and, a miniature black cloud, floated away from the mayhem on the roof and dived over the edge of the building- She reached for a microcutter on her belt and began slicing at the first window she came to. As

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she popped the window out and began to drift through it, she realized she was entering Amalia Jensen's bedroom.

Darksuits are useless camouflage during the day. The black holographic cloud obscures the figure, of course, but it may be argued that a black cloud floating through someone's window may call more attention to itself than a person doing the same thing- And of course if you happen to be halfway through a window, your darksuit could be projecting the chorus from Aida and you'd still be an easy target.

The first glimpse Tvi caught of Amalia Jensen was as the human female popped out from behind her waterbed and lobbed overarm a heavy vase that caught Tvi squarely between the ears. Stars exploded in Tvi's vision. She decided to get out of the window as fast as possible, and accelerated straight across the room. Unfortunately her depth perception was still numb and she smashed headfirst into a closet door-

Jensen, seen by Tvi through her rear projectors, continued to hurl weighty household objects into the darksuit screen. A heavy ashtray caught Tvi between her shoulders. A vase detonated over her head.

Enough was enough. This was Khotvinn's department.

Tvi flew down the hallway to the living room and unlocked the roof entrance. The amplified scent of flowers warred with pain in her skull—the place was full of plants. Khotvinn came slowly down the a-grav elevator, a robot arm in one hand.

"What took you so long?" he snarled.

Tvi willed her hologram projectors off and pointed numbly toward Jensen's bedroom. "That way," she said. Khotvinn flung the robot arm into a corner—there was a crash that echoed endlessly in Tvi's skull as the arm destroyed a

porcelain planter—and then the giant began to lope at a ground-shattering trot toward the bedroom.

Unfortunately Jensen had changed position. She came flying out of a connecting bathroom, a green-and-white-striped towel blossoming from one hand. The towel draped nearly over Khotvinn's head just as Jensen's foot planted itself in his midsection. The air went out of Khotvinn in a rush.

There followed a good deal of confused thumping and thrashing. Jensen was aided by another small household robot that clung to Khotvinn's knees and tried in a fairly incompetent way to harm him. Tvi wasn't certain what she was watching, not being an aficionado of the martial arts—a proper burglar disdained violence—but it seemed as if honors were about even. Both fighters were breathless and bloody before Jensen broke off the combat and retreated back into the bathroom. Khotvinn, ignoring the clawing robot and a bottle of shampoo that bounced off his chest, marched in pursuit.

Tvi leaned against an overstuffed chair, holding her head. "Hey," she said as the thrashing started again, "use your stunner, why don't you?"

The household robot came flying out of the bedroom door and smashed to bits on the opposite wall. Amalia Jensen, crouched low, followed the robot out of the door—apparently she'd just ducked from the bathroom into the bedroom—and began backing toward Tvi. Tvi reached for her stunner.

Then Khotvinn appeared, brandishing a towel rack. Jensen reached for a flowerpot and let fly. Tvi lowered her weapon. The wide-beam stunner would get them both if she fired it.

The combat demolished most of the living room. Tvi

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floated up near the roof in her a-grav harness, trying to get in a clear shot, but Khotvinn kept blocking the way.

"Earth slime!" Khotvinn bellowed.

"Inhuman scum!" Amalia Jensen retorted through bloody lips.

Fate of the Empire, Tvi thought resignedly, and wondered how well her black boxes were doing without supervision.

Do something.

She floated over Khotvinn, grabbed his scruff with one hand, and yanked back, turning her a-grav up to max. Khotvinn flew backward, his arms windmilling, and landed on a glass table that shattered with a sound that rattled in Tvi's head like snapping thunder. Jensen cackled triumphantly and prepared her coup de grace. Tvi, now having a clear shot, fired and dropped Jensen in her tracks.

"No!" Khotvinn roared. He was having trouble disentangling himself from the table frame. "She was mine!"

"Idiot," Tvi said. Her skull was splitting. "You were just supposed to stun her. Pick her up and let's go."

"No fair," Khotvinn muttered sulkily.

Fate of the Empire, Tvi thought. Next time the Empire offered her its fate, it could jolly well go hang.

## CHAPTER A

Roman flew alone in Peleng's ruby morning sky. He found it encouraging that he hadn't been followed today—perhaps the two Khosali tags were thrill seekers after all, and had got bored.

He had spent the previous evening being a decoy, trying to give the impression that he and Maijstral were having an ordinary evening. He had taken a bouquet of flowers to Nichole at her residence. It had been delightful seeing her again, as she was one of Maijstral's friends of whom he could actually approve. At Nichole's, Roman had left word with the household robots to expect Maijstral later that night, laying a false trail just in case the small female Khosalikh who had been following Roman all evening should ask. ... Roman had then ordered a meal for three from Chef Tso's Exquisite Mesa Catering, and picked up the laundry. At some point during these more mundane errands, Roman's tail had vanished, just dropped from sight.

This morning Roman had performed various evasions and escapes just in case, but he'd become certain before very long there was no one after him. Buoyed by the knowledge, he finished his evasions anyway, for form's

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sake. He hoped the rest of the day would be as free from aggravation.

Seen through the viewscreen of his flier, Peieng City's low pastel buildings, all surrounded by bright ornamental trees and blossoms, resolved from an early morning mist. Roman's heart gladdened. He put the flier on a landing spiral that would place it on the flat roof of Amalia Jensen's small white house. His ears turned down as he thought of Humanity Prime, and then his diaphragm spasmed once in resignation. If Maijstral was going to engage in an irregular occupation, he would inevitably deal with irregular people—Roman could only wish there were more like Nichole and fewer like Jensen and her friends.

The flier settled on the roof like a leaf on a spotless green lawn. The edge of the roof was decorated with planters and bright blossoms. Roman felt buoyed; he liked having living things around him. Enjoying the plants in spite of himself, Roman got out of the flier and headed toward the roof entrance. The first thing he saw was a dead robot-

Suspicion hummed in his nerves. He checked that his gun was loose in its holster and wished he had brought some of his darksuit attachments that would allow him to see behind his back.

Carefully Roman examined the robot. The machine had been torn apart—arms and legs ripped off, command unit excavated and thrown across the roof. The destruction was wanton, far more than would have been necessary to disable the machine. And whoever had done it had been very strong.

Indignation began to gather. There was an offense here, and not to Amalia Jensen, but rather to the honor of Maijstral's employer.

Roman drew his gun and clicked its setting to "Lethal."

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The green light on the roof elevator showed it wasn't locked- He stepped to the elevator and pressed the down button.

The living room was a mess- Furniture was overturned,

papers scattered about, planters were smashed. Bright blossoms lay dying on me carpet. Roman's nostrils flickered in disapproval.

In the hallway another robot lay in pieces. One of Jensen's shoes lay in a corner, its mate nowhere to be seen. There was some blood on a heavy vase, evidence it might have been used as a club. Roman looked closely. There was short, dark hair on the vase that seemed consistent with Khosali fur.

Roman stood for a moment in the midst of the devastation and pondered events. He had come to tell Miss Jensen that her commission had been successful, if a bit messy, and to make arrangements for the sale and the delivery of the artifact. Getting involved in vandalism and violence was not a part of his job.

But something had happened here, something that possibly was related to Maijstral's commission. He decided he should try to find evidence of this, one way or another.

He had barely commenced his search when he heard the sound of a flier dropping to the roof. His gun at the ready, Roman slipped into the kitchen, where he could get a view of the elevator -

The elevator went to work silently, its a-grav field bringing the passenger down. Roman, his ears pricked, heard Pietro Quijano's voice.

"Miss Jensen? What happened to Howard? Oh."

Howard, Roman presumed, was the name of the robot on the roof. He clicked his pistol to "Stun," then put it back in its holster.

"Miss Jensen?"

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Quijano almost jumped out of his skin when Roman glided silently out of the kitchen. Hoping to ease his mind, Roman smiled at him, tongue lolling from his long muzzle. Quijano glanced anxiously to the elevator and door, looking for a place to run.

Quijano spoke Human Standard through clenched teeth. "Who are you? What happened here?"

"I was hoping," Roman said, moving closer, "you

would be able to tell me the answer to that last question."

Quijano looked relieved. "Are you police? Is Amalia—Miss Jensen—is she all right?"

"I don't know." Roman glided closer to Quijano, his feet moving noiselessly across the rubble. "It looks as if she has been abducted. Would you have any idea why?"

Several complex expressions passed through Pietro Quijano's face. From these, Roman gathered, Quijano had, first, a very good idea what might have happened, and secondly, that he had no intention of conveying this information to anyone he didn't know and trust, even someone he assumed to be a policeman. Perhaps especially a policeman.

"No," Quijano said. His eyes were darting toward the exits again. "I—I don't think—I don't know at all."

"Are you sure?" Roman said.

Quijano looked at Roman sidelong. He took a breath and braced himself, apparently taking heart from the fact that Roman hadn't actually attacked him. He stood with his arms akimbo and looked belligerent. "Say. I don't believe I know you. And if you're from the police, shouldn't you show me your identification?"

Roman gave a passable imitation of a human sigh as he tried to put the young man at ease- "You're right, sir. I've been neglecting the formalities."

He might as well admit he had run out of ideas.

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Roman reached inside his jacket, brought out his gun, and shot Quijano at close range, terribly overstimulating his nerves. Roman caught the unlucky man before he fell, then slung him over his shoulder and carried him to the elevator. Once on the roof, Roman told Quijano's flier to head home on autopilot, then dropped Quijano into the back seat of his own machine.

Quijano looked up at him glassily. He seemed terribly disappointed at the way the cops were behaving.

Roman had decided to let Maijstral handle this. That's what criminal masterminds were for—to deal with the big picture.

"They stole what?" Lieutenant Navarre gazed in bemused surprise at the insurer and the man from the auctioneers'.

The auctioneer flipped through his catalog. "Here it is, sir. 'Engraved silver cryonics container, with power source, Imperial seal, functional, c9, wt losm, 18x17ng.' "

Navarre still felt bemused. He took another few steps into the large room. ignoring the trophies and battleflags, his gaze moving from one object of interest to the other—open skylight, stunned robot, empty niche. Skylight, robot, niche. Again, looking for some reason behind the thing. Skylight, robot, niche. Fixing everything in his mind.

"What was it worth?" he asked.

"We were, hm, going to start the bidding at twelve novae and hope to get, mm, sixteen or eighteen."

"It wasn't worth much, then."

The auctioneer's voice was defensive. "Sir. It was probably the most valuable, mm, single object in the house. The militaria is worth more as a collection, which is why we're selling it in large lots, but none of the single items

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are remarkable. The fact of the container's being loot from the imperial quarters might have increased its value to some collectors."

"It's not exactly beyond the reach of collectors, either," Navarre said. "Sixteen or eighteen novae—the disruptor that was used to knock out the robot probably cost at least five, and the black boxes we found were worth more, maybe even eight or nine."

"They had an, hm, a homemade look, sir. They may have cost nothing if they were made from scratch."

The Khosalikh from the insurance company glanced over the room, taking in the racked weapons, the decorations, the flags. "It may have been stolen by a traditional Imperialist," she pointed out. "The artifact came from the sacred precincts—selling it at auction would pollute it."

"Really?" Navarre was vaguely annoyed at himself for

not perceiving mis on his own—he liked having things in order. He fixed the fact firmly in his mind. Then he glanced up at the overhanging banners. "They why didn't they steal the Imperial battleflags? They're loot from me sacred precincts as well."

"Perhaps, sir," said the Khosalikh, "the thief did not have time. The alarm seems to have been given fairly early."

"Perhaps."

"Drake Majjstral is on planet, sir." The auctioneer's tone seemed to hang the fact in the air, like one of the flags, without bothering to interpret it.

Navarre frowned. "This hardly seems in his class."

"True, sir. True. It had occurred to me that you might know him- I conceived it might be personal."

"It shouldn't be. I just met him the other night."

"Yes, but there is also . . . well, his family history, and yours."

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Navarre frowned. "I shouldn't think so. He didn't seem to be the sort to hold a grudge that way."

The insurer sighed. "I'm sure you, hm, know best, sir."

Navarre walked to the skylight and squinted out into the bright yellow sky. Then he turned to look at the niche again, then the robot. Perhaps a different perspective would serve to clarify matters. Skylight, niche, robot. No help.

He realized he was standing between two portraits of his uncle: the young hostage-taker over the mantel facing the older Admiral Uncle Jack in his decorations and frown. Both looked fierce and determined, each in his own way. Navarre had always hoped his look of concentrated energy was as ferocious as Admiral Uncle Jack's.

A thought struck him. He turned his energetic scowl on the auctioneer. "By the way," he said, "was there anything in this container?"

The auctioneer hesitated. "We, uh, didn't, don't know."

We didn't know how to open it." Navarre looked at him. "That's what the, hm, 'c9' in the description meant, sir. It's our code. It means there was a complicated lock on it, and it didn't come with a key, so we didn't open it for fear of damaging it."

Navarre intensified his scowl. "Suppose someone knew what was in it? That it was valuable, I mean."

"A cryonics container? What could there be in it?"

"Genetic material? Drugs? A piece of supercooled processing hardware?"

"Old wine."

"An antique, or perhaps a memento," the Khosalikh offered. "Something perishable that the Imperial family wished to preserve for sentimental reasons."

Navarre looked at her. "Such as?"

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"The heart or other organ of one of the deceased household pets."

"Oh."

"The clever little foreclaws of a clacklo, for example," the Khosalikh went on. "I often wished I could preserve the claws of my little Peejee when she died, but I was young and my parents were afraid of the expense."

"You have my sympathies, ma'am," Navarre said.

The insurance investigator's eyes glowed. "You should have seen the little ways Peejee would invent to steal food. She would lay brilliant little ambushes around the refrigerator. She was so smart you could swear she was almost Khosali." Her nostrils dilated with emotion. "How I wish," she sighed, "I could have preserved at least some of her parts."

"I'm sure that would have been a consolation," Navarre said. He looked back at the empty niche. "But somehow I have a hard time believing that there are very many Imperialist animal lovers with the wherewithal to steal my uncle's silver jug."

"Quite, sir." The auctioneer frowned around him. "Per-

haps we should increase security here, in case the thief or thieves return. It might be that the perpetrators were after something else, and only picked up the container on the way."

"Perhaps we should." Navarre did not like ambiguities, and the thought that there was still something here that someone might want made him uneasy. He glanced at the portrait of his uncle, the young man in tattered uniform holding a businesslike spitfire rifle on a startled-looking Emperor, the latter hiding in the harem and dressed as one of his wives. (That was the human version of the story. The Khosali version had the Emperor stunned and over-

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come while leading the defense in the uniform of an Honorary Life Guard colonel).

"Blast it all," Navarre said. "What could have been in the thing?"

Roman's nerves sang of anger as he flittered through the sky. Wrongs done, insults given, actions demanded.

Maijstral, he knew, was careless in matters of honor, But he could scarcely ignore this. Roman's blood boiled on behalf of the Maijstral family.

This was an insult not to be borne.

As it drifted through the window of the small country cottage, the cool country air stirred Maijstral's unbound hair. The place was safe: Roman had rented it under a false name, and Maijstral felt free to relax and spend his morning in bed watching an old Western. He nibbled a bit of fleth and allowed the household robot to refill his champagne glass. "Thank you," he said, and began his third champagne of the morning.

Lying on the bed were a number of computer faxes that Gregor had given him. He really should have been working on them, planning his next job.

The next series of thefts would be easy. Two nights ago, Maijstral's presence had been splattered across every media broadcast in Peleng. Nervous owners of famous art treasures and gems, knowing his name, would naturally want to increase security while he remained on the planet.

That was why Gregor had been on a breaking-and-

entering mission that same night—he had been planting microtracers on the equipment of Peleng's major security consultants. When the householders increased their security, the tracers would now lead Maijstral straight to then-valuables. They would also make the job easier, since

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Maijstral would know in advance what manner of gadgets had been installed. Gregor had spent much of the previous day following his microtracers around Peleng and making note of their locations.

For a thief, knowing where to go was at least as important as knowing how to get there.

But instead of plotting his next job, Maijstral sipped champagne and watched his Western. Perhaps he was lazy. But he had been working late the night before.

The vid was one of his favorites. *Riders of the Plains*. He'd had a sentimental liking for it ever since he'd seen it for the first time at the age of seven.

Maijstral let the robot pour more champagne while he watched Elvis ride across the western prairie with his old friend, Jesse James. While playing idly on his electric guitar, Elvis tried to talk Jesse into going straight and giving up his life of crime. Elvis knew that Bat Masterson had sworn to bring Jesse in dead or alive, but had promised Bat not to tell Jesse. It was a terrible moral dilemma.

What Elvis didn't know was that Jesse had chosen the outlaw trail because of his passionate affair with Priscilla, Elvis's wife. Jesse knew that if he stayed around the ranch, Elvis would find out, and the knowledge would destroy him. The climax of the drama featured a violent multiple tragedy that ended with Jesse and Priscilla dying in one another's arms, and the truth finally revealed to a grieving King of Rock and Roll. At the very end, Elvis walked down a lonely trail, strumming despairing chords on his guitar, his own ultimate tragedy foreshadowed. It was a beautiful mythic moment.

Maijstral liked Westerns better than other forms of genre entertainment. He wondered why Shakespeare hadn't written any.

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The robot chimed gently. "Visiting flier in our airspace,

sir," it reported.

Maijstral frowned. No one knew his location but Gregor and Roman. Gregor was here, and Roman was supposed to be staying at Maijstral's other house, giving police, press, or other undesirables the impression that Maijstral was in residence. He told the robot to tell the house to give him an exterior view and a picture of whoever was in the flier.

The intruder was Roman. Maijstral's frown deepened. He knew that Roman wouldn't put in an appearance unless there was something seriously wrong.

He turned back to the vid. Elvis was talking about how much Priscilla missed Jesse, telling the outlaw that there would always be a place for him around the ranch. Jesse was turning away with tears in his eyes. It was one of MaijstraTs favorite scenes, but there was no choice but to postpone the film's climax- He told the vid to turn itself off, then sprang out of bed and put on a silk robe. He brushed his hair back out of his eyes and went to meet Roman.

The Khosalikh was carrying Pietro Quijano over one broad shoulder. Maijstral told the house to ask Gregor to join them. This was going to be serious.

Roman's nostrils flickered as he saw Maijstral in his robe. He didn't approve of people who spent their mornings lounging in bed- Maijstral had probably been watching low entertainments, to boot. Hardly suitable in the light of the present affront to his honor.

Roman really knew Maijstral very well.

Maijstral helped Roman put Pietro gently on a plush couch—the Khosali difficulty in unbending is not due to temperament, but anatomy—and then stood while Roman explained what had just happened. Gregor entered in the middle of the story, and Roman had to begin again.

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Pietro looked up at Maijstral. Rotating holograms—the day art—reflected in his eyes. He seemed desperate to say something. Maijstral leaned close. "Flig," Quijano said through thick lips. "Gleep."

Maijstral nodded as if he understood. "You pose a definite problem, Mr. Quijano."

"Neegle. Thrib."

"I'll have the robot bring you some champagne. It might make you feel better."

"Gri. Thagyou."

Maijstral sighed as he moved off on his errand. "You're welcome, Mr. Quijano," he said.

No fun at all. Sergeant Tvi lay on her bed in Countess Anastasia's house, held a semilife patch to the bruise on her head, and closed her eyes. The indomitable chimes in her skull refused to stop clanging.

The Fate of the Empire. Romance, Excitement, Danger. She repeated the phrases to herself as she pressed another patch to her head. The point was, the danger wasn't supposed to come from your own side.

She'd reported Khotvinn's behavior to the Baron. Not that this had done any good—the Baron had just read her a lecture about how she had to explain things to subordinates in order for them to know their jobs properly, and how this was all a part of being prepared and anticipating difficulty.

Tvi concluded that the Baron had never actually worked with Khotvinn. or tried to explain anything to him. Officers, in her estimation, always had the perfect command of things they had never experienced.

The communicator in her room beeped. Echoes flooded her skull like a lunatic carillon. She touched the ideograph for "answer" and snarled.

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The Baron's voice cut the air. "Time to relieve Khotvinn and bring Miss Jensen her second breakfast."

"Yes, my lord." Tvi covered her head with a pillow and whimpered to herself silently, a martyr of the Empire. Then obeyed.

She picked up Jensen's tray from the kitchen—the robot staff couldn't be involved in this, since their memories could be impounded as evidence if things went wrong—and men trudged up the stone stair to the attic room where Jensen was being held. The tray smelted of roast amette. Tvi's mouth began to water.

A very popular children's puppet, a little over seven feet tall, waited at the top of the stair. It was human, with red hair and freckles and a perpetual grin. Its name was Ronnie Romper.

"Relieving you," Tvi said.

"About time," snarled Ronnie Romper. It snapped off the holographic device and became Khotvinn. Purple bmisess showed through his dark fur, which was also mottled with semilife patches. He took off the holo projector and another gadget from his belt and handed them to Tvi.

"Your disguise," he said. "The restraint control."

"Thank you," Tvi snarled back. "So much." She clipped the projector to her belt, snapped it on, and put me manacle control on her tray. Khotvinn stomped down the stairs.

The door was secured by a heavy bolt that had been installed the previous night. Its alloy screws had chipped the dark wood of the door. Tvi shot the bolt back and entered.

The guest bedroom had been hastily filled with miscellaneous furniture brought from storage in the attic: a canopied bed with plump pillows and blue ruffles, a pair of chairs covered in peach brocade, a deep carpet of violet dewkin fur, a crystal lamp in the shape of a Khosali ballet

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dancer with a stained-glass shade on his head. The clash of colors and cultures made Tvi's headache worse.

Amalia Jensen produced another contrast with the frilly furniture. Her face was covered by semilife patches that were feeding her painkillers and sapping her bruises. She was lying on the ruffled bed in the black pajamas in which she'd been taken, her ankles locked together by restraints, and she glared at Tvi while sneering through a split lip. "Another Ronnie Romper," she said. She was speaking KhosaU. "Why do you bother trying to look human? I can identify you both."

"Go ahead," Tvi said, answering in the same language. "What's my name, then?"

"Look. I suppose I can understand the need for disguises. But why did you have to pick something that smiles all the time?"

Tvi put the tray on an antique inlaid Troxan table and moved the table to the brocade-covered chair. She strolled to the corner of the room and sat on the other chair. "I'm going to close your wrists and release your ankles," she said, and picked up the control to Jensen's restraints. "Then you can move to the chair, sit in it, then I'll close your ankles and release your hands. Right?"

Jensen's eyes flickered over the room, taking in the bed, the chairs, the table. Measuring things. "Very well," she said.

Tvi knew someone preparing a desperate move when she saw one, and her diaphragm spasmed in resignation. She took her stunner out of its holster. "Right," she said. "Here we go."

She pressed the restraint controls. The snug bracelets on Jensen's wrists moved toward one another, as of their own volition, until they touched. Jensen swung her legs off the bed and walked stiffly toward the table. Her bruises were

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bothering her. She kept her eyes on Tvi's stunner. Standing by the table, she seemed to hesitate, then looked at the stunner again and sat down where she'd been told.

Tvi touched another button. Jensen's ankles came inevitably together. Her hands were freed, Jensen removed the food tray's lid and began to eat.

Tvi's upper stomach rumbled. No one had said anything about feeding her.

Jensen took a mouthful of roast amette, winced, and concentrated instead on the softer vegetables. Tvi settled back in her chair.

"You must have got the wrong person, you know," Jensen said. "I'm not worth much ransom."

"You're not being held for ransom," Tvi said.

Jensen didn't seem terribly surprised. The human took another shaky forkful.

"Why then?" she asked.

"I daresay you would know best, ma'am," Tvi said.

On me vid. Allowed Burglars were always polite. Style counted a full ten points, after all.

"Why am I still alive?" Jensen asked.

This wasn't bad, really, Tvi thought. A civilized conversation between a kidnapper and her victim. An occasion for her to play the suave mastermind. "No need for anything so extreme as murder, ma'am. You'll just be our guest for a few days."

"Until what?"

Tvi decided to feign a knowing silence. Much as she might enjoy playing the part of a cultured kidnapper, she hadn't actually been told the reasons for Jensen's abduction. She knew Maijstral was involved in it somehow, and that the Fate of the Empire was at stake, but other than that she'd been kept in the dark.

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Amalia Jensen just shrugged. She swallowed her coffee. "Well," she said, "they probably haven't told you."

Tvi ground her teeth. This human was sharp. She decided to take another tack, another brand of sophistication. Elegant mercenaries were at least as much fun as elegant masterminds.

"That hardly matters," Tvi said. "I was paid well."

Jensen looked at her and put her forkful of pureed manna back down on her plate. "I could arrange that you be paid more."

"Miss Jensen. I seem to recall, not a moment ago, you said you weren't worth much ransom." Tvi's upper stomach rumbled. The roast arnette, she observed, was under a white sauce.

Jensen smiled thinly, then winced and dabbed her split lip with a napkin. "Things can be arranged. What would you say to forty novae?"

Tvi's ears pricked forward. That wasn't bad money, not really, assuming that Jensen could actually deliver and Tvi collect. But against the Fate of the Empire, she concluded, it was nothing. She waved a languid hand. "You do me a disservice. Miss Jensen, if you believe that a mercenary of my standing will change sides after already embarking on

an adventure. I take pride in seeing my contracts through, you see."

"I apologize," Jensen said, smiling again. "I did not mean to impugn your professionalism."

"Apology accepted. After meeting Kho—my colleague, I can understand that you might mistake me. He is none of mine, I assure you. A creature of my employers."

"I understand." Tvi's lower stomach had joined her upper in a distressed chorus. She snarled beneath her human holographic smile.

Amalia Jensen seemed to perceive Tvi's rumblings. She

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held up the plate of amette. "Would you like the roast?" she asked. "I'm afraid my mouth's a little . . . tender, this morning."

"I am peckish. If you wouldn't mind."

"Not at all." Jensen tottered to her feet, holding out the roast. Tvi rose to a half crouch, one arm extended. Jensen flung her plate at Ronnie Romper's grinning head and sprang, her hands clawed, her ankles still tethered together.

Tvi had been half expecting this—the Baron's lecture about preparedness hadn't fallen entirely on deaf ears, and Miss Jensen had turned far too pleasant all of a sudden. Tvi fired her stunner in the middle of Jensen's arc, and the captive's leap ended in a soft muddle on the plush dewkin carpet. Tvi's diaphragm pulsed with regret. White sauce ran down her neck.

Blast, she thought. Just when she was beginning to enjoy herself.

Pietro Quijano had spilled most of his first glass of champagne on his shirt, but managed to get down the second. His color and bearing had improved considerably. He was now able to sit up without danger of toppling over.

Gregor watched him from a straight-backed chair in the corner, his fingers tapping tittle rhythms on his knees. Roman stood silently in a corner, looming. Maijstral could tell he was seriously upset.

Maijstral walked into his room, and there tied his hair in

a knot and pinned it on the back of his head. He changed into soft suede pants, pumps, a loose grey silk shirt, and an earring. If he was to have guests, he might as well look presentable.

He entered the parlor room and offered Pietro a piece of fleth from his plate. Pietro accepted. Maijstral chose a soft chair opposite Pietro's sofa and settled into it. Above him,

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a holographic representation of the Bartlett Head rotated slowly in its niche. Maijstral drew taut the drawstrings on his sleeves.

"Well, Mr. Quijano," he said carefully, "perhaps you can enlighten us as to recent events."

Pietro Quijano looked nervously toward Roman, then glanced at Gregor. "No idea," he mumbled, and held out his glass for more champagne. The robot purred from the comer and began to pour.

Maijstral began itemizing on his fingers. "Amalia Jensen appears to have been kidnapped," he said. "This kidnapping occurred less than two days after she commissioned me and my associates to acquire an artifact. My researches have noted the fact that Miss Jensen was quite visibly involved in politics here on Peleng, a ranking member of an organization that has branches throughout the Constellation. You are the treasurer for that organization."

Pietro was beginning to look uncomfortable. He bit a piece of fleth and chewed nervously. Maijstral rose from his chair, turned, and reached into the Bartlett Head. He drew out the silver artifact and, with the device in his hands, settled into his chair. Pietro's look turned to one of burning, undisguised eagerness.

"You recognize it, I see," Maijstral said. "Miss Jensen was kidnapped within hours of my acquiring this object. Since the object itself is not valuable, I assume it has some political or symbolic significance of which I am unaware."

He frowned down at the heavy silver container. He had examined it carefully after appropriating it, and knew that besides the Imperial seal, the container featured an engraving of Qwelm I, the first Pendjalli Emperor, receiving the submission of the first ambassador-delegate from Zynzlyp. It hadn't been much of a conquest—the sea-slug shaped

Drawmii were so incomprehensible and unpredictable that it had never quite been determined whether they actually understood they had been "conquered," and therefore become members of a "Khosali Protectorate." But it had been the first Pendjalli conquest and the mythographers had, perforce, to make the most of it.

The other side of the saddle-shaped container showed the retiring Nnis CVI among his College, a group of renowned scholars he had gathered in the City of Seven Bright Rings to assist him in the abstract inquiries for which he was rather more famed than for his skill at governing the Empire. Maijstral looked closely. He recognized the face of Professor Gantemur, a human philologist who had passed plans of the Imperial Residence to agents of the Rebellion and subsequently been awarded the holdings of a number of prominent human Imperialists, Maijstral's grandfather among them.

Maijstral looked at Pietro. The young man's eagerness was almost palpable.

"Mr. Quijano, I must know what has occurred," he said. "My client has been abducted. It is possible that I—that we—are in danger from the same source. Within a matter of hours, this container will be legally mine, and I may dispose of it. Naturally, I would prefer to give it to Miss Jensen—that is my contract. But—" He held up a hand, and Pietro's face darkened. "If this object will bring me unwanted attention, I may have to get rid of it quickly,"

"But," Pietro said, "you can't." He looked for support to Gregor. "He can't," Pietro asked. "Can he?" Gregor only grinned.

"On the contrary, sir." Maijstral was firm. "If Miss Jensen is not available, she cannot fulfill her part in the contract. I assume that whoever abducted her knows that, and will keep her incommunicado until such time as I have

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either left Peleng or disposed of the object in some other way. It is likely, if they find me, they will make an offer of their own. I may be compelled by circumstances to accept."

Pietro goggled at him. "Look," he said, "I'm the

treasurer. I can pay you in Amalia's place."

"It may be," Maijstral said, "that I could place your bid among others in any auction taking place after Miss Jensen fails to reappear. But you will be bidding against others, Mr. Quijano."

Pietro appeared to cave in. He glanced toward Gregor again, then at Roman.

"I'll tell you," he said. "But your Khosalikh will have to leave."

Irritation snapped into Maijstral. A display of racism at this point was more than annoying. He glanced up at Roman's stolid, unmoving countenance. "Roman may stay," Maijstral said. "He is my oldest associate, and perfectly in my confidence."

Pietro shook his head. "This issue transcends mere personal loyalties, Mr. Maijstral." He leaned closer and lowered his voice, as if trying to keep Roman from overhearing. His tone was earnest. "The Fate of the Human Constellation," he said, "is in the balance."

Maijstral raised an eyebrow. "You don't say." This puppy was getting more annoying by the minute.

"Please," Pietro said.

Maijstral tossed the relic from one hand to the next. "And here I am asking a mere sixty. For the Fate of the Constellation."

Pietro was indignant. "You agreed to sixty!" Then he seemed to recover himself. "Trust me on this, Mr. Maijstral."

Maijstral sighed. There was a short silence, relieved

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only by Gregor's tapping on his knees. Finally Pietro spoke.

"Very well, sir. If you vouch for him. But I wish you would reconsider."

Maijstral glanced at Roman. "I will not." Another bout of irritation gripped Maijstral at the sight of Roman's stolid countenance. Roman was concealing some great

anger, that was clear, and Maijstrai assumed it was on account of this tactless young man. He leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. "What's in the jug, Mr. Quijano? The truth, now."

Pietro bit his lip. When he spoke it was a whisper.

"That container," he said, "is a cryonic reliquary containing the sperm of the heirless Pendjalli Emperor, Nnis CVI."

Maijstrai looked at the object in his hands. He perceived Gregor's stunned look, Roman's jaw dropping, and he wished he had sent them both away, far out of earshot, far off the planet even.

The thing hummed in Maijstral's hand, a cold, impossible weight.

"Oh," Maijstrai said. "The Fate of the Constellation really is at stake, then."

## CHAPTER C

The cryonic reliquary sat on the table. It gleamed in the soft light of the room. Maijstrai reached out his glass and accepted another fill of champagne. The group was on its second bottle. Maijstrai told the robot to chill a third. He was going to need it.

He wanted nothing so much as to get rid of the reliquary without further delay. Drop it off a speeding flier into the nearest bottomless lake. Toss it into the heart of the first fusion furnace he stumbled across. Fire it into the heart of Peleng's sun.

It had come true, he thought. The worst nightmare of every thief. To have stolen something so valuable, so fabulous, that it would be desired by every soldier, every politician, every criminal, every diplomat, every murderous fanatic.

Poor Maijstrai, thought Maijstrai. And drank his champagne without pleasure.

Maijstrai would not have been cheered by the idea that some people were in worse situations. Consider poor Nnis.

The current Pendjalli Emperor had spent his youth in the Imperial harem, a withdrawn, scholarly child, out of place

in the competitive, none-too-gentle atmosphere of the place, He preferred catching insects and scrutinizing their genitalia under a microscope to the usual harem activities, which consisted largely of children engaging in intrigues that were imitations of those indulged in by their mothers, each child being pushed along in a typhoon of plotting and scheming and maneuvering, a miniature storm reflective of those external stresses created by the endless struggles of the best-bom Khosali houses to make one of their offspring the favored child, the next heir. The Khosali Imperium had no rule of primogeniture, no regular system for determining the heir save the Imperial wilt itself.

If one were not a natural intriguer, childhood in the harem could be ghastly. Nnis was not an intriguer. He was, however, very good at bugs.

It was with considerable relief that Nnis learned he had lost the contest to a younger half brother. His bitterly disappointed mother, the beautiful and high-strung daughter of the Duke of Moth (pronounced Myth), lectured him for hours about his inadequacies. Nnis didn't care. He sniffed her ears good-bye and flew to Gosat on happy libelulla wings, where he spent the happiest three years of his life studying desert entomology. His studies were interrupted by the terrifying news that the Prince Royal had died in a freak ballooning accident, and that, as the result of a particularly successful bit of intrigue on the part of his mother and the Moth (pronounced Myth) clan, he had been anointed the next heir. Panicked by the prospect, Nnis dashed back to the City of Seven Bright Rings in order to inaugurate a counterconspiracy aimed at getting himself removed, only to find on his arrival that the Emperor had moulted and lapsed into coma. All was lost.

The Moths were smiling in the coronation holographs, a row of red, tolling tongues. Nnis CV1, in the green bro-

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cade cloth of state, looked as if he were attending a funeral.

The Moths' smiles were, in the event, short-lived. Emperors are restricted in many areas of their lives, but Nnis concluded that he could arrange his family life, at least, to suit himself. The City of Seven Bright Rings subsequently

announced that the Dowager Mother would be built a new palace on Gosat, where she would become Custodian-Pensioner of the Imperial Entomological Collection. The Duke of Moth returned to Mothholm minus the cost of a lot of expensive coronation presents.

Nnis must have concluded that there was some point to being Emperor after all.

Nnis subsequently married about a dozen times. His harem was small—there was a certain resentment over that, particularly on the part of the Moths' hereditary enemies, who had been looking to get their own back—but what really got the traditionalists wailing was the fact that Nnis declined to sire any offspring.

There had never been an Empress; tradition decreed that the crown go to a male. The tradition had been founded before the days of widespread genetic technology, when a male heir could sire many more offspring than could any Empress. Gene technology made this requirement obsolete, but the necessity of a male Emperor was continued simply because it was tradition, and tradition was something a Khosalikh could never question.

Nnis, however, wanted to postpone the intrigue over the heir for as long as he could. As he liked his insects best when they were pinned to a mat, he liked his household quiet, quiet and unexciting. Predictable, calm, scholarly. His first inquiry, on being proposed a new wife, was whether or not she had a soft voice; the second was whether or not she had published.

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Quiet he got. Forty years worth. And when excitement came at last, it more than made up for the previous two score years.

It has been a matter of historical debate concerning whether effective and spirited leadership from the Imperial City would have prevented, or altered the course of, the Human Rebellion. Probably not—prior to Nnis's accession the course of Imperial policy had been set, the ministers were in place, the humans already agitating. If Nnis had looked up from his collection long enough to notice there were problems, he might have brought them to his ministers' attention and they might have been compelled to look more closely ... but it was not the Emperor's job to consider the inconceivable, and a successful revolt was simply that.

Nnis was the first Khosali Emperor to lose a war. Ever. Imagine that.

Had he suicided, no one would have blamed him, and most would have applauded. At least it would have shown an appreciation of his position. But his presence was necessary to maintain both the Emperor Principle and the peace. And, of course, there was no one to follow—he had seen to that.

But the shock was too much. His health collapsed and he went into his cold coffin. From there he kept a tenuous grip on affairs and on ritual. Kept soldiering on for two generations as the medical procedures used to keep the final darkness at bay grew ever more elaborate and extreme, and his hands upon the reins of Empire grew ever weaker, ever colder,

He never had an heir. His ministers had, years before, impressed upon him to contribute the royal seed to cryonic storage. Three containers were prepared—the donation was eventually made. But the war wrecked it all. Two contain-

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ers were destroyed, another was missing and presumed lost. By the end of the war, his fertility had declined to the point where future contributions were pointless. Nontraditional means of succession, such as cloning, were denied the tradition-bound Emperor.

And there he sat for years, dreaming in his box, awaiting release, the last comforting silence. Wondering where things went wrong, what he could have done differently.

Wondering if they will ever let him die.

Lieutenant Navarre swung from side to side in his hammock and frowned into his receiver. While searching the house for further sign of theft, he had found the hammock in his uncle's storage closet and promptly strung it between two trees on the lawn. His telephone he always carried with him, on his belt. The Pompey High Seas Scouts are always prepared. On proper communications often depend lives.

He'd had a two hour nap, interrupted when a pair of plum-colored birds decided to play follow-the-leader through the leaves overhead. Then he decided to call Amalia Jensen and tell her about the theft at his uncle's place; and

incidentally repay her dinner last night with an offer of one of his own. But there was no answer, and that was odd. Not even a robot or an answering device. And Jensen had told him she would be in all day.

It was as if communications had simply gone down.

He put his receiver down, swung his legs out of the hammock and reached for his uniform jacket and mourning cloak. He would deliver the message in person. He smiled as he thought of Amalia Jensen amid her scented bower.

So intent was he on this vision that, as he strode across the lawn adjusting his jacket and calling for the robot to lace him up, he forgot that he left his telephone sitting on

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the hammock. It glittered silver in the sun, rocking two and fro with the wind.

One of the plum-colored birds fluttered down onto the hammock. The telephone winked at her. She picked it up in her forepaws and flew into the sky.

The press found out that Maijstral had been expected at Nichole's hotel late last evening—a rumor Nichole had agreed with Roman to plant, a false trail laid by Roman for the benefit of his shadow. The media globes hadn't seen Maijstral enter, but then again he was known to be elusive. Nichole had declined to discuss the matter further, which only enhanced speculation.

Nichole knew how to prime the pump of rumor- It was her profession, after all.

And now came the phone call.

"Drake Maijstral, ma'am."

Nichole had programmed her bedroom with a deep masculine Khosali voice, deferent and respectful. This was in deliberate contrast to the brassier, female tones of her dermatology robot, which was carefully applying her cosmetics. She ordered the dermatologist to withdraw its apparatus and told the room to accept (he call. MaijstraTs life-size holographic head appeared on a level with her eyes. His hair was escaping the knot into which he'd tied it. He seemed not to have slept well.

"Hello, Maijstral. Did you have a profitable evening?"

"It was ... an interesting night, Nichole." Something in his voice made her sit up.

"Are you all right, Drake?"

He hesitated. "Yes. But I must beg off luncheon today. You know I wouldn't leave you without escort were there not compelling reasons."

A challenge? she wondered. Arrest? Some kind of trap?

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She hadn't heard Maijstral's name on the vid save in connection with her own. Whatever the problem was, it wasn't public.

"Can I help?"

Maijstral's smile was strained. "It's very kind of you to ask, but no."

"Anything you need, Maijstral- We're friends. You know that."

He paused a moment before answering, then shook his head. "Your offer is very kind, but I think not. You should stay clear of this."

She rested her chin on her hand. "It's serious, then."

"Yes, milady. It is."

"Is Roman looking after you?"

He smiled. "Very well. Thank you."

"Take good care of yourself, Drake. Don't do anything foolish."

"I won't." He raised a glass of champagne into the holo field. "Thank you for understanding. I'll make it up to you when next we meet."

Nichole smiled. Maijstral always did have ten points for style. "I'll hold you to that," she said. She watched him sip from his glass, and she realized there was something about his manner that still bothered her. He was, she realized suddenly, shaken. Truly shaken. The champagne was a careful attempt at regaining savoir faire. She had

never seen him in this state before, and if she hadn't known him very well for a brief interval she would never have noticed it. "Drake," she said suddenly, "call me tomorrow. I want to know how you are."

, He moved the glass out of the holo field. His look was  
^ neutral. "Thank you," he said. "I'm flattered by your  
concern."

^ It was a typical Maijstral remark, but he'd spoken High

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Khosali, in the conjugation relating to the state of the universe. Ten points for style again, but there was still something seriously wrong.

Not the least of which was, Nichole now had no escort for a public luncheon. After MaijstraTs head vanished from her room, she thought for a minute and told the room to dial the residence of Lieutenant Navarre.

He wasn't home. Navarre's telephone asked for a message, but Nichole declined to leave one. Members of the Diadem spoke face-to-face or not at all.

She thought for a moment, then decided to plead fatigue and beg off the lunch. The press, she knew, would assume Maijstral was still with her.

Good. Whatever was going on, Maijstral wouldn't be hurt if everyone assumed he was someplace he wasn't.

The plum-colored bird had flown her nest in alarm from the chirping sound made by Lieutenant Navarre's telephone. But the phone fell silent, and after a moment of contemplation the bird decided to make a cautious recce. She perched on a limb just out of reach and looked down at its home, one forepaw scratching her beak in puzzlement.

The telephone sat among the bird's treasures, bits of tinsel, a shiny candy wrapper, a fountain pen, several bright-colored rocks, a child's ring. The bird hated to concede its trove to the interloper. The damn thing had only been playing at being inanimate.

When the phone chirped again the bird raised her wings in alarm, but only retreated a few paces along the branch. The chirping sound continued. The bird's alarm decreased and she moved closer, a slow sense of delight beginning to trickle into her mind.

The thing talked! The bird had never had a treasure that talked before. The bird ruffled its feathers and said "Coo!"

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The phone chirped on. The bird answered. Finally, in Peleng City, the insurance investigator hung up, and the phone was silent.

The plum-colored bird returned to its nest, happy in her new friend.

The materialist approach to life, as the plum-colored bird will attest, is not always compelled by the philistinism its detractors often allege. Consider the joys of surrounding oneself with the objects that bring comfort and pleasure—the good wines, the fine art, the leather-covered volume, the well-made conveyance—and one may very well bid the rest of the world go hang. There are worse ways to arrange one's life, and it is only when the materialist impulse moves from comfort to compulsion that it becomes obnoxious. No one needs more than one colander per residence, and when one makes a point of collecting platinum colanders with diamond-studded rims and allegorical reliefs on the base, and all for the purpose of showing up one's neighbors, then the observer can safely assume the materialist impulse has got out of hand.

Allowed thievery is based on-materialism, but without philistinism. One searches for the perfect object, the best of its class, the rarest, the most astonishing—and then, through one's own efforts, one ventures to possess it. What might be a vulgar case of breaking-and-taking becomes instead a venture in aesthetic romanticism. A century ago Ralph Adverse saw the Eitdown Shard and knew he had to have it, that he could not rest until he held it in the palm of his hand and watched its dark splendors dance in the light of his homefire. No wonder he spent half his life trying to steal it—not to sell it, but to possess it for himself, for its own glorious sake—and in the end, having spent all the money he'd made over a lifetime of thievery in its pursuit, having at last clasped his hands and known it

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was gloriously his, he committed suicide with the Shard clutched to his bosom rather than have it auctioned by the Imperial Revenue Authority for back taxes. Who can blame him? He was a romantic first, a materialist second.

But one can be a materialist without having to go overboard. Consider the philosophy of the plum-colored bird:

find something nice, take it home, sit on it and make friends.

The homely comforts are always the best.

Lieutenant Navarre gazed at the wreckage in Amalia Jensen's house. He had called the police as soon as he found Howard scattered over the roof. I'm being persecuted, he thought. Someone's following me around and doing this to me.

He followed Officer Pankat through the litter in the living room. Mortally wounded blossoms gave off their dying fragrance.

"I had dinner. We talked. I flew home." What else could he say?

"No, I didn't see anyone. I barely knew the woman."

Officer Pankat looked at him through level almond eyes. "Do you think, sir, in view of the other incident last night, that someone might be persecuting you?"

Navarre started. He was just thinking that. But all he could think of saying was, "But why?"

Paavo Kuusinen stepped out of his flier and examined the yellow grass. Leaves rustled overhead in the gentle breeze. Amalia Jensen's pastel house stood half a mile away. Here, Kuusinen found, was where the two Khosali had waited out the night; he easily found the marks of the flier on the ground and two sets of prints, one small, one

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large, both identified, from the shape of the boot, as Khosali.

He had followed Sergeant Tvi for a while, from Navarre's manse to an estate which, on inquiry, he discovered was rented by the Imperialist Countess Anastasia. From there he followed Tvi to Amalia Jensen's, whence he had heard smashing noises and witnessed Tvi and her big associate carry out a limp body, which they transported to the Countess's. Kuusinen had then gone to Maijstral's place, but no one seemed to be home. He had checked the early reports on his scanner, heard there had been a robbery at

Navarre's, and returned there in time to see Navarre take off in the direction of town. Kuusinen had followed, to discover Navarre lighting on Jensen's roof.

Kuusinen scoured the ground carefully and found a pair of empty hi-sticks that had probably been used by the big Khosalikh while the smaller one scouted Jensen's house. There was nothing else of interest.

He returned to his flier and told his scanner to seek the robbery report for Navarre's house. The report had added a description of the one object missing, a silver cryonic container. To the official description was added the description from the auctioneers' catalog: "with power source, Imperial seal. c9, functional, wt 16sm, 18xl7ng." To this was appended: "value approx 18n."

Odd, Kuusinen thought. The container scarcely seemed valuable enough to justify all this fuss. He wondered what was in it, and considered for a moment all the activity he'd witnessed, the two Khosali consorting with the Imperialist Countess and a baron from the Imperium, and he wondered what all of this had to do with the silver container, Amalia Jensen. and the copper-skinned lieutenant from Pompey.

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He had no idea at all- But he was fairly certain this puzzle had to do, in some inexplicable way, with Maijstral.

Kuusinen observed Lieutenant Navarre's flier rising from Amalia Jensen's roof and decided, for lack of any further ideas, to follow it. As he rose into the sky, he decided to hang on to Navarre for another few hours, then return to the Countess's place. Maybe one of them would lead him to Maijstral.

This was the most interesting diversion he'd had in a long time.

The silver container still sat on MaijstraTs table, refusing to go away. Maijstral returned from his conversation with Nichoie to find that, like a magnetic object, the Emperor's sperm receptacle had drawn the other three nearer to it. Gregor and Pietro had hitched their seats closer and were bent forward, barely glancing at each other even though they were in conversation. Roman, still standing, still trembling with some unspoken emotion, hovered over Gregor's shoulder, rising to tiptoe from time to time to gain a better view. It was a living demonstration

of Imperial Presence.

"If the situation in the Empire remains unchanged/\*  
Pietro Quijano was saying, "Nnis may drag on for another few generations. When he finally shuffles off, the Blood Royal will have to assemble to choose another Emperor. It will take years for the family to make up its mind, and by the end of their deliberations we in the Constellation should have a good idea of who will come to power. The Human Constellation will have a long breathing space, and if the new Emperor's supporters are committed to reconquest, we'll have time to prepare."

"For the correct price, sir," said Maijstral as he slid into his chair, "the future of the Constellation may be

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yours to command." He leaned back, resisting the magnetism of the silver reliquary.

Pietro looked up at him, trying in vain to gaze through Maijstral's hooded eyes. "We only have sixty in the treasury, and we only got that because Miss Jensen took out a personal loan."

"Perhaps you should take out a loan yourself, Mr. Quijano."

"I'm a student. I'm doing postgraduate work in mathematics, and I'm not worth any money. But I'll give you the sixty right now."

"You are not Miss Jensen. My contract was with her."

Pietro's eyes showed desperation. "The Fate of the Constellation is at stake," he said. "Surely you can—"

"Mr. Quijano," said Maijstral. "perhaps in your enthusiasm something has slipped your mind."

"Sir? What is that?"

"I am, by profession, a thief. It is not my job to care about the Fate of the Constellation."

Gregor snickered, but Pietro was undeterred. "Surely there must be some human decency to which I can appeal."

"Human decency?" Maijstral appeared to consider the words- He shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Quijano."

Such decency as I possess is almost certainly Khosali." He gave Pietro a thin smile. "The indecent part, however, is entirely human."

Pietro Quijano looked at him for a long, cold moment. "Then, since Miss Jensen's the only person you'll deal with, let's find her."

Maijstral was about to point out that neither was it his job to rescue maidens in distress, but Gregor cleared his throat-

"Boss," he said, "it's bad form to let people go around

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stealing your clients. It lets them think they can push you around."

Maijstral frowned. "I'm not in the habit of exerting myself for nothing," he said.

"You want your client back, right, boss? Only too you do. There's a way to do it. Find her and get her loose."

"May I speak with you privately, sir?" The voice was Roman's, speaking in Khosali. Maijstral nodded.

He let Roman take him aside into Maijstral's bedroom. When Roman spoke, it was in High Khosali, and his voice trembled with suppressed emotion.

"Your client was stolen, sir," he said. "And with your business unconcluded. The kidnappers knew of your interest, but have not acted to preserve that interest or consult you- That is insult given, and considering their likely identity, an offense to honor. The insult must be answered."

Surprise rose in Maijstral as the High Khosati sentences followed one another in perfect form and rhythm, like the elements of some complex mathematics. Given Khosali premises, the conclusions were absolute. Maijstral tried to find a gap in the reasoning and failed.

So that's what Roman had been seething about. If Maijstral hadn't been so distracted by events, he would have realized it long since. He gave a reassuring nod.

"I give you thanks for your concern," he said, answering in High Khosali. "Your interest does you credit, Ro-

man." Roman's eyes gleamed at the compliment. "I need no reminders to know that honor was offended," Maijstral went on, "but first I must decide with whom the offense lies, and how best to act, and I must also find out how much Mr. Quijano knows. An outright challenge might give these people more credit than they deserve."

Roman's ears pricked forward. "That is true, sir."

Maijstral raised a hand to Roman's shoulder. He dropped

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to standard Khosali. "I think we should return to Mr. Quijano."

"Yes, sir. Very good."

Maijstral gestured for Roman to precede him. He took his hand back from Roman's shoulder and observed that it trembled lightly. He clenched the hand into a fist and followed Roman into the living room. By a conscious effort of will, he did not grind his teeth.

"Very well," he said. "We should, at least, investigate the possibility of rescuing Miss Jensen. But where would they be holding her?"

Gregor frowned. "A safe house, maybe. Possibly."

"Perhaps not. The kidnapping showed every sign of being arranged in haste, within a few hours of my acquisition of the jug. They may not have had time to arrange for a safe house, though they may be arranging for one now. We should run a check for consular personnel, then for any residences they may possess outside the consulate."

"There is also the Countess," Roman said.

"Right," Gregor said, "I should cross-check the references for rented security. They may have laid on some extra."

Maijstral smiled. That was a good thought.

"Fine. If we get any cross-references, we'll go for aerial reconnaissance and perhaps check further by darksuit. Get about it, then."

Roman and Gregor glided away to their tasks. Maijstral settled back into his chair with a piece of fletch. Pietro

Quijano was, he realized, looking at him in an expectant way.

"Yes, Mr. Quijano?"

"You're going to find Miss Jensen and then rescue her?"

"I said we would investigate the possibility, Mr. Quijano. Not quite the same thing."

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"But you'll at least call the police?"

"No. I think not. The whole purpose of the kidnapping would have to come out. The law protects me after a few hours, but that doesn't apply to any of my patrons. I presume you would not wish it established that Miss Jensen hired me with criminal intent?"

Pietro looked a little pale. "No- I guess not." Maijstral nibbled his fleth. Gregor, from the hallway, spoke up.

"Perhaps we could get Lieutenant Navarre to help us."

Pietro scowled at the idea. Maijstral answered. "I scarcely think so. He would discover that Miss Jensen only entertained him last night for the purpose of getting him away from his house so that I could rob him."

"Oh."

Pietro brightened, then frowned again. "What if we can't rescue her, sir?"

Maijstral looked at the piece of fleth in his fingers. The hand no longer trembled. "In that event, Mr. Quijano," he said, "I shall have to challenge her kidnappers one by one. And kill them, one hopes. Family honor, alas, won't have it any other way—and challenging them is preferable, in my mind at least, to committing suicide and hoping it shames them into letting Miss Jensen go." He looked at Pietro with his lazy green eyes. "Unless, of course, you'd like to issue the challenges yourself?"

Pietro grew paler. "No. sir. I don't—it's not my province, you see."

"I understand. One can scarcely hope to vanquish an enemy in single combat through the use of higher mathematics alone." He finished his fleth and dusted his fingers,

then stood. "Luncheon, Mr. Quijano?" he asked. "I think we're stocked with food."

"I'm not hungry." Pietro was staring into nowhere.  
"Thank you."

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"I'll find myself a snack, then." Maijstral said. He stood and moved toward the kitchen.

What he really intended to do was get on the phone and rent another safe house. This one was hopelessly compromised. Pietro Quijano was on Maijstral's side for the present, but when and if Amalia Jensen was rescued that was likely to change.

Successful criminal masterminds, one notes, always look ahead.

Nichole was lunching on cold chicken, bean salad, and pickles; a humble meal she could eat only in private, but which she much preferred to the elaborate, often eccentric cuisine demanded by her role as a member of the Diadem. Even here, the meal was not entirely her own; since she was supposed to be hiding Maijstral here in her love nest, she'd had to order for two. The sight of the second plate made the meal more lonely than it should have been. Lightly downcast, she sipped her iced tea with lemon and wondered again what Maijstral was involved with.

The phone rang. Nichole sipped again and waited for the room to tell her who it was.

"The Countess Anastasia, ma'arn," the room said finally. "Asking for Mr. Maijstral." Nichole turned around in surprise.

Well, she thought. Developments.

She ordered the room to create a holographic mirror image of her by way of making certain she was fit to show herself on the phone, patted her hair, men moved to another chair so that her meal would be out of sight and that her backdrop would suit her complexion. "By all means connect the Countess," she said.

Countess Anastasia was holographed from a point of view slightly below her chin, giving her a lofty elevation,

allowing her to took at Nichole down her nose. Some people came this to extremes, which made for an upsetting view if they neglected to clip all their nose hairs; but the Countess was more subtle and the effect was slight, but still observable.

"Nichole," she said coldly. She spoke in Khosali. "I asked for Drake Maijstral."

"I regret he's not here, my lady." Nichole said. "I would be happy to take a message, should I see him."

The Countess smiled thinly. "Ah. I must have been misinformed. The broadcast media, you understand."

"I regret to say, my lady, that the media are wont to report as fact all manner of speculation."

"Yes. That has been my experience as well. I would have given the reports no credence, you understand, save that I have been unable to reach Maijstral at home."

Nichole, looking at me Countess, wondered why Maijstral was so timorous around this woman. The Countess seemed, despite her breeding and apparent confidence, a pathetically insecure creature who had found salvation in the Imperialist Cause, quite the same way others found salvation in religion, or crank philosophy, or conspiracy theory—against one's own inner conviction of insignificance, a flailing, defiant, unfocused, but perfectly sincere protest. Nichole, thinking these thoughts, looked at the Countess and smiled helpfully.

"I will take a message, my lady," she said, "and relay it to Maijstral if I see him."

The Countess seemed cross. Nichole guessed that the Countess assumed Maijstral was hiding in Nichole's boudoir, listening in. "Very well," the Countess said. "Tell him this. He has something that I want, and I believe he will find the price to his liking."

"I will report the message faithfully, my lady."

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"Thank you." The Countess smiled with a graciousness her hard eyes denied. "I regret having to bother you, ma'am."

"No bother at all. Countess. I enjoy doing things for my friends." Nichole was smiling back, a smile that betrayed a slight effort, the effect intending to show she knew the Countess's civility was a mask. Nuance, nuance. Nichole's specialty.

The Countess winked away.

Nichole let her smile relax. Majstral. she thought, her alarm growing. What have you got yourself into?

"Relieving you," said Sergeant Tvi. She was carrying Amalia Jensen's food tray up the stairs. Khotvinn thankfully turned off his Ronnie Romper disguise and handed her the hole projector, gun, and manacle control.

"The prisoner has been quiet," he rumbled. Then he moved down the stairs, treading heavily, flexing his shoulders. Looking for something to hit.

Guarding prisoners. Pah. Breaking necks was more his style.

This was no work for a Khosalikh such as he. He stood 169ng, and his shoulders were 70ng across. His upper arms were 58ng around and his chest was wider around than the last tape measure he'd tried to measure it with. On his home planet—a frontier world, where Khosali power was tempered by scarce resources and the ferocity of native life-forms—he had been regarded with awe and fear. Awe and fear that were, so Khotvinn had always thought, perfectly justified.

Khotvinn stomped to his room, wanting to tread the lilies on his carpet. The room was furnished in the local milksop style: frilly things on the windows and bed, plush carpets, vases with flowers, an oversoft mattress on a bed

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that would alter its shape on command. It was the sort of thing Khotvinn had to guard against. If he wasn't careful, this kind of living could make him soft.

He had no intention of becoming soft. He was the imperious offspring of a superior brand of Khosali, the pioneers who had, by dint of their strength and will, driven back the frontiers of the Empire and subjugated entire

planets full of alien inferiors. The effete Emperor back in his harem thought his victories had come at his own bidding. Bah! It was the people like Khotvinn who got the job done, and by the best and most effective way—smashing heads.

Khotvinn considered himself a bloody-handed reaver—titanic in his fury, awesome in his mirth, careless of the laws made to protect those weaker than himself. He recognized no custom save his own will, no motive save his own enrichment. He despised Allowed Burglars, taking advantage of loopholes in the law, sneaking into darkened houses at night. Better to proclaim yourself openly. And Sinn wasn't any better, using others to do his dirty work. The only one of this crowd he had any use for was the Countess, a woman who clearly worshipped strength, honor, and desperate deeds. Khotvinn was a born plunderer, and if his young career as an armed robber (and army deserter) hadn't been interrupted by a cowardly, puking little human weakling (who had dropped a brick on his head while hiding on a balcony), he would be plundering still.

Subsequently he had concluded that being a member of the Secret Dragoons could work to his advantage. He could study the stupid fools who surrounded him, learn their ways, and then, when the time was right, strike out on his own, leaving nothing but ruin and broken necks behind him.

Khotvinn reached under his bed and came up with his

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sword case. He drew out the long steel blade—no light alloys for him!—and raised it two-handed above his head. Carefully he pictured Baron Sum in front of him, and then sliced the image from neck to crotch. The blade danced before him like a whirlwind, chopping Sinn to bits. His heart hammered. His blood raced. He was Khotvinn . . . Khotvinn . . . KHOTV!NN! Glorious exemplar of his race! Furious brawler with sword of steel! Bloody ravager with a heart of careless majesty!

The antique vase splintered beneath Khotvinn's backswing and splattered the bedcovers with mangled roses. Khotvinn snarled and threw down his blade. It pierced the lily carpet and stuck in the floor, quivering.

Khotvinn spat. This was not a suitable room. This was not a suitable mission. His companions were not suitable.

With an easy gesture he yanked the sword from the floor. It hung in his hand like a tooth of omen. He considered his situation.

His companions—his so-called superiors—were holding the human, Jensen, for ransom. Holding a woman prisoner wasn't anything he couldn't do himself, or anything that required Tvi or Sinn.

His lips drew back, his tongue lolled. A glorious idea had entered his mind. Give Sinn the chop, he thought. Give the chop to Tvi. Then leave with Jensen over his shoulder, the Countess's ghastly milksop mansion burning behind him. A wonderful picture. What cared Khotvinn for the Fate of the Empire?

The smile began to fade. Who, exactly, was he supposed to sell Jensen to? He couldn't remember.

He'd have to keep his ears open and await his chance. His time, he knew, would come.

Khotvinn's grin broadened. Saliva dropped to the carpet. This was going to be great.

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\* \* \*

"I'm not advocating discrimination, you understand." Amalia Jensen's split lip had healed under the influence of a semilife patch, her swelling had likewise been reduced, and though the bruises still showed, the swelling and discomfort were down and she was speaking, and eating lunch, without difficulty.

Speaking and eating on the bed, from a tray, with her ankles held together. Tvi wasn't taking any chances.

"No, not discrimination. Just reasonable precautions. The Rebellion was successful because many of the rebels were highly placed in the Imperial bureaucracy and military, and were in a position to aid in the defection of entire Imperial squadrons. The Constellation should take precautions against just such an event. That's all I'm suggesting."

Tvi was still enjoying the role of a sophisticated mercenary, and she relaxed in her chair, a leg dangling over the chair arm, her stunner in one fist. "So nonhumans should never be put in positions of authority?" Tvi asked. "And this is what you call nondiscriminatory. Miss Jensen?"

Amalia frowned into her frappe. "It's a necessity. A regrettable one, I know. But humanity is simply too delicately placed to take a chance."

"It would seem to me, speaking strictly as an observer, that you're almost asking for betrayal. Why should anyone be loyal to a government that will never trust her?"

"Perhaps in a few generations, after the Imperial threat becomes less acute. . . ."

"And I must say, speaking again as an observer, that you seem rather naive about human nature."

A veil of steel seemed to move over Amalia Jensen's eyes. Tvi realized she may have offended by offering a judgment on Amalia's species. Oh well, she thought, what was the point of being a languid sophisticate if you couldn't

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offer sweeping judgments? Besides, this wasn't anything Amalia hadn't just done with respect to races other than her own. "Yes?" Amalia said. "How so?"

"Because you are underestimating the extent of human corruptibility. Miss Jensen. Why do you assume that an individual will be loyal simply because he is human? Are not humans as susceptible to greed, extortion, and treachery as any other? More so, if the stereotypes are to be believed." Seeing Amalia's dark glance, Tvi hastened to add, "Which I don't for a moment believe, by the way. But d'you see what I mean? If you waste all your resources averting treachery on the part of nonhumans who may not be traitors in the first place, you may be missing the humans who are."

"I'm not advocating for a minute spending all our resources doing any one thing," Amalia said. "But still, one may assume a certain species loyalty, yes? Why else would so many well-placed humans support the Rebellion, even though such support was largely against their own interests?"

"Greed and blackmail, for starters."

Amalia frowned and pushed her tray away. "That's not true."

"Probably not. Not in more than a few cases, anyway."  
Tvi threw her other leg over the chair arm and snuggled into the cushion. "I'm just offering a pair of motivations you seem not to have considered in the case of your own species, but are all too happy to attribute to others."

Amalia Jensen winced and turned her eyes away. "I understand the reasons for Ronnie Romper," she said, "but can't you get rid of the smile, somehow? It's just too distracting, having to debate that grin."

"I'm afraid not. Miss Jensen."

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Amalia gave a sigh and put her chin on her hand. "I'll just have to bear up, then."

"Good advice, I'd say, for a woman in your situation."

Bingo, thought Gregor Norman. Point for me. He looked at the numbers shimmering on his computer screen and leaned back in his chair, lacing his hands behind his neck just above where the proximity wire in his collar interfaced his mind with me computer. A grin spread over his face. The champagne that still sparkled on the frontiers of his consciousness acted to widen the grin. He nodded in time to the Vivaldi he was playing on his Troxan sound deck, enjoyed his triumph for a few moments, then reached to the service plate on the wall and pressed the ideograph for "genera! announcement."

"Boss. I think I've found something."

"One moment."

If Gregor hadn't been anticipating, he never would have heard Maijstral enter. The man moved in such absolute silence that, in the early months of his apprenticeship, Gregor had wondered if there was something uncanny about it. Just good training, he finally decided, and began consciously to imitate him.

Gregor was a good thief, had always been. He'd been living by his wits for most of his life, but he knew he'd never make it to the top of the ratings as an Allowed Burglar.

The problem was those ten points for style. The people at the top of the charts—Alice Manderley, Geoff Fu George,

Baron Drago—they fairly oozed style, and moved among their victims with such charm that it almost seemed as if no one in the company resented the way his valuables kept disappearing. Maijstral, for example, had all the advantages—gentle birth, schooling in the Empire, the

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right social connections. When the teenaged Gregor had heard about Maijstral and Nichole, he'd breathed fiery jealousy for weeks.

Gregor was Non-U, that was the trouble. Should he ever have occasion to meet Nichole, he wouldn't know how to make an approach, what to talk about. If he was to be a successful Allowed Burglar, he'd have to know how to move among these people, how they spoke, thought, interacted. He'd learned a lot just watching Maijstral. He was taking diction lessons. He'd learned that the hair style he'd favored on his home world would have got him challenges on half the planets in the Empire. He'd learned not to paint his face in the pastel colors he had favored in his youth, and to say "perhaps" instead of "maybe," and "vetch" instead of "clinker." But he still had a long way to go.

Anticipating, Gregor looked up just as Maijstral appeared, in his silence, behind Gregor's right shoulder. "I think I found it," he said. "I broke into the phone company's computers and got Countess Anastasia's numbers, including her address. I cross-checked the address with my security file and found out that Anastasia added multiple security to her residence just yesterday, which might mean she was anticipating having to put the snatch on Jensen."

"What sort of security?" Maijstral asked.

"Leapers, screamers, and flaxes."

"Go on."

"No hoppers. So it might not be individual objects she's guarding, but an area. Like an area holding a prisoner."

"Can you get a map of the building?"

"Maybe. Perhaps. I'll check the planning authority. That will give me a chance to use the peeler program Poston sold us."

"Can you find out whom the building belongs to?"

"Coming up."

Still leaning back in his chair, Gregor gave a mental command to his computer and supervised as it phoned the planning authority, then crashed through its defenses like an Imperial cruiser through an insect screen. Poston's peeler was brute force, no mistake, not a bit of elegance. No style points here. Gregor smiled as the data read across the visual centers of his brain.

"Woolvinn Leases, Ltd," he said. "Shall I look at the Countess's household computer, boss? If we can check her food shipments we might be able to find out how many people she has in there."

Maijstral considered mis. "If you're certain it won't give us away. ..."

"Not with Poston's peeler. I can always just ring off and say it was a mistake."

"Very well. Go ahead."

"Only too."

Gregor started the program on its merry way, his head bobbing to the sound of Vivaldi. He looked up at Maijstral, seeing the man withdrawn behind his hooded eyes. He thought about Maijstral's conversation with Pietro Quijano that morning, and a troubling thought entered his mind. He'd assumed that Maijstral had merely been playing with me man, but with Maijstral it was hard to tell.

"Boss?" he asked. "About the reliquary?"

Maijstral's expression was abstracted. "Yes, Gregor?"

"You were just pretending to consider selling the thing to the Imperials, correct? I mean, we really wouldn't do it,

right?"

Maijstral's eyes turned to him. There was a hint of intensity behind the lidded eyes- "Would it bother you if we did?"

Gregor shifted uneasily in his chair. "Well, boss, I

don't think much of the Constellation or the hacks that run it, but that doesn't mean I want to have aliens over us again. Let alone an Emperor. Not only that, but my granddad fought in the Rebellion, and he used to tell me a story about what it was like under the Empire. It wasn't good for a lot of people, boss."

Maijstral's smile was slight. Vivaldi was reaching a climax, and he seemed abstracted, his mind somewhere off in the music. "The possibility of the Empire returning," he said, "seems remote."

"Besides. Those people stole our client."

"That has not escaped my attention, Gregor."

Gregor frowned. He was not comforted.

MaijstraTs hand reached for Gregor's sound deck, popped me trapdoor, removed Vivaldi. "What next?" he asked.

"The Snail."

Maijstral's hand flourished another recording. "Snail shall it be. I always like the D Minor." He dropped the recording into the trapdoor and pushed the play button. He turned to Gregor with a smile.

"Anything from the Countess's?"

"Right." Gregor turned his attention to the data that had been winking in his mind for some moments. "Looks like the Countess had visitors last night. A lot of wine and dinner for four." He laughed. "The comp prepared breakfast for five mis morning. Luncheon for five, too. Where'd number five come from?"

"I'm sure we can guess."

"And—let's see—she's ordered some tools, timber, plywood. . . ."

"It seems as if her ladyship might be nailing shut a window or two."

"It seems like. And she's also ordered a heavy-duty bolt, some tools for installation, and a Ronnie Romper

disguise from a costume shop." He looked up at Maijstral. "Ronnie Romper?" he asked.

Music wafted into the room. Maijstral shrugged. "Perhaps Ronnie is her favorite. I always liked him when I was young."

"I never cared for him. It was the smile, I think. Never went away."

Maijstral nodded to the sound of violas. His eyes were dreamy. "The D Minor. I always liked those first four bars."

"Me, too, boss." Gregor looked at Maijstral, disquiet humming in his mind—He knew he'd been diverted from his question about the reliquary's ultimate fate—and expertly diverted, too—but his admiration for Maijstral's style had not obscured his disquiet. He had no objection to looking after profit, but neither did he enjoy the idea of the Imperium coming back.

All this, he concluded, was going to take some thinking about.

Woolvinn Leases had a small office in the center of Peleng City. Beside the door was a copper plate that was probably polished daily. The door was opaque from the outside but transparent from the inside, so that the functionary therein could observe the customer on his approach and decide on the proper attitude. Roman stepped through the door and gazed at the functionary through rose-colored spectacles. "Mr. Woolvinn, please."

"Mr. Woolvinn has been deceased for eighty years," the functionary reported. He was a Tanquer and looked up at Roman through slitted, supercilious nictitating membranes. "I will show you to Mr. Clive. Who may I tell him is calling?"

"My name is Castor. I am personal assistant to Lord

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Graves." Roman handed the Tanquer a card. The real Graves was a distant relation of Maijstral's who lived in the Imperium, a spare and miserly young gentleman who would have been mortally offended by the uses to which Roman put his name, but too parsimonious to send a message complaining about it.

"Sir." The Tanquer bowed, his striped tail swishing, and led Roman to an office paneled in light, varnished wood. "Please wait here, sir." The functionary indicated a chair, then a bar set into the wall. "May I offer you coffee, tea, rink, kit infusion? Wine, perhaps?"

"A kif infusion. Thank you."

Roman sipped his drink and felt a warm and secret joy. In addition to his ornamental spectacles he wore a soft grey jacket with a dark braided collar and black laces, an antique gorget of darkened Wilkinson steel, and handmade boots of brown leather. It was anything but what a servant should wear, and that was what gave Roman pleasure. He had always thought, in his heart of hearts, he would make a first-rate lord. He was secretly pleased that Woolvinn's had proven sufficiently old-fashioned not to have connected their computer files to the telephone, and that he'd have to do his reconnaissance the old-fashioned way.

Mr. Clive proved to be human, a middle-aged man of pleasant aspect and Empire-tailored coat. Roman sniffed ears and declined an offer of pastry.

"Is that a Jasper?" he asked, indicating a smooth silver-alloy construction rising gracefully in the corner. A lesser impersonator would have said "genuine Jasper."

"Indeed, yes," said Mr. Clive. "Our founder, Woolvinn the Elder, was a collector."

Roman sat, and Clive followed suit. "I congratulate Mr. Woolvinn on his tastes," Roman said. "My own taste runs more to Torfelks, but I understand that Jaspers are not easy

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to find nowadays. Lord Graves had a small collection to which he is always hoping to add, but alas, Jaspers are much harder to acquire these days than in the late Mr. Wootvinn's time."

"Indeed, yes," Mr. Clive murmured.

"Lord Graves wishes to make a tour of the Constellation," Roman said. "He hopes to spend a month on Peleng, beginning eighteen months from now. He wishes to have suitable accommodation."

"His lordship will doubtless want a house in town."

"In the country, methinks." The Countess Anastasia's residence had a rural address, and Maijstral had primed Roman with a description of her tastes- "A sizable place, suitable for entertaining his lordship's large acquaintance. Elegantly appointed, with an arbor for preference, perhaps a croquet court. Would mis be possible?"

"indeed, yes," Mr. Clive said, now for the third time. "We have several properties that might suit. In eighteen months, you say?"

"Indeed," said Roman, "Yes."

Roman viewed holographic representations of a number of residences, any of which might suit the given description. He knew that, in view of the amount of money they charged for a monthly rental, Woolvinn Ltd. would damn well install a croquet court if necessary. He looked at the address of each hologram, and when the fifth residence appeared, he leaned back and tilted his muzzle up to look through his spectacles at the neo-Georgian pile with its veined porcelain roof.

"Sink me," he said. "That's his lordship's taste, if ever I've seen it!"

Mr. dive's ears pricked forward. A subtle light, far too tenuous to be called a gleam, crept into his eyes. "Let me show you the entry hall. Marble imported from Couscous."

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Roman purred his joy over the Couscous marble, the furnishings, the exquisite taste and the care with which the house was assembled. Since Lord Graves traveled surrounded by numerous objets d'art, Roman inquired about security, and received a careful briefing concerning the mansion's protective systems. He asked for a copy of the company's hologram so mat he could send it to Lord Graves and his lordship could view the furnishings and appointments himself. This was happily provided. He asked if he could see the place. Mr. Clive said that the house was currently occupied by me Countess Anastasia and her suite, but that she had only rented the place for a month, and mat he would call to see if a visit would be convenient for her, If he could have the number of Mr. Castor's telephone . . . ?

Roman gave him the number of the cottage where Maijstral was hiding and rose to give his conge. Mr. Clive showed him to the door and sniffed his ears.

Roman noticed that the functionary had completely unslitted his eyes (a compliment he assumed), and he gave the Tanquer a nod as he left. As he walked down the blue brick sidewalk, his private joy rekindled. For the brief moments of the two-hundred-yard walk between Woolvinn's and his flier, he abandoned himself entirely to the concept of Mr. Castor, associate of an Imperial lord, confidante of the aristocracy, dancing an elegant and graceful ballet amid the highest circles of Empire, - . .

Amazing, come to think of it, what a braided coat and a pair of rose-colored spectacles can do for a person. Here was Roman, the controlled and very muscular associate of a known thief, strolling down the street awarding benign and gracious nods to those he passed, a living embodiment of noblesse oblige and a glorious example of what a Khosalikh can be, given the removal of a few minor inhibitions. His secret joy seemed to communicate to those

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he met, and they went on their way with their hearts lightened, a spring growing in their step, smelling the fresher-seeming air, all pleased that the tall, dark Khosali lord seemed so happy merely to encounter them on the street. It was a small miracle, this two-hundred-yard stretch of shared bliss, but a miracle nonetheless.

Roman, still glowing with the inner conviction of being Mr. Castor, climbed graciously into his flier and took his miraculous way into the sky.

The Countess Anastasia heard Maijstral's household robot answer the telephone and dropped her phone into its cradle. Maijstral hadn't answered all day. He was probably in Nichole's suite, spending himself in some appalling sensual indulgence, when instead he could be here fighting for the Empire as his father and grandfather had done. . . .

It made me Countess want to spit.

"Maijstral is probably hiding out until the statue of limitations passes," said Baron Sinn. "We'll be able to get in touch with him tomorrow morning."

The Countess was still white about the nose. "This is frustrating. I want the Imperial Artifact, and I want that Jensen creature out of my house."<sup>1</sup>

"There is no need to fear. There is no way she can

know where she is being kept. She has not seen either of us."

The Countess frowned. "That isn't what I was worried about. Maijstral is ... he's a lazy man. But he is not without his pride.'\*

Sinn's ears turned thoughtfully downward. "You mean he may turn awkward."

"That is my fear. And he is very effective at what he actually puts his mind to. Perhaps we ought to increase the number of guards around the place." She put her hand on

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his arm, stroking the dense velvet. "There are two men I know. We've used them as security for Imperialist meetings, in case people try to disrupt us.'\*

Sinn was thoughtful. "The fewer people who know, the better it will be for us."

"Oh, I wouldn't mention the real reason why they were here. Just that I had reason to suspect some trouble. We could give them rooms downstairs, that way they'd be within call but out of our way."

The Baron's diaphragm throbbed. "Very well, Countess," he said. "Make your call."

Smiling, Countess Anastasia reached again for the phone. She felt unaccountably buoyed- Even though the presence of the two men would probably not make any difference, it was still a comfort to be doing something.

"Perhaps later," she said, "you would join me for some croquet."

"Happily, my lady."

As she told the telephone whose number to call, the Countess pictured in her mind the smooth yellow sward, the click of mallets and balls, the brisk, fresh air. Baron Sinn searching for his ball amid a pile of kibble fruit. Lovely, lovely. And while she enjoyed herself, the plan would be moving forward. That was all she asked.

"I'm going to think for a while." Maijstral had just assembled his late luncheon/a pair of sandwiches on a tray. "Please don't disturb me unless you're positive it's

very important."

Maijstral was good enough at being an aristocrat that neither Gregor nor Pietro Quijano thought to ask what he intended to think about, or how long it was going to take. Only Roman knew Maijstral well enough to detect a slight

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falsehood in his bearing, and Roman was off on an errand at Woolvinn Leases, Ltd.

The truth was that Maijstral had nothing better to do until Roman returned from his errand, and he didn't want to hang around gazing at the reliquary while Quijano continued his fretting, Maijstral, who actually planned to finish watching his Western while he ate his sandwiches, and afterward take a nap, knew that maintaining a certain level of mystery was an important factor in sustaining his position as leader, and that the admission of how he intended to spend the rest of the afternoon would not serve to enhance his mystique.

Maijstral sat cross-legged on his bed, while the Western played out to its cathartic end, Jesse and Priscilla dead, Bat wounded, the King alone ... a lump rose in Maijstral's throat at the last lonely guitar chords from the man walking companionless into the bloody sunset. The tragedy was awesome and gorgeous, and Maijstral felt better instantly. He stifled his longing for a third sandwich—he would have longed for something different, but the kitchen was Roman's province and Maijstral didn't know how to fix anything else—and then Maijstral stretched out on his bed and tried to sleep.

Withal, this was perhaps an odd reaction for a man whose honor had just been mortally insulted. He should, perhaps, have been stamping and fuming and plotting bloody-handed deeds of revenge. No doubt that's what Robert the Butcher would have done. But Maijstral was more careless in these matters—in fact, he had no intention whatever of challenging Baron Sinn or anyone else, or indeed of risking his skin more than it had been risked already. He had just said that to impress Quijano, and because Roman expected it to be said. He knew how to play a part as well as anyone.

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He knew that he was terribly deficient in his moral sense, but this knowledge seemed not to bother him. No doubt he

was deficient in conscience as well.

Conscienceless, his nerves soothed by sandwiches and safe video tragedy, he slept well.

Roman changed into proper modest clothing before waking Maijstral, and bade a regretful farewell to Mr. Castor as he hung the braided jacket in his closet. Maijstral, used to being awakened at odd hours, snapped fully awake as soon as Roman scratched softly at the door.

Roman knew, as soon as he saw Maijstral stretched on the bed, that he had been secretly enjoying low entertainments again. Stifling a spasm of resignation, he reported his findings to Maijstral and watched as Maijstral ran through the hologram of Anastasia's residence. Maijstral ran through it twice, nervously twisting the diamond on his finger, then looked up.

"We shall have to make a plan," he said. "Do you think Mr. Quijano can handle a pistol?"

## CHADTCC 8

Paavo Kuusinen drowsed most of the afternoon away, stretched out full length beneath a yellow-leaved cricket tree. He was on a knoll about half a mile from Countess Anastasia's residence; by cracking open one eye he could look down across the back of the manse and the rear portico with its double row of pillars that overlooked the smooth expanse of the croquet court, a court surrounded by a grove of low, red-fruited kibble trees. Through the longfinders he carried, Kuusinen could see the back windows and occasional dim figures, usually robots, moving behind them. (From his comfortable position he couldn't see the boarded-up front window behind which Amalia Jensen languished in her well-fed exile, but then he was new at this sort of thing.) His flier was parked out of sight on the reverse slope of his knoll.

There hadn't been much to see since morning; only the Countess playing croquet with Baron Sinn. By putting his longfinders on maximum amplification, Kuusinen could see they both carried pistols as well as mallets. He watched long enough to note that the Countess was a furious and competitive player. She had given the Baron a ball of a peculiar shade of red, and when, with cracks that reverber-

ated all the way to Kusinen's knoll, she whacked Sinn's ball off beneath the kibble groves, Sinn was compelled to son his ball out from fallen kibble fruit of an identical size and shade. Kuusioen concluded the color of the ball could not be anything other than deliberate psychological warfare on the part of the Countess. It worked. She won both games.

At siesta the games ended. Kuusinen drowsed. On waking he yawned, stretched, and searched the windows again with his longfinders. Nothing of interest. He went to the picnic basket he'd had a restaurant deliver, ate a cold salmon salad, and drank a bottle of rink. Perhaps, he thought, he should call Maijstral and tell him anonymously where Amalia Jensen was being held prisoner. He decided to wait until the morning before calling.

Stars appeared. A cool wind began to gust through the cricket tree. Kuusinen shivered and put on a cloak. In a moment, when the breeze fell silent, he heard the delicate whisper of a flier somewhere in the night sky. He trained his longfinders upward and saw the unmistakable silhouette of a Gustafson SC-700 moving against the Milky Way. He smiled. Maijstral's flier was a Gustafson.

The flier settled over a mile away, onto the far side of a tree-crowned ridge with a view of the front of the building. Kuusinen couldn't see them from his position; that didn't bother him. He got some system-assists from his flier and dry-swallowed them, intending to keep alert. Something was going to happen, and he was sure that when Maijstral made his move, he could get a view of it somehow.

Another flier whistled overhead, skimming Kuusinen's knoll. Kuusinen looked up and waved. Another Gustafson SC, close enough so that Kuusinen could see two people in it. It circled and landed by the first. In a few minutes, both fliers rose and sped off over the horizon.

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Kuusinen frowned. Maijstral's behavior—if this was Maijstral—seemed odd. But then he realized that the fliers had probably been sent somewhere on autopilot, just in case anyone had seen them land.

Paavo Kuusinen smiled as the first wave of system-assists began to dance along his nerves. This was going to be fun.

"Hey. Do you know what you get when you cross a range-drover with a dithennoon? A baby who vetches in purple."

Amalia Jensen convulsed with laughter. She raised her bound ankles and kicked her legs as she cackled. Tvi grinned. It hadn't been a half-bad idea to leave Amalia efficiently tied up after siesta and slip downstairs for a bottle of wine. In order to avoid detection, she'd had to sneak down the circular stairs in the round library on the east side, but this was no problem for a practiced thief. She snuggled deeper into her overstuffed chair.

"My grandfather worked as a dithennoon for a season," Amalia said. "He had all sorts of stories. That was before the Rebellion. He commanded a cruiser at Khom, but didn't meet Admiral Scholder till after the war." She sighed. "My father was in the Navy, too. I lived at sixteen bases before I was twelve. That's when my father died in the Hotspur accident and my mother came here. We lived with my grandfather till he died."

"My childhood was similar," Tvi said. "But my parents were both civil service." She supposed she wasn't giving too much away by that admission—Imperial civil servants numbered in the hundreds of millions.

"Most of the places were all right. The border's fairly close to Earth, so most of the bases were near or on planets that had been inhabited for a long time. It wasn't

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as if my dad was a member of the Pioneer Corps or anything."

"But it was still military. I can imagine."

"It was, well, disciplined. But that was all right. The part I didn't like was my father going away all the time."

"But you didn't join the Navy yourself."

Amalia Jensen shrugged. Her face was drained of expression. "I have got a mild form of epilepsy. It's controllable with medication, but it still disqualified me. It's not curable without great expense, and the Navy would prefer to spend the money training someone else."

"Sorry." Tvi wondered what epilepsy was. Something peculiar to humans, apparently.

"I could have got into Planetary Services. But for me it was the Navy or nothing." Tvi's stomachs rumbled. She looked at her watch and saw that Khotvinn would be bringing supper fairly soon. Better finish the bottle. "More wine?" she asked.

"Thank you. So I got into politics instead. It seemed the best way to serve. Outside the military, anyway." Tvi brought Amalia's wrists and ankles together, poured wine, stepped back across the room, and then sat in her chair again, all while Amalia went on talking.

"Your father would approve, you think?" Tvi asked.

"I think he would," Amalia said. "He and my grandfather were always strong prohumans."

Tvi lapped at her wine meditatively. "Mine doesn't approve of me at all," she said. "We were in constant combat when I was growing up. But I wonder. If my father had died when I was twelve, would I be in Imperial uniform, trying to be the best timeserver on fifty planets?"

Amalia Jensen seemed lost in thought. There was a knock on the door that made them jump, and then Khotvinn's voice.

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"Relieving you."

Tvi lapped up the rest of her wine in a hurry, then hid the glass in a drawer. The little left in the bottle she poured into AmaUa's cup.

"See you later," she said.

"Au revoir, Mr. Romper." With a drunken giggle.

Tvi was surprised to see a long sword strapped to Khotvinn's waist and a strange defiant gleam in his eye. Tvi wondered what notion had crossed the troglodyte's brain this time, then decided he'd probably spent the afternoon being fired up by a recording of Ten Greatest Militarist Speeches or something equally exciting. "The prisoner's in good spirits," she reported.

Khotvinn grunted. "What was the name of that person who was visiting her last night?"

Tvi was surprised by this evidence of interest. "Him? Lieutenant Navarre, I think."

"Hm. Good." Tvi could almost watch the slow tumblers of Khotvinn's mind clicking over. The fur on her shoulders rose slightly—the cave-dweller was perfectly eerie, with his sword and intent expression—then she consciously smoothed her fur and handed over the Ronnie Romper hologram. She was, on reflection, almost glad she didn't know what Khotvinn was thinking. It showed, she thought, that her ancestors, unlike his, had probably advanced somewhat in the last million or so years—

Tvi moved down the servants' stair, careful not to sway too drunkenly. Odd, she thought, that the captive was the only person in this place she could talk to. Amalia Jensen might be something of a political crank, but her opinions weren't vicious and at least she seemed a more balanced sort than the other cranks around here.

"There's some geezer on a knoll off to the northeast," Gregor said. He was in his darksuit, soft, loose crepe

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covering everything except the pale oval of his face, but hadn't yet turned on the camouflage holograms. "He's got a flier parked out of sight. He waved at us as we flew overhead. No effort made to conceal himself. There was nothing to hide behind but a tree that isn't even as thick around as he is."

"Do you think he's a lookout?" asked Pietro. He was wearing a spare darksuit, and weapons hung from his belt. He had proved a quick study at their use, but Maijstral and his assistants hadn't any idea of how he'd act when the real thing came, and decided to equip him only with nonlethal weapons against which their own darksuits had built-in protection.

"A lookout?" Maijstral asked. His voice came eerily from the cloudy blackness of a hologram. "Possibly, although I'd think it more likely he's police, or one of Miss Jensen's political contacts."

Pietro shook his head briefly. "No. Not one of us."

Maijstral went on. "He can't see half the approaches to the house from where he is—if he is a lookout he'd do better on the roof—but we may not be dealing with professionals here." He had just come down from a short flight

above the trees, searching the front view of the house with longfinders. "There's a window boarded up on the second floor, near the southeast corner. Fairly obvious, but then me Countess was never subtle."

Gregor had a hologram projector in his hand. He touched a button and suddenly, glowing in the dark night air, the white expanse of the house appeared. Maijstral turned off his darksuit and pointed with a soft-gloved hand. "There,"

Gregor altered the perspective of the hologram, moving through the second floor of the building.

The front of the building was shaped like a broad, shallow U, a covered veranda held within the U's gentle

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arms. On the southeast corner, second floor, was a drawing room that occupied the arm of the U on that story. Just to the north of the drawing room was a circular library, two stories in height, with an ornate, wrought-iron spiral stair and a large crystal chandelier. The western-facing windows of the drawing room looked out over the roof of the veranda, and in the drawing room's northwest corner was a door that led into the upper front hall. Moving down the hall, one door to the west, was the room with the boarded-up window.

Maijstral found the situation testing his temper—"There's just too much access to the second floor," he muttered. "Look here. Inside the house, within a few paces of Miss Jensen's door, there's a servants' stairway, and just around the corner from that is the grand stairway to me ground floor. We've got the spiral staircase coming up the round library on the east side, and that stair has access to the southeast drawing room, and from the drawing room it's two paces to where they're keeping Miss Jensen. There are two stairs from the front porch to the balcony on the front portico, and they lead to Miss Jensen's window. And then elsewhere there are—let's see—four other stairways and two elevators."

"That gives us more ways out." Gregor offered. "It also means that we can run into trouble on any route," Maijstral said. "We're going to have to assume that Miss Jensen is guarded, and we may not be able to deal with the guard in silence. Therefore we must plan against an alarm being given."

"A diversion, sir," suggested Pietro. "Some of us

could try charging in the back way. ..."

Maijstral turned his ears down in disapproval, and Pietro fell silent. "I think not," he said. "Splitting our forces invites chaos, and the diversion would accomplish little if

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they ignored you and instead concentrated on defending Miss Jensen." He frowned, twisting the ring on his finger. "What we need to do is seal off Miss Jensen's room for the time it takes to break her free. AH we have to do is get an a-grav harness around her and a proximity wire around her neck. Then even if she's tied up, she can manage her own escape while we cover her withdrawal."

He gave his ring a final twist, as if in decision. "Very well. Roman, you and Mr. Quijano enter through the second story drawing room on the southeast corner. Roman, you will move to the hall door and stand by ready to deal with any guards in the corridor. Mr. Quijano, your particular job will be to block the door to the library staircase. Don't just lock it, put a piece of furniture in front of it, as heavy as you can carry. And then help Roman if he needs it. Gregor, you'll go in the unblocked window next to Miss Jensen's. Any guards in the corridor will be caught between you and Roman."

"And you, boss?"

"I will fly first to Miss Jensen's window. I want to make certain she's actually being held there before any of the rest of us make a move."

Pietro Quijano gave Maijstral an admiring look. The others accepted his plan without a word. Maijstral had his own reasons for wanting to go first, and wanting to be on the second floor balcony where there were no guards and a clear field for escape, and his reasons had nothing to do with a hope that Pietro might admire his bravery.

"We'll approach from the southeast to avoid detection from that fellow on the knoll, whatever he's doing there. Keep in cover till I give the signal—"

"Deus vult, sir?" offered Roman.

Maijstral smiled. Roman was ever prepared to trace Maijstral's ancestors far beyond the point that Maijstral

found creditable. Jean Parisot de La Valette was, in any case, supposed to be a celibate, and furthermore would almost certainly not approve of his alleged descendant.

"Deus vult. Very well. Thank you, Roman."

Maijstral asked each of his companions to repeat his instructions aloud, making certain he knew what he was supposed to do, and then led them on a brisk hike along the bottom of the ridge, staying out of sight of the mansion, and then through the first tripwire alarm, the hemispheric cold-field that surrounded the building like an invisible bubble. Roman, controlling Pietro Quijano's darksuit through a proximity wire, showed the young man how to slip through the net.

A brightly lit flier appeared over the western horizon. Maijstral froze, snapping on his darksuit, his heart hammering in a perfectly absurd way. He was glad no one could see the way his hands had begun to tremble. Roman's darksuit was also turned on, but apparently he had raised his longfinders. "Dewayne Seven," he said.

An old model, not very fast. Visitors? Maijstral wondered. The flier circled, then landed out back. Not visitors, Maijstral concluded, if they were using the servants' entrance. Plumbers, cooks, maybe people installing new security gadgets. If the latter, it was time to move quickly.

"This may work to our advantage," he said. "They will be less likely to do violence if there are outsiders in the house."

Pietro Quijano looked dubious. He was still struggling with his darksuit, trying to get the night holograms on. Maijstral reached across the gap between them and pressed a stud on his belt.

"Thank you," Pietro said.

Maijstral did not reply. He was already flying toward

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the mansion, followed by one of his media globes, both of them keeping close to the ground.

Old General Gerald, breathing hard from the exertion of putting on his battle armor, crouched once again in the corner of his living room. During siesta his monitors had

shown several overflights of his house, any one of which could have been Maijstral scouting his place in a flier. He couldn't be certain, of course, but he had what amounted to a moral certainty that Maijstral would come tonight.

He grinned a tight-lipped grin as he tracked over the data readouts from the various rooms of his house. He could track individual dust motes as they swirled above his bookshelves. Maijstral wouldn't have a chance.

This was going to be great.

Maijstral drifted across the thick, manicured lawn. The manse ahead of him blazed with floodlights; the planks that scarred the single upper window were an eyesore, an obvious sign of something out of place. MaijstraPs sensors reached out, found and dissected the building's defenses. He reversed himself, oozed feet first through a network of flaxes, then reached the generator and silently disabled it. His surrounding hologramatic image—his darksuit was more advanced than Tvi's—began to take on the lighter tones of the spotlighted walls themselves.

He rose effortlessly to the second floor and neutralized a rank of leapers that Gregory's miniature beacons had pinpointed for him. He drifted to the window, carefully not touching the balcony with his feet, and peered between the cracks of the rough planks that had been nailed over the window. He could see nothing through the curtain beyond. Maijstral deployed his cutter and sliced a neat circle in one of the planks, then another circle in the window behind.

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He popped a micro media-globe through the hole, then guided it so that it peeked delicately beneath the lacy hem of the curtains. The globe's view was fed into Maijstral's brain.

Amalia Jensen lay on the curtained bed, eating supper from a tray. There was no one else in the room.

Relief eased through Maijstral's heart. This might be simple after all.

The matte-black media rolled along the bottom of the curtain, skated along the dark paneling of the room, slid up one of the bedposts, then finally drifted to a point within an inch or so of Amalia Jensen's left ear. Maijstral could see bruises on her cheek and felt a flash of anger. He spoke, subvocalizing into his throat mike, the globe whis-

pering for him.

"Don't jump. Miss Jensen. This is Drake Maijstral."

She jumped anyway, but at least avoided tipping the tray-  
As her head spun toward the globe, Maijstral received a  
swift, distorted impression of wide eyes, parted lips, a  
swirling pattern of bruises, pores like meteor strikes.

"Please whisper, Miss Jensen. Are you being monitored  
in any way?"

The projection of her moving lips in Maijstral's mind  
made them seem as large as Fassbinder Gorge on Newton.  
"No," she said. "There's a guard outside, and they warned  
me not to touch the window because there are alarms on  
it."

Maijstral reduced the scale of the unflattering close-up  
view and considered a moment. "I have fulfilled my half  
of the commission. I would like to discuss payment."

Her answering tone was puzzled. "But you came to get  
me out, didn't you? Once I'm free, we can complete the  
transfer."

"Miss Jensen, I merely came to make arrangements for

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the delivery of the artifact and the collection of my  
payment."

There was growing anger in Amalia's voice. "How can  
you expect me to pay you, Mr. Maijstral? I'm being held  
prisoner."

"Please lower your voice. Miss Jensen." Maijstral smiled  
behind his holographic screen. "I simply wished to con-  
firm that your estimation of the situation is the same as  
mine."

"Of course it is! All you have to do is get me out of  
here, and then I'll pay you."

"I was about to mention. Miss Jensen, that I am not  
normally in the business of rescuing kidnapped persons."

"You could call the police."

"I'm afraid they would then discover that you had hired

me to steal an invaluable object. I shouldn't like to get you in trouble, Miss Jensen. And in any case, I make a point of never dealing with the police."

There was a long silence. Maijstral turned his attention back to the image from his media globe; Amalia was scowling at it. Then, "What do you propose, Mr. Maijstral?"

"I suggest that we agree to cancel our earlier agreement, and reach a new one. For your liberty, I suggest a payment of sixty. After your safe delivery to your friends, we may negotiate for the sale of the Imperial Artifact."

"You aren't giving me much choice."

"On the contrary, my choice is entirely yours. You may accept my offer, or you may arrange for your own deliverance, or you may stay here until such time as your commission expires and I become a free agent."

"Where will I get the money?"

"You know your own finances best. But you are a member of a star-spanning political organization of consid-

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erable wealth, and whose interests might well be engaged. I suggest that you contact them."

"You're taking advantage."

Maijstral's answer was immediate. "Madam, you mistake me. My nature and interest is but to perceive the situation and act upon it. I do not attempt the concealment of facts, for example the value that might attach to the contents of a silver object, or the drastic action some might take to acquire it."

Her decision, when it came, was quick, and there was steel in her voice. Maijstral suppressed a momentary surge of admiration.

"Done, then. Sixty to get me loose."

"And our earlier contract voided."

"Yes."

"Your obedient servant, ma'am. Please put the tray

aside and be ready to move."

Maijstral made certain that the media globe had recorded the bargain, then shifted to his communications channel and whispered, "Deus vult."

Behind him, on the bare edge of his darksuit's perceptions, the rest of the party, clothed in night, began moving purposefully across the lawn. Things hadn't gone badly at all.

The Countess lit her cigarette by tapping it twice on the rear portico pillar and looked at her two henchmen, Chang and Bix. Both were brawny and well-muscled, each carrying a small suitcase and a larger satchel containing their gear. Both had removed their hats in her presence and, because their hands were carrying satchels, the hats ended up crushed in their armpits. "The robots haven't finished making up your rooms," she said. She spoke Khosali. "Let me show you to the library. You can wait there."

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"Yes, my lady." Chang was the more vocal of the two, though neither were precisely fluent in any known language. "We're happy we could be of use."

"This way." She led them past the back study and the small ballroom, then through the billiard room to the library. Leather volumes gleamed in subdued light. She pivoted and gestured with the cigaret. Neuralgia crackled in her shoulders.

"Please feel free to go anywhere on the lower floors," she said. "You may order anything you like, and the house will bring it. On the upper floor there is a Very Important Guest"—she tried to inflect the capitals, and saw how their eyes flickered to the upper landing—"and it is urgent that our guest not be disturbed. If anything disturbing should occur, I'm confident you will know how to respond."

"Yes, my lady." Chang bowed stiffly, and Bix, after a pause, followed suit.

"I'll have the robot escort you to your room as soon as it's done readying it—"

As the Countess left the room, neuralgia walked with needle toes along her arms and shoulders. She repressed an urge to stretch, move her arms. An Imperial aristocrat kept

her shoulders back at all times.

She'd just have to schedule an extra session with her robot masseuse. The robot lacked the touch of her human one, but all the live servants had been shuttled to Peleng City as soon as she'd decided to go in for kidnapping.

Never mind. Service demanded the occasional sacrifice. This would, she concluded righteously, do her good in the end.

Baron Sinn wasn't certain he wanted to be recognized by the Countess's goons, so when their flier landed in the

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back he decided to take a stroll on the front porch. He stood silently by one of the Corinthian columns and pitched his cigaret onto the lawn. A robot would clean it up tomorrow.

A gust of wind ruffled his lace. He would have to shower tonight to get the smell of tobacco out of his fur. Another little price of diplomacy.

A few feet above Baron Sinn, Maijstral's beam cutter quietly sliced the planks blocking Amalia Jensen's window, then sliced the window itself. Planks and sheets of glass rose into the air above his head, held by a-grav. Gregor, nearly invisible in his chameleon darksuit, floated behind him and began moving the alarms on the next window.

Maijstral detected an alien scent, then froze. It was tobacco. Was someone smoking just under him? His nerves giving odd little leaps, Maijstral turned up his audio reception and, amid the amplified buzz of insects, distinctly heard Sinn's movements below. Maijstral gnawed his lip. He realized that all the person had to do was step off the porch and look up in order to notice the planks had been sliced from the window.

"Gregor," he said, subvocalizing, "there's someone just under us." The answer came back without pause.

"Khosali geezer. Gun under his jacket. Smokes Silver-tips."

Maijstral blinked. Gregor quickly cut his window away and floated into the house.

Good idea, Maijstral decided. He drifted through the curtains.

Amalia Jensen looked at him coldly. "My hero," she said.

\* \* \*

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"Quite a place," said Bix.

"Only too, partner." Chang went to the wall service plate and touched the ideograph for "kitchen." "Send beer," he said.

"I've never seen so many books."

"My brother has a few."

Bix dropped his suitcase and satchel, then began moving up the stair, looking at titles as he went. "Geographic Survey of Rose Territory, Peleng. Twelve volumes. Who'd want to read that?"

"Phyllis Bertram's from Rose Territory."

"No, she's not. She's from Falkland."

"That's in Rose Territory."

"That's not true."

"Is so."

The pair's routine, developed over years of close association, was well-honed.

\* \*Counter-Intuitive Approaches to Condensation Psychology. Complete Works of Bulwer-Lytton. Where did they get this stuff?"

Good question. Except for a few showpiece volumes, the books had been picked up as discards from local libraries, then bound in such a way as to look rare and valuable. Woolvinn Leases, Ltd. had a solid appreciation of the way books vanish into the pockets or tuggage of tenants and subsequently migrate to places unknown, and so made certain that most of the books in their exquisitely appointed library were of incomparable dullness, the better to discourage theft.

"Who's Bulwer-Lytton?" Chang asked.

"No idea, partner."

Bix had advanced to the landing on the second floor.

"There's more stuff here," he said. "Old videos. King Lear." He looked at Chang. "Who was that?"

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"Tsanvinn Dynasty. He was the grandfather of the emperor that conquered Earth."

"That far back." He reached for the door to the southeast drawing room. "Wonder what's in here?" he asked.

"Don't. We're not supposed to - , ."

Pietro Quijano followed Roman's lead up the side of the house to the darkened windows of the southeast drawing room. He was beginning to get the hang of the darksuit, and flipped back and forth from his night image-intensifiers to infrared perception, enjoying, for its own sake, the contrast in viewpoints.

Roman worked deftly and quickly, and within a few seconds had a window cleared of alarms and sliced open. Pietro watched as the disconnected pane of glass floated gently skyward, then hung in midair, unaffected by the slight breeze. Then, with a start, he realized Roman had entered the building, and that he should follow,

Pietro's image-intensified view of the drawing room was devoid of texture—everything looked bright and without perspective. He dropped to the floor, soft carpeting absorbing his weight without a sound. Light was entering under both the door that led into the corridor and the other door that led to the circular library. He could hear voices from somewhere, but wasn't certain of their origin.

Roman was still floating, hovering by the door to the corridor. Quijano recollected he was supposed to block the library door and began looking for heavy furniture. There were two long couches, several chairs, a desk. He moved toward the desk and began to drag it over the deep pile carpet, tugging it toward the door. Roman's subvocal came in his ear.

"Don't. They might hear." Pietro froze in front of the library door.

"Wonder what's in here?" a voice said, from right on

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the other side of the door. Pietro turned toward the door, wondering what in heaven's name he could do. His heart boomed louder than the sound of the voice. This wasn't in the plan. He reached out with the idea of physically holding the door shut.

The door opened.

Bix's face gazed toward him in amiable curiosity. Pietro reacted instantly. He completely forgot the weapons at his belt, forgot that his darksuit made him difficult to see. He simply lashed out with a fist, his whole body behind it. The fist mashed Bix's nose and knocked him back against the landing's metal rail. Bix rebounded and Pietro lashed out again, catching him more by luck than design on the point of his jaw. Bix fell unconscious. Pietro stepped back into the drawing room and slammed the library door. He turned to Roman, who had drawn a weapon and would have used it if Pietro hadn't been in the way. Severe pain pulsed in Pietro's knuckles.

"We're in for it now," Pietro said. And then he clapped his hands over his mouth. He'd said it out loud.

Khotvinn's ears pricked at the sound of a voice.  
"We're in for it now." You certainly are, my lad, he thought; he spun, drew his sword with his left hand and his chugger with his right, and charged the door. He roared as he came.  
Khotvinn the brave! Khotvinn the majestic!  
He was going to carve the intruders like cheese.

Chang watched as Bix was knocked unconscious by a figure only dimly seen- He watched without surprise—Chang did not have enough imagination to possess much in the way of expectation, and therefore was never surprised when his expectations failed to come true-

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The Very Important Personage, Chang decided, had a mean punch and a savage regard for his own privacy. He was not going to enjoy apologizing to the Countess for Bix's intrusion. Then he heard a bellow and the sound of firing, and decided something was wrong.

He went to the service plate and touched the ideograph for "General announcement."

"This is Chang in the library," he said. "There's a fight going on upstairs."

Then he went for his guns.

Roman heard Pietro's voice and felt at once the onset of dismay. He knew his action would have to be fast, and so he stifled the dismay swiftly and spun to the door that led into the corridor, wrenching it open, his gun ready. He observed a seven-foot-tall, red-haired puppet, a magic wand in his hand and a happy and slightly mischievous grin fixed to his face, leaping toward him, hanging in midair with one foot outmistrust.

Roman stepped aside. The puppet was balanced to encounter a door and failed to hit one, and so flailed and came to a crash landing inside the drawing room. Pietro stared at the apparition. Roman fired his stunner and saw a coruscating energy pattern spatter bright colors across both the puppet and Pietro. Roman had known Pietro's screens could deal with the attack, but apparently the puppet's could as well. Hell. Roman slammed the door behind him and looked for something to hit the puppet with.

The puppet leaped to his feet, striking blindly in the unlighted room, unable to see his opponents in their darksuits. His grin was blinding. "Prepare to die, human scum!" he roared. He fired his own gun randomly. Explosive bullets blew furniture apart.

"Ronnie RomperT" said Pietro.

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Maijstral got the a-grav harness around Amalia Jensen and put the proximity wire around her neck, and then his heart gave a lurch at the sound of Khotvinn's howl and the subsequent battle. "This way," he said, and arrowed straight for the window.

Standing on the porch outside. Baron Sinn glanced up in surprise at the ruckus, then drew his gun and sprinted for one of the outside stairways connecting the front porch with the balcony overhead, switching on his shields as he ran. He saw the cutaway boards that surrounded Amalia Jensen's window, then saw the visual quality of the window shift as Maijstral sliced through it in his darksuit. Sinn fired, his spitfire blowing flaming chunks out of the

building.

Maijstral, completely by instinct, reversed himself and flew back through the window. Once inside he cursed himself for an idiot—he could have got clean away—then drew his own spitfire and blew more pieces out of the window, just by way of suggesting Baron Sinn not enter that way.

Amalia Jensen was floating in midroom, looking startled. Clearly without adequate protection, she could not leave via the window. "Beg pardon," Maijstral said. He opened the door. "This way," he said.

When the fighting started, Gregor was admiring—and mentally pricing—a Basil vase sitting atop an eight-hundred-year-old hand-carved bureau of Couscous marble. He was therefore a little late in wrenching open his door and sticking his nose and gun into the corridor, arriving just in time to see the door to the southeast drawing room slam shut. There was no one in the corridor. Then Baron Sinn's spitfire began blasting bits out of the wall behind him.

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Gregor concluded his stunner was a little inadequate to the occasion, put it away, and drew his disruptor.

The door to Amalia Jensen's room opened. "This way," said Maijstral's voice. A woman unfamiliar to Gregor floated out in an a-grav harness, followed by Maijstral, who was backing out, firing behind him.

"What's happening, boss?" Gregor asked.

Maijstral nearly jumped out of his skin.

Sergeant Tvi was eating dinner alone in the servants' kitchen when Chang's voice on the house intercom alerted her to fighting on the top floor-

Tvi to the rescue! she thought brightly. Her heart lifted at a mental picture of herself in the fight, charging to the last-minute salvation of the Impenum in a swell of dramatic music.

She switched on her darksuit, drew her gun, and flew at top speed up the servants' stair.

Savage joy filled Countess Anastasia as she heard Chang's announcement. She stepped to the nearest ser-

vice plate and thumbed the ideograph for "general announcement."

"Kill them!" she shrieked, and then prepared to run for the sporting rifles in her private study. Then, as an after-thought, she touched the ideograph again.

"Be firm now," she added. Firmly.

The Countess's action may serve as an interesting comment on human nature. It is sometimes odd how, in times of stress, training takes hold. The Countess could have made her announcement simply by telling the house to do it for her, but in High Custom it is simply not done to turn and start yelling at inanimate objects, particularly when

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there are other sentients present. A graceful stroll to the nearest service plate, followed by a tow-voiced command, is considered apropos for alt but the most dire situations,

The Countess Anastasia, even when urging her friends to battle, remained a lady. Even if she found it necessary to involve herself personally in the slaughter, one may be certain she would somehow stay above it all, and do her best to avoid getting too much blood on her gown.

Noblesse is not inborn; it is learned, and it takes a long time. But once learned, it is hard to unlearn—it's fully as good as instinct. Thus does training triumph over circumstance.

Allowed Burglary furnishes another illustration. One steals—very well. But one steals with style and grace, and people forgive you, sometimes even hold the door for you as you step into the night with swag in hand. Training in politesse can hold up under the most amazing provocations, theft among them.

All one can hope for is that thief and victim will be playing by the same rules,

Things were well and truly afire in Amalia Jensen's former room. The closet door opened and a simpleton robot, whose usual job was to make certain clothing was hanging properly, extruded a long mechanical arm and began spraying fire retardant.

"Ronnie Romper?" Pietro asked, then clapped his hands over his mouth again as the giant red-haired pixie spun

toward the sound of his voice and raised his magic wand. Pietro concluded the wand wasn't about to transport him to the Magic Planet of Adventure, where kindly Auntie June and crusty-but-softhearted Uncle Amos would offer him sage advice between bouts with prehistoric beasts or rene"

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gade aliens, but instead would probably cut him in half. He gave a yelp and dove at top speed behind the couch. The sword whistled as it sliced cushions.

Roman, standing behind Khotvinn, raised a metal chair and smashed it precisely into the side of Ronnie Romper's head. Ronnie yowled and spun, the magic wand scattering fairy dust in a glittering arc. A woman's voice on the household intercom promised death and firmness. Ronnie swung again, and Roman raised the chair to intercept. The sword cut halfway through the chair, then stuck, quivering. Roman gave the chair a wrench, tore the sword from Ronnie Romper's hand, and flung it into a corner.

"Flower lover!" Ronnie Romper roared. His fixed smile never moved.

Roman realized that Ronnie Romper was the one who had uprooted Amalia Jensen's flowers. Rage filled him.

"Barbarian," he said, and gave Ronnie Romper a solid punch in the nose. Ronnie swung wildly in retaliation, not coming close. Roman punched again, connected, kicked Ronnie in the midsection, then spun and kicked Ronnie square on the forehead. Khotvinn collapsed, stunned.

"Lout. That'll teach you," said Roman firmly, and he dusted his hands and reached for the hallway door. (Politesse, politesse. Here's training again.) On opening the door, Roman saw Gregor, Maijstral, and Amalia Jensen in the hall.

"This way, sirs and madam," he said, and bowed with a flourish.

Tvi reached the top of the servants' stair. Through her sensory enhancements and the triumphant mental music she was playing as accompaniment to the video in her mind, she heard a strange Khosali voice, "This way, sirs and madam," and then the sound of people moving. There

seemed to be a lot of them. She recollected suddenly that she had only a stunner and that real thieves disdain violence. She also realized that if she moved out of the door she would be unable to avoid any unfortunate consequences, just as she had when she had been halfway through Jensen's window.

She decided to wait awhile-

Baron Sinn realized his spitfire was running low on energy, that he had no reloads on him, and that he'd have to do something fast. He commended his soul to the Emperor and to the Sixteen Active and Twelve Passive Virtues, then sprinted forward and dove headfirst through the torn window into Amalia Jensen's room, hitting the floor and rolling, his gun ready.

The room was lit by flame, clouded by smoke. His eyes smarted. Vaguely, he saw a hand and a gun protruding from the closet, and with three wild shots of his spitfire he blew into fragments the simpleton robot that had been trying to put out the fire.

"Thagger," he said, realizing his error. And began to wheeze. The room was filling with smoke.

Pietro rose from his hiding place behind the cushions, Amalia Jensen was floating through the door after Maijstral. "Miss Jensen!" he said, delighted. He stepped out from his hiding place, tripped over Khotvinn's sword, which was still jammed halfway through an overturned chair, and crashed to the floor.

Amalia Jensen, hearing the crash, glanced in his direction. "Oh, Hullo, Pietro," she said.

Chang listened to the crashing and thumping from upstairs as he struggled into his shield bell and reached for

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his disruptor rifle. He looked up, frowned as he contemplated Bix's unconscious body, and decided that the direct approach, up the spiral staircase, was fraught with danger. He opened the French door onto the small east porch and glanced up at the windows of the southeast parlor. One of them seemed to have a neat hole in it. This was clearly the escape route for the wicked.

He smiled. He had them trapped, bigod!

He batted fems out of his vision as he crouched behind a metal planter, then sighted in on the window. A more imaginative individual might have actually waited for the enemy to try to leave, then picked them off as they came out, one by one. Chang, as has already been observed, possessed no imagination.

The air sizzled as he fired.

Roman picked up Khotvinn's chugger, checked it for loads, and readied it for action. "This way," said Maijstral, pointing to the open window, and just as he was about to fling himself over the sill, warning lights began to blaze on his darksuit displays, indicating invisible disruptor bolts crackling through the window. Maijstral checked, glanced around, and saw the library door. He realized he was growing tired of being the first through an exit. He pointed.

"That way!" he said.

Tvi took a micro media-globe from her belt and let it look around the corner for her. She had to look carefully in order to see a single person, his presence marked only by the odd shimmery distortion of his darksuit- He stood in the drawing room door, apparently the rear guard. The rest had filed into the drawing room.

Tvi considered this. Dramatic music began welling in her mind. Tvi the Silent, Tvi the Thief, would creep up on

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this bunch from behind and bat them one by one! If she played this right, they wouldn't even know she was behind them.

Roman charged through the library door, saw motion below him, and, with three well-placed shots of Khotvinn's chugger, utterly demolished the robot that, per Chang's earlier request, had just arrived with a large selection of beer. Foam flooded the carpet. Roman felt a pang of regret.

"This way," he said, and flung himself over the railing, gliding to the first floor on a-grav. Maijstrai, Amalia Jensen, and Pietro followed.

Tvi crouched, readied herself, then flung herself at top speed toward the shimmering figure in the door. Gregor's first bolt went wild and there wasn't time for a second. Tvi crashed into Gregor, driving him into the doorframe. The

breath went out of him and he sagged to the ground. Tvi, seeing stars herself, groped for Gregor inside the darksuit screen, located his neck, reasoned there was a head above it somewhere, and lashed out with the bun of her stunner. The weapon connected and Gregor flopped to the floor.

Tvi grinned invisibly behind her holographic shroud. Things were looking up for the Fate of the Empire.

Khotvinn groped his way toward consciousness through a blaze of stars. A dozen puny humans hiding behind their darksuit screens must have set about him with clubs. But Khotvinn wasn't finished yet—he was sure he must have chopped five or six at least, and the rest couldn't have much fight in them. He climbed to his feet, groped for his sword, then dragged it out of the metal chair. He felt better immediately. Where were the stinking redbellies?

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There was someone in a darksuit apparently engaged in a wrestling act in the corridor, and in the clear light of the library Khotvinn could see Amalia Jensen, her ankles stilt bound, beginning her descent to the first floor.

Light! Once he could see his foe, nothing could stop him! If the traitors hadn't turned out the tights, he would never have been overcome.

Roaring, Khotvinn raised his blade and charged.

Action at last! Death to traitors!

Warbling, Countess Anastasia raced down the corridor for the library, cradling her new Nana-Coulville custom mapper with the folding para-assault stock and Trotvinn XVII sights. Her little song was simple: "Kill, kill, kill . . . firmness, firmness, firmness . . ." But it was in High Khosali, in which each word made a comment on the word before, and it was heartfelt. She was singing with all her soul. Not even the great Sebastiana would have put more feeling into a lyric.

The simple pleasures, one is constantly reminded, are oft the best.

"Say," Pietro Quijano said, remembering to subvocalize for once, "shouldn't we wait for Gregor?" He was standing on the second-floor library landing to one side of (he door, watching Amalia Jensen as she dropped down the center of the room toward the splatter of smoking robot

and streaming beer that stained me costly carpet. And then Pietro heard a howl to freeze his blood. Ronnie Romper, he realized, was coming to chop Miss Jensen to bits!

Pietro's mind seemed to work, in that instant, with amazing clarity. He dropped to the landing and stuck his foot into the doorway.

Roaring, Ronnie Romper charged through the doorway,

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tripped over the foot (roaring), made an architecturally perfect arc (roaring) as he soared over Bix's unconscious form and the wrought-iron rail, and fell twenty feet (still roaring) to the library floor.

Ronnie landed and the mansion trembled. Beer fountained as high as the crystal chandelier. Amalia Jensen, who had been missed by inches, looked up in surprise.

Feeling a bit squeamish, Pietro gazed delicately over the rail. Ronnie was sprawled in an X below him, his never-altered grin beaming mischievously upward. Pietro felt his stomach turn over.

"Well. So much for /Mm/" Amalia said. She looked from Pietro to Ronnie and back. "Thank you, Pietro," she said.

"You're welcome. Miss Jensen." In that bleak instant Pietro realized, sick at heart, that he would visit the Magic Planet of Adventure nevermore.

Tvi crouched in the doorway and watched in stunned amazement as the giant Ronnie Romper charged across the drawing room, a hoarse bellow issuing from behind the perpetual smile. There followed a crash, one mat shook the entire house, but no shots, no sound of struggle.

it was time to do some more sneaking up, she decided.

Baron Sinn, commending his soul, etcetera, half overcome by smoke, charged into the corridor amid a gush of fire-generated camouflage. He could barely see, and he staggered as he lunged toward the southeast drawing room.

What he did see through his streaming eyes was a figure in an darksuit in the drawing room door. Obviously a miscreant. Sinn raised his spitfire and fired.

Tvi yelped as the spitfire blew away the wall just over her head. Her darksuit had given her a view of the corridor

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behind her, and she'd been thankful Sinn was there to back her up. Instead of offering to assist, her boss, without even a declaration of enmity, had gone and shot at her.

This, she concluded, was totally unfair. She did not mind to wonder why the Baron had opened fire. The point uppermost in her mind was the doubt that her darksuit screens could handle spitfires.

Tvi flew like hell for the servants' stair. Another spitfire round blasted the wall as she ran.

Baron Sinn, gasping for breath, staggered in pursuit- Here was one he wasn't about to let get away

Maijstral considered the French door onto the east terrace long enough to realize that whoever was firing disruptor bolts into the second story could as easily cover the east terrace from his position. He pointed at the door into the interior of the house.

"Thai way," he said. "Then north."

Roman flung open the door and lunged through it, colliding with the Countess Anastasia and knocking her sprawling, "Beg pardon, my lady," he said promptly, and, after relieving the Countess of her Nana-Coulville, gallantly offered to help her stand.

A deep X of anger marred Countess Anastasia's brow. "Die, redbellied wretch!" she barked, and batted Roman's hand aside.

Even well-trained politesse has its limits.

Roman stiffened. He bit back the comment that came to mind at this churlish display of unladylike behavior. "Good evening, my lady," he said in sepulchral, indignant tones, "Your obedient servant." He strode in high dudgeon toward the back of the house.

"Hey," said Pietro Quijano, "what about Gregor?" He was still on the landing, listening to the spitfire

bursts from the corridor where, so far as he knew, Gregor was standing alone against the Imperial hordes.

Maijstral did not, apparently, hear, since he was on his way into the corridor. The spitfire bursts came to an end.

"Gregor?" Pietro subvocalized, and heard a groan in reply.

He peered into the drawing room and saw Gregor's form sprawled in the doorway, a smoking spitfire hole in the wall over his head.

There seemed to be no enemies about. Pietro slipped back into the drawing room, got Gregor in a fireman's carry—easy, since Gregor on a-grav was virtually weightless—and hastened after the others-

Maijstral, on hearing Pietro's plaintive inquiries about Gregor, reflected on first thought that henchmen were, after all, expendable, and on second thought that Pietro was too. It wasn't as if they hadn't volunteered. Thus cheered, he floated near the ceiling to avoid the Countess—he was tempted to say something savage in passing, but decided to stay well to windward—and instead increased his speed, heading for the back of the house.

The party encountered nothing but a robot rushing for the servants' stair with a fire extinguisher, and then burst out of the back door and accelerated over the smooth croquet lawn. On the way they passed Tvi, who had jumped into Bix's flier and was trying to peel the lock and get it moving before the Baron drew another bead on her.

Maijstral called for his fliers to meet him at a rendezvous a mite ahead. Tvi got her Dewayne Seven started and raced away.

Baron Sinn burst out the back, waving his spitfire. Blinded by tears, he put a foot down on his kibble-colored

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croquet ball and crashed to the sward. Through his streaming eyes he could see nothing but a scatter of empty stars.

The first thing Bix smelled was beer. He put a hand to his wounded jaw and staggered to his feet. Stars flooded his vision. He swayed and clutched the wrought-iron rail. As his eyes focused, he saw Ronnie Romper sprawled

amid a massive puddle below, surrounded by robot parts.

"Hey," he said. "Did I miss something?"

The Countess entered, back rigid, fists clenched. Furiously she kicked a robot part across the room.

"Swine!" she remarked.

Bix decided to keep out of sight. He had obviously done something wrong by opening the drawing room door.

In careful silence, he drew back into the drawing room and shut the door behind him.

## CHAPTEC 9

Mr. Paavo Kuusinen was on the wrong side of the building to see much of what occurred at the Countess's mansion. He was resting under his tree, his arms pillowing his head, when suddenly he heard the sound of spitfires barking back and forth, accompanied by bright explosions from the front of the building. Kuusinen sprinted across the knoll to his flier and jumped in without bothering to open the door. He rolled back the canopy to get a better view and set the flier on a long banking curve to the south so that he could watch the building from a safe distance. He saw that the upper right front of the mansion was definitely on fire, but could see nothing else of interest. He continued to orbit, swinging wide around the back, and saw a figure leaving the back of the building. Kuusinen focused his longfinders and saw Amalia Jensen floating at great speed over the lawns and ornamental gardens behind the estate- If there was anyone with her, Kuusinen didn't spot him, but whatever the case, this looked like a clean getaway.

Kuusinen told his flier to circle and kept AmaUa Jensen under observation. Presently two Gustafsons appeared over the horizon, Jensen floated into one of them, and darksuit screens appeared over each. Kuusinen swore. He tried to

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keep them on his detectors as they rose into the sky and sped off on two separate paths, but the disguise technology on each was too good, and they seemed to have special terrain-avoidance computers that kept them closer to the ground than Kuusinen dared fly.

Police and firefighters would soon be coming. It was time for Kuusinen to leave.

He decided to take up his surveillance again in the morning.

General Gerald snored gently in his battle armor, dreaming of glory. Maijstral had not come, would not be coming, but in his dreams the General fought a greater foe, the vast might of the Khosati Empire, the armada he had trained all his life to fight, now come at last.

"Next thing I knew," Gregor said, "Pietro was carrying me out."

There was an ever-darkening lump on his temple, which Roman now approached with a semilife patch. Gregor flinched from Roman's touch, took the patch himself, pulled his long hair out of the way, and gingerly applied the creature to his head- Happily released from suspended animation, the patch began to attach taproots to his skin and exchange healing drugs for nutrients.

Gregor could not recall being knocked out. The last thing he remembered was floating in the room next to Amalia's, admiring the Basil vase.

The others were in a much more ebullient mood. They hadn't ceased talking, laughing at their exploits, and exchanging stories since the fliers had parked at MaijstraTs house.

Maijstral raised a glass of champagne. "Mr. Quijano," he said, "you have been a glorious asset to our cause. You

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disposed of two enemies, including the ferocious Romper, and rescued Gregor from the hostiles. I salute you, sir."

Pietro blushed and looked at his feet. "Wasn't much," he said.

"Quite the contrary," said Amalia. "Beating that Romper creature was more than I could accomplish, and I've been studying pom boxing for years." Pietro's blush deepened. Amalia was still hovering in midair until such time as Roman could locate a tool capable of getting the manacles off her ankles,

Roman refilled everyone's glass, then bowed and went

in search of the appropriate cutter. Now that the rescue was over he had reverted to the role of impassive servant, changing from the one-piece darksuit to more formal apparel. Maijstral had changed clothing as well, into a lace-edged shirt and dark, embroidered housejacket—meaning one he didn't have to be laced into—which was tailored not to show the pistol he still wore in a hidden pocket.

"By the way," Maijstral said, "I believe our hero is still wearing our screens and weapons."  
"Oh. Right."

Pietro handed Maijstral a pistol, which vanished into another hidden pocket, and peeled himself out of the darksuit, which Maijstral dropped on a table. Gregor gave an unusually (for him) mellow smile as his healing patch fed him soothing chemicals-

"Do you think any of them were hurt?" Amalia asked.  
"Aside from Romper, I mean."

"I don't believe so," Maijstral said. "Were there any you particularly wanted injured?"

Amalia gnawed a lower lip. "No. Romper was the only one who went out of his way to be unpleasant. The rest were only doing their jobs. But you didn't see a small Khosalikh in any of the fighting?"

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The others looked at each other. "I don't believe so," Maijstral said. "The only other Khosalikh I saw was the Baron." To Maijstral's surprise, Amalia seemed relieved. Maijstral decided not to offer comment.

Roman returned with the cutter and a microvision hood, which would enable him to perform the delicate task of removing the skin-thin manacles from Amalia's ankles. "Please come over to the sofa, miss," Roman said, "and put your feet up on the table." The others watched with bated breath, sipping champagne, as Roman pulled the hood over his head and carefully sliced the manacles away from her ankles and wrists.

Amalia stretched her legs. "That's much better. And not a scratch. Thank you, Roman."

"I'll bring another bottle," Roman said, and took his tools and the manacles away.

"Say," said Pietro, "why don't we show Miss Jensen the reliquary?" He reached into the rotating Bartlett Head. The hand groped, encountering nothing.

Maijstral sighed. It was unfortunate that a celebration as nice as this one was going to end so soon. Good thing, he thought, he'd just disarmed Pietro. He seemed pleasant enough, but with these impetuous young men of action one never really knew.

"Oh," Maijstral said as if he'd just remembered, "I moved the Imperial Artifact to another location. Just in case our enemies followed us back, or managed to capture one of us and gain the location of this place."

Pietro looked at him blankly. "When?"

"When we were flying toward the Countess's. You were in the other flier. I made just a short detour."

Pietro frowned. "Should we go fetch it? Then we can conclude the purchase."

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Amalia Jensen put a hand on Pietro's arm. "Maijstral and I made other arrangements, Pietro," she said.

Pietro was bewildered. "When? You've been—"

"This reminds me ...," she said, standing and putting down her champagne. There was a growing coldness in her voice as she recalled facts which, in her joy at release, had been temporarily obscured. "We should leave, Pietro. We have many arrangements to make."

"We do? About what?"

Maijstral straightened his shoulders and put down his own glass. "Roman will take you where you wish to go," he said. High Custom smoothness had entered his voice.

"I thought the party was just starting," Pietro protested.

Roman entered with another bottle and perceived the change in atmosphere. He looked at Maijstral. "Sir?" he said.

"Please take our guests home."

Roman bowed. "Certainly, sir. Would you like a cloak,

madam?"

"No. Thank you, Roman. I think we should just leave."

"As you wish, madam."

Towing Pietro by the arm, Amalia Jensen left through a door that Roman held for her. Maijstral picked up his glass again and sipped. The champagne tasted a little flat.

Gregor looked up at him in anesthetized joy. "Short party, boss," he said.

"Best we pack," Maijstral said. "We'll have to leave before Miss Jensen brings reinforcements."

"Say again, boss?"

"It is possible, Gregor, our friends may come back with guns and kill us," Maijstral explained,

Gregor absorbed this with a certain glassy-eyed effort. "Short party," he said again.

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Maijstral decided that the situation was best summed up by recourse to Gregor's idiom. He put down his glass. "Only too, Gregor. Time to pack."

It was still four hours before sunrise. The nightwind was up, scudding leaves along the yellowgrass borders of Amalia Jensen's lawn. She and Pietro watched from the roof as Roman's Gustafson soared out of sight. Amalia was poorer by sixty novae; her rescue having put her in debt for the next twelve years. Pietro turned to her in bafflement. "What's the problem. Miss Jensen?" he said.

She idly kicked at a piece of the dismembered Howard. It scuttered across the roof. "Come downstairs with me. I want to start cleaning up the mess, and I can explain while I do it."

Cleaning house is good therapy for anger, and though Amalia Jensen wasn't terribly good at it—Howard and his ilk normally handled mis sort of thing—physical labor worked wonders for Amalia's mood as she explained how Maijstral had added conditions to her release. Pietro, who wasn't working as hard, found his anger growing as hers declined.

"Damn the man! If I'd known, I would have whacked him!"

"The point is, Pietro, I had no idea you were a member of the party," she said. "If I'd known you were present, I would have been able to refuse him, and then he couldn't just call off everything with you in his company—you would have known something was up."

"If he'd let me live," he said darkly.

"I could have handled it, though, if I'd thought it through. Just now I realized that I should have pointed out that his honor had been insulted when I was kidnapped,

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and if he didn't rescue me he'd have to start challenging people or else find another line of work."

"I'm tempted to challenge him." Pietro pointed a finger at an imaginary Maijstral. "Bang. Send him off and take the artifact."

"If you challenged Maijstral you could be certain he wouldn't bring the artifact with him," Amalia said sensibly. "Besides, Pietro, you might lose." She put her hand on his arm. "You're going to be needed for other work, Pietro. We're going to have to locate the artifact and steal it, or if not steal it, destroy it."

Pietro felt a glorious confidence blazing in his soul. He had done rather well tonight, now that he thought about it, and he found himself longing for further action. His hands fairly ached to close around Maijstral's neck. He patted Amalia's hand.

"Right," he said. "I'll take care of it. We know where they're staying."

"We won't have guns," Amalia pointed out. "They do."

Pietro gave a bold smile. "We'll use strategy instead," he said.

"Good. Have you got one in mind?"

Beat. "No." Another beat. "Have you?"

"It's almost time for first breakfast. Let's have some-

thing to eat and give it a think, shall we?"

"Yes, Miss Jensen."

Her arm still in his, she steered Pietro toward the kitchen. "I think," she said, "in view of your rescuing me, you might call me Amalia."

"My pleasure." Pietro smiled. "Amalia." The name came to his lips like a lyric in a song.

A physician, assisted by numerous robots, was resetting

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Khotvinn's bones. The giant Khosalikh's howls echoed through the halls of the smoke-damaged manse.

Baron Sinn flicked fire-retardant foam from his sleeve. Ash rose in puffs from the velvet. Sinn's nose twitched. He smelled more tike smoke than ever.

The firefighters and police had just left, puzzled by a wholly unconvincing tale of housebreaking and violence by persons unknown, and Sinn was going to have to brace the Countess for a session with the estate agents on the morrow. Chang and Bix had been sent home before the authorities arrived—Sinn distrusted their ability to remember any story that he and the Countess might concoct in order to explain their presence.

Another of Khotvinn's yells reverberated through the corridors. Sinn knocked on the door of the lower drawing room and heard the Countess's voice bid him enter.

"My lady."

The Countess was dressed in black silk lounging pajamas and a cheerful brocade dressing gown, the effect of which was somewhat marred by the addition of a pistol belt. She'd told the police that she was awakened from a sound sleep by the sudden flurry of shots, and she'd had to dress the part. Despite her clothes and the hour, the Countess didn't look at all sleepy; she sniffed the Baron's ears, lit a cigaret, and resumed her pacing, her shoulders square, her back unmoving.

"Tvi has still not reported in," the Baron said. "I hope she's following Maijstral."

"You're assuming she wasn't working for Maijstral,"

the Countess said.

"I don't see how she could have been corrupted. She doesn't know a soul on this planet—she came here with me when the consulate discovered the existence of the Imperial Relic."

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Countess Anastasia turned toward him, pivoting her entire torso like a Khosalikh, her spine unbent. "Maijstral got to her somehow, I'm sure. Or that Jensen woman did."

"She might be a prisoner."

"She might be gathering mushrooms in the forest, my dear Baron. Or visiting an all-night boutique for some new apparel. We're going to have to face realities."

Sinn seated himself in a chair and watched the Countess pace. He was at low ebb, the situation had run clean out of his control, and he didn't like it. "Realities? Which realities do you mean, my lady?"

The Countess pivoted toward him again, her posture alternately more and less strained as she remained facing him while she paced back and forth. "Your Secret Dragons have failed you. Baron," she said. "Tvi's missing, and Khotvinn's out of action for at least the next few days. We're going to have to mobilize my people for this, my lord."

Sinn shifted uncomfortably.

"Are you certain, my lady? Carrying out appropriate covert action, with its necessity of discretion, is an art form. The fewer people who know ..."

The Countess stabbed the air with her cigaret. "We don't have to tell them anything. Just have everyone on the lookout for Maijstral, and have some here at the house, people like Chang and Bix, who can handle the rough stuff if—when—it's necessary."

Sinn rose from his chair. There was no choice anymore;

the situation was dictating events. "No one must know the reason for this. Not your people, not mine."

The Countess took this rightly, as assent. She bowed

toward him. "No one shall know. We shall invent a story that will satisfy inquiries. Perhaps over first breakfast."

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She walked to the service plate and touched the ideograph for "kitchen." "Will you join me, my lord?"

"With pleasure. Countess. But give me leave to wash first. I fear I'm a bit smoky."

"Thank you, sir."

"Only too, boss."

Gregor raised his cash counter to his mouth and bit it for luck. The gold ideograph for "money" gleamed against an eyetooth. The semilife patch on his temple looked like a strawberry birthmark.

Maijstral put his own cash counter in a pocket- He had just transferred to his henchmen their share of Amalia Jensen's sixty novae. The household robot finished clearing the breakfast plates from the table.

He had moved into a rented safe house in Peleng City after deciding that the city was where he was least likely to be looked for. The country house, in the meantime, had been programmed to look lively, keep window shades moving up and down, lights switching on and off.

The new town place was about forty years old and had been built during the period of architectural adventurism that followed the success of the Rebellion, when all the old boundaries were down and human horizons seemed unlimited. The house looked rather like a blue matte flying saucer crashed at a forty-degree angle into the corn-colored sward of a small ridge. At night its rim coruscated to alternating strobe lights and colored beams of coherent light. Gravity stabilizers kept everyone comfortably vertical with regard to the floors, though looking out the window and seeing the horizon tilted on edge could be unsettling until one got used to it.

The style seemed a bit quaint now, particularly the

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household fixtures, which were designed to look too much like what they were. Sinks and toilets featured gleaming pipes and spigots that wove in intricate, elaborate patterns

above the taps. Service plates had metal studs, buttons, and flashing lights rather than simple ideographs.

The household robots were designed to actually look mechanical—their arms and legs were driven by gears and hydraulic pistons and small electric motors, and they made rattling, clattering, and hissing noises when they were in action, as if they were somehow powered by steam. Their voices were obviously artificial and their cogitation was accompanied by blinking lights. Maijstral, who hated the very idea of cute robots, realized early on that if he stayed here very long he was going to have to take a heavy wrench to everything mechanical before the clattering and buzzing drove him mad.

Maijstral stood up from the breakfast table, stretched, and yawned. "Later today," he said, "we'll contact Miss Jensen and the Countess." He patted the pocket where his cash-piece rested. "A bidding war between them will serve us well, I think."

Gregor, Maijstral noticed, seemed not to be as cheered by the thought of money as was his usual wont. Maijstral wondered if the semilife patch had exhausted its resources of painkillers so quickly, then remembered Gregor's professed concern for the Fate of the Constellation. He nodded toward Gregor.

"Don't despair," he said. "I believe the result will be to your satisfaction." Gregor seemed to take cheer immediately. The robot, still clearing dishes, rattled the silverware in a calculated, programmed way. It did this every few seconds.

"I'm going to get some rest,"\* Maijstral continued.

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"Wake me by thirteen if I'm not up. And have second breakfast ready by then."

Roman rose from the table. "Sir. A word."

"Of course, Roman. Come with me."

The dishes rattled again. Maijstral clenched his teeth.

He led Roman toward the saucer's living quarters. He put his gun on his bedside table and tossed his jacket over a chair. He looked up and noticed that Roman had one ear cocked toward the door, as if concerned about being overheard.

"Close the door if you like, Roman."

Roman's ear flickered, but stayed trained toward the door. "No need, sir," he said. His voice was low. Maijstral sat on the bed and began unlacing his cuffs. Roman moved toward him and automatically assumed the task. "I wonder if I may inquire," Roman said, "what you plan as the ultimate fate of the Imperial Artifact?"

Maijstral didn't even look up. "Sell it, of course," he said. "As soon as possible. It will only bring us trouble if we keep it."

Roman's shoulder fur rose under his clothes, a few strands escaping his collar. Silently he put Maijstral's cuffs in a drawer. "I think we may safely say," he said, "that honor was satisfied by Miss Jensen's rescue."

Maijstral tossed his shirt on top of his jacket and rotated his arm in its socket, wincing at a slight pain. He must have strained his shoulder at some point during the night's adventure. He spoke offhandedly. "Truly. I thank you, both for the observation and for your participation on my behalf."

"It would be a shame," Roman said, "to penalize the Imperial line in order to punish the rudeness of some of their adherents- But I suppose the Empire can command greater financial resources than Miss Jensen and her friends."

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"Possibly." Maijstral had considered this. "But we must judge our demands carefully. At some point it would be cheaper simply to have us eliminated."

"Would they risk that?"

"Countess Anastasia would. Perhaps Baron Sinn would not."

"Still," said Roman, "I would not like to see a dynasty destroyed as a result of anyone's actions on Peleng."

Maijstral looked up at him. His smile was casual. "In that case, Roman, we must take care."

"As you say, sir."

"Was that all?"

"Yes, sir- Thank you."

"Close the door behind you, please."

As the door swung shut, Maijstral kicked his legs out and settled onto the bed, his mind humming. Any impulse to sleep had vanished. Roman, he had always known, was a traditionalist—insofar as Roman thought it proper to possess opinions, he probably regretted the existence of the Constellation and had a sentimental regard for the Empire in which he had never lived. Gregor, contrariwise, hated any aristocracy and wished death to the Empire. Maijstral had it in his power to serve one of these ends, but not both.

The problem was that Maijstral counted on both his assistants for much. Gregor wanted money and instruction in ton, and could be kept content so long as he was paid in both. Roman was loyal to the Maijstral family—Maijstral knew Roman would never do anything underhanded, or betray any trust—but still Maijstral's future depended not simply on cooperation, but on willing cooperation. Their jobs were too critical—their hearts had to be in it, or mistake could be made. If an alarm was overlooked, a tool left on a windowsill, a trap remained unsprung—who could

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say that it was an honest oversight, or the unconscious sabotage that could spring from a troubled mind?

He had to keep both his henchmen happy, and willing to continue insulating him from the menace represented by Humanity Prime and the Anastasia mob.

Maijstral nestled back against the pillows and closed his eyes- This was going to take some thought-

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Nichole, stretched comfortably on a couch, contemplated her feet and thought about how ugly they had become. Her profession required her to spend hours on her feet, and though she'd had them reshaped five years before, they had already splayed a good deal and it was time for another rebuild. She'd have to arrange for a week or ten days away from people so that she could have the job done and get used to the results before she'd have to appear in public again.

She could see her minute reflection in each of her toenails. By way of good-morning she waved at her reflection, then wriggled her toes in answer. There was a chiming at her door.

"Second breakfast, madam."

"Bring it in, room."

A robot table floated in on a silent a-grav field, lowered its legs, planted itself. Room furniture readjusted to the new arrangement. A chair rolled to the table, then pulled back invitingly.

"Your breakfast, madam." An Emanuel Bach woodwind concerto sprang into existence around her.

"Thank you, room." She moved to the chair and seated

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herself. Covers rose from the plate, releasing steam. Second breakfast in Peleng was a lot heavier than first. She wasn't certain if Maijstral still wanted her to keep up the pretense he was staying with her, but she'd ordered only one breakfast, not being able to face two. She declined the table's offer and poured her own coffee.

There was another gentle chime. "Drake Maijstral, madam."

"Oh." She put down the cream jug. "Put him on directly."

Maijstral seemed in much better spirits. The old assurance gleamed in his green eyes, an Nichole's heart lifted to see it. Otherwise he was difficult to recognize—his face had been sprayed a pastel blue color, he was wearing ghastly earrings that winked on and off like mechanical toys, and behind him was a view of a game arcade.

Nichole, having got used to these little dodges four years ago, concluded that since he was using disguises and a public phone, he wasn't yet out of danger.

Nichole raised her cup and smiled, "Delighted to see you, Maijstral. You seem in good spirits."

"You look lovely. As ever, Nichole."

"I see your alarming taste in disguises hasn't altered."

He bowed toward the holo camera. "I plead the necessities of the service, madam." His eyes flickered to the boundaries of the holo image, as if trying to glance out of it. He touched a tentative finger to one of his earrings.

"Pardon my boldness, but might I inquire whether you are breakfasting alone?"

"That depends, I daresay, on whether or not you're still supposed to be living here."

He smiled. "Unfortunately for our deception, its intended victims are all too well aware of where I was last night."

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"I thought your address seemed buoyed by success. Did it go well, whatever it was?"

"Well enough. Villainy was thwarted, at any rate."

"Had the villainy in question anything to do with the Countess Anastasia?" Nichole smiled as she saw his eyelids twitch. "She called here yesterday and asked me to give a message to you. But the message may well be out of date by now."

Maijstral gave a lazy shrug. "Tell me. It might amuse."

"She said you had something she wanted, and dial she was willing to pay for it. Sounds like a proper villain's message, I'd say."

He grinned. "That's indeed what it was. I'm pleased to hear she's willing to pay for my object. That's precisely what I had in mind."

Nichole laughed. "You seem to have things fairly well in hand."

"For the present." He glanced over his shoulder in a conspiratorial way-

"You are about to ask me for another favor," Nichole said.

Maijstral seemed a trifle embarrassed. "You're right, of course."

tt! know you too well, Drake. Out with it."

"I observed that in your announced schedule, you have no appearances planned after meeting the methane creatures at the zoo, which interview should end at noon."

"That's true. It's my afternoon and evening off." Nichole wiggled her toes in the carpet in Joyful anticipation of time to herself. She propped her chin on her hands and gave the Maijstral-image her girlish, ingenuous look. "You're not planning on interrupting my beauty rest, are you?"

"Only in a pleasant way, I hope. I was hoping you might invite the Maijstral of your choice to dinner."

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Nichole laughed. "With your permission, Drake, I'll eat my breakfast while you explain what you meant by that."

"Please go ahead. I've eaten."

Merriment bubbled to the surface of her mind as Nichole listened to his scheme. She laughed.

"Very well, Maijstral, I'll do it. I've got a holo of you somewhere." She took a bite, then thoughtfully waved her fork at him. "Truth to tell, Drake, I'm grateful for this diversion of yours. Life in the Diadem has been uncommon tedious of late."

"My sympathies, lady."

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "I don't need facetious commiseration, Maijstral. Not from old friends."

"Apologies, Nichole." Promptly.

"Accepted." She took another bite, chewed thoughtfully, swallowed. "Do you not find, Drake, that your occupation, however well suited, begins to tire?"

Maijstral's expression was hooded. "It contents me well enough, my lady. Travel, new sights, new acquaintances, adventures when I wish them, relaxation when I need it ... My celebrity is not sufficient to be obnoxious, but it is great enough that I am treated well where I go. I am rarely bored, my lady. If one has to have an occupation at all, mine seems a good sort to have."

"Your profession grants you more freedom than mine does me, Drake."

"That is true. You know why I—"

"I am beginning to wonder, Drake, whether or not you were right, four years ago."

Comprehension entered his eyes. "Ah."

"I travel more than you, but the new sights are always hidden behind a screen of hangers-on and gushing interviewers and a swarm of people eager to make an acquaintance . . . it's all the same, and it's all become unreal in

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quite the same way. My celebrity gets in the way of my work—it has become my work."

"You knew that, Nichole. You knew what the Diadem was about when you became a member."

"It's not the same as living it. I'm supposed to be an actress—my god, I haven't acted in two years!"

"Find a new play."

"There are only certain roles suitable for members of the Diadem. And they're unreal in the same way my life is unreal. And worse—they're dull, Drake. Impossibly dull."

Maijstral absorbed this. "Are you considering leaving the Diadem?"

"Considering. I haven't decided." Nichole wiggled her toes again. Maybe she wouldn't need to have her feet done after all.

Maijstral was looking at her intently. "Would you be happy, Nicole? Once you were outside?"

She shrugged. "I have a hard time remembering what it was like."

"I think you would not. I know you, Nichole."

Nichole stirred the food on her plate. "I'm two points down," she said.

"Ah."

"That's what this tour is about. I'm supposed to introduce my audience to new marvels. My writers are giving me mots for each of eight planets. Each guaranteed spontaneous, witty, and quotable."

"I think, if you don't mind my observation, that Nichole ushering tours of the Peleng City Zoo is not what your ratings need, no matter how glorious the collection."

She glanced up. "I know that. What else do you suggest?"

"Find a new play, Nichole. Something outside of what

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they've been giving you. Stretch the concept of a Diadem play- Stretch yourself."

Nichole's lips twisted in a wry smile. "And that's what I need? Just a new play? And . . . stretching?"

"Perhaps something else, my lady."

"Yes?"

There was amusement in his glance. "A new passion?" he suggested.

Nichole barked a laugh and flung a teaspoon through Maijstral's image. The coffee in her cup trembled in alarm. "Damn you, Maijstral. You know me too well. Won't you let me get away with anything?" Her laugh turned rueful. "All right. I'll tell my people to look for something."

"My lady, if you want a thing badly, you should look for it yourself."

Nichole sat for a moment, then slowly nodded. "Yes, Drake, I will. Thank you."

"It's the least I can do, considering how much you have helped me. We make light of it, but your assistance may yet save my life. These people I'm involved with . . . they're serious people, Nichole."

"I must take care to preserve your health, Maijstral. Your advice may prove invaluable to my career."

Maijstral glanced over his shoulder again. "I should end

this, my lady. We have gone on too long for this line to be secure,\*

"Well. As usual, it's been refreshing. Give my love to Roman."

"I will."

"I hope I will see you in person before I leave."

Maijstral smiled. "You forget. I am seeing you tonight."

"Yes. Of course. AM revoir, then."

"Your most obedient, Nichole."

His blue-faced image vanished. Nichole thought for a

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moment, looking down at her toes, and tried to think of who she should call to have her feet done.

Khotvinn felt charged with energy. The semilife carapace that supported his crushed back and ribs had fed him enough drugs to obliterate the pain and infuse him with vigor. When the doctor added some patches to his legs that would make him relax and go to sleep, he waited till the human creature left, peeled off the disappointed creatures before they could take effect, and dropped them in the trash.

He hoisted himself out of his bed, reeled, then steadied. He bared his teeth and growled. The puny human redbellies were going to get what was coming to them.

His mind brooded darkly on revenge. He got his weapons out of the closet and donned them.

Khotvinn the Avenger! He needed to demolish something, and fast. He opened the window and got one leg over, then hesitated.

He realized he didn't know where he was going.

Khotvinn pulled the leg back in and thought for a long moment. He knew where Amalia Jensen lived—but the house was a wreck, the Jensen creature probably wouldn't be living there, and the place might well be monitored by police. Tvi could have got him in, but she had disappeared. He could try MaijstraTs residence, but he had no

idea where Maijstral was.

The sound of voices filtered over the morning breezes. Khotvinn's ears cocked in their direction.

Time, he decided, to do a bit of skulking.

He slid over the windowsill, overbalanced, and grabbed a climbing vine to keep himself steady. The morning air still smelled of burning. Chuckling to himself, Khotvinn

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loped along the back porch until he stood beside the open window of the dining nook.

". . . and another to Lieutenant Navarre," Sinn's voice was saying. "Miss Jensen may stay with him." Khotvinn's ears pricked. This was the second time he'd heard the name of Navarre.

"And that odious Nichole woman." Countess Anastasia's voice.

A clatter of tableware obscured the Baron's next observation. "Far better to let the media do that for us," he then remarked. "The security around the Diadem is strict. Anyone lacking proper credentials and observed in Nichole's vicinity would be jailed, at least for inquiry."

"Perhaps you, yourself. Baron, might—"

"I'll do what I can, my lady." The next part of the conversation was dull, and consisted mainly of the Countess proposing names for various tasks, and Baron Sinn asking about their capabilities and credentials.

Khotvinn grinned. Navarre it would be, then! He smelled food and his stomach growled.

He turned and began to lope toward the back kitchen door. He'd steal enough food for several days, find Jensen through her pal Navarre, and hold her for ransom to both sides. And while he was at it, he'd carve her companions like kidneys.

It was great to be alive.

The police left at last, unhappy with a tale of Ronnie Romper-garbed abductors who had held Amalia Jensen inexplicably for a day, neither asked for ransom nor com-

mitted any assault, then let her go- There was more to it, or so they clearly thought, but Amalia Jensen wasn't giving it to them. It was her kidnapping, she thought, and she could say what she liked.

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Pietro was back in his own apartment—Amalia had decided there was no point in involving him in any police business. New household robots were moving silently about the place, wiping dust from comers, gorging themselves on debris she had missed on her first sweep. Amalia badly needed a rest, but duty demanded she supervise Pietro's mobilization of the local members of Humanity Prime, who were to be sent out to look for Majstral and to keep an eye on Baron Sinn, the Countess, and the Khosali consulate. She sucked on a hi-stick and walked to her communications control plate. It had been replaced in the last few hours by technicians working overtime. Time to call Pietro.

The telephone chimed before she could touch the service plate. "Receive," she said, and looked at the holo image in surprise.

"Captain Tartaglia. This is a—"

"Surprise. I know." The captain was a short, broad-shouldered man, going bald in front. He had resigned from the military in order to devote himself to the good work of Humanity Prime, and prided himself on his "human" mannerisms—bluntness and belligerence to name two. Through dint of hard work and devotion to the cause, Tartaglia had worked his way up to Local Deputy Director—Amalia Jensen's immediate superior, in fact. Amalia had only met the man twice, and hid her instinctive dislike behind a screen of brisk politesse.

It had been Tartaglia who, in a coded message, had alerted her to the existence of the Imperial icon—apparently Humanity Prime discovered its existence from a double agent within the Imperial ranks. When she saw the thing in the auction catalog, she'd sent a message to him with a note of her intention to bid for it. She'd expected a con-

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gratulatory message in reply- Apparently, by return mail she'd got Tartaglia himself.

Tartaglia looked at Amalia Jensen with small, dark

intelligent eyes. "What's the status of Artifact One?" he asked.

Amalia had never heard this term used before, but had no doubt what it meant.

"Not good, sir. It's been stolen by Drake Maijstral." Tartaglia's expression barely changed. "Imperialist family."

"I don't think Maijstral himself is an Imperialist, sir. I think he intends to set up a bidding war between the Imperialists and ourselves."

The captain's eyes flashed contempt. "Rogue. Immoral. We'll deal with it."

"They're playing rough. The Imperialists, I mean. I was kidnapped, and Maijstral, with one of our people here, Pietro Quijano, set me at liberty."

"Oho." Tartaglia's eyebrows rose. "Why did Maijstral involve himself? Is there an attachment between the two of you?"

Amalia flushed. "Indeed not, sir. I think he set me free because he needed someone to conduct the bidding from our side."

"Good. I've brought a line of credit with me, and some of our best people. We'll get the thing from Maijstral one way or another."

Fear brushed lightly along Amalia Jensen's nerves. It occurred to her that Captain Tartaglia was not a nice person. She looked at his grim, amused countenance. "I'm sure we will," she said.

Lieutenant Navarre had intended to replace his missing portable telephone but hadn't got around to it, so it was

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largely a matter of luck that the call from Nichole came when he happened to be in his house. He thought he handled his end badly—he hemmed and hawed, flushed, yammered like a schoolboy—but then, after all, he was taken unawares, and one didn't receive a call from a member of the Human Diadem every day. Yes, he understood perfectly why he would have to be chauffeured. No, he didn't mind the element of intrigue—it would be amus-

ing, haw haw.

He hung up and felt a rare sensation of surprise and anticipation. Nichole had always been one of his favorites. Though his vanity was not such as to think he would make an instant conquest, still he was pleased that out of all the men Nichole had met on Peleng, she had chosen to spend her few free hours with him. And the element of intrigue added, frankly, a touch of the bizarre. At the very least this was going to make an interesting story back home.

He decided to ask his vid to check its memory for the broadcasts it had received about Nichole's visit to Peleng. Maybe he'd be able to remember some of the best lines and compliment her on them.

Someone was home. The cold-field around the Scholder/Navarre place was down and this allowed Khotvinn to sneak right up to the windows without setting off alarms. A copper-skinned human stood in his atrium, trying on a series of shirts and jackets with the help of a robot, preening himself in the mirror while keeping one eye on the vid, which featured a blond woman talking about methane life-forms. Khotvinn couldn't be certain, but he thought the human was alone. No Jensen. Well—he'd get the information somehow,

Khotvinn opened a door—it wasn't locked—and slipped into the house. He padded down the short hallway that led

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to the atrium. "Unfortunately," the blond woman was saying, "few people speak methanile."

Khotvinn flicked on his Ronnie Romper hologram, drew his sword, then charged into the room, roaring. A single sweep of the sword sliced the robot in half. Lieutenant Navarre turned, only to be picked up by the neck and slammed against the wall.

"Where's Amalia Jensen?" Khotvinn roared. Navarre's eyes popped. He gave no answer. Khotvinn drove him into the wall again. "Where's Amalia Jensen?" There was only silence, except from the vid, which was going on about admirable communications at near absolute-zero temperatures. Navarre was turning purple. Khotvinn smashed him into the vid, which went silent.

"Where?" Slam. "Where?" Slam. "Where?" Slam.

Lieutenant Navarre, who was giving no answer for the very good reason that Khotvinn was strangling him, made a gurgling noise and passed out. Khotvinn growled his annoyance, held the dangling lieutenant for a moment, then dropped him. Lieutenant Navarre crumpled to the floor.

Not one to waste an opportunity, Khotvinn began ransacking the room. There had to be a clue in here somewhere.

Captain Tartaglia had taken charge so fast that Amalia Jensen had no clear recollection of how it had all come about. It seemed that an instant after Tartaglia had called her, she and Pietro were here, outside MaijstraFs country cottage, with seven armed men that Tartaglia had brought with him from Pompey.

"This is Wade. In position."

Tartaglia smiled. "Acknowledge your transmission."

Amalia Jensen looked at him. "What about alarms, sir?"

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"Fast in, fast out. That's the trick."

"What if the object isn't there?"

"Maijstral or his crew will be. Once we get them, we can make 'em talk." He shaded his small eyes. "Got plenty of experience at thai. You don't maintain an empire without learning how to be persuasive."

Amalia was startled. "I thought," she said, "that we weren't the Empire."

Tartaglia was abrupt. "Call it what you will. Point is, we've got a lot of alien races that have to be kept in line. Otherwise we won't stay on top very long. Let 'em know who's boss, that's the ticket. Once they know that, we won't have any trouble."

Amalia glanced at Pietro and saw a queasy look on his face, which mirrored the sensation in her own heart. Maijstral had not used her well, but she wasn't altogether certain that he deserved what Tartaglia seemed ready to do to him.

"This is Royo. In position."

"Right. That's the last. Prepare to move."

Tartaglia turned to Amalia and Pietro. "Just stay out of the line of fire and you'll be all right. Leave everything up to us."

She nodded, secretly thankful. "Fine, sir."

"You've done your job just bringing us here. I'll see you get a commendation."

"Thank you, sir."

Hologram camouflage blossomed around Tartaglia's face. "Ready?" He was speaking to his troops. "Let's move out."

Then there was nothing but silent flickering in the air as Tartaglia and his people charged the house, then crashing noises as doors and windows went down before the assault. Amalia watched in silence, chewing her lip.

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"Amalia," said Pietro, "I don't like these people."

She looked stolidly toward Maijstral's house. "I understand," she said, trying to be strong. This was a necessity. The Constellation's fate depended on this.

"We could have bought the damn thing back." He was silent for a moment. Then, "You know, I kind of liked Maijstral."

She gave him a look, and he flushed and looked at his feet. But she knew how he felt.

Whooping and smashing noises were coming from Maijstral's house. Amalia heard a robot protest, followed by a final-sounding crash. There weren't any sounds of battle. She wondered if Maijstral and his friends had been caught with their defenses down.

Gradually the noises died away. Then there was swift flickering across the grounds, followed by Tartaglia and his party appearing in front of Amalia, disappointment on their faces.

"No one there," Tartaglia said. "Artifact One is still at large."

Amalia Jensen tried very hard to control her feeling of relief. "They anticipated this," she said.

"We'll find 'em."

"They'll find us." Pietro surprised everyone by speaking up. "They want to sell us the artifact."

"Artifact One, you mean. Right." Tartaglia nodded. "We'll find 'em. That's what I said." He spoke to his troops. "Better get in our fliers. The police will be coming soon."

"Where?" Thud. "Where?" Thud. "'Where?" Thud. The man's name was Calvin. He was very good at his job and took pride in it. Silent, anonymous, efficient, discreet. What else was a security man for the Diadem to be?

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"Where?" Thud. "Where?" Thud. "Where?" Thud.

Calvin was here to prep Lieutenant Navarre for his visit to Nichole—this visit in particular, with its unusual elements, seemed in need of advance work. But no sooner had he landed on the roof than he heard hoarse Khosali shouting and smashing noises.

It didn't sound like the sort of thing the Diadem wanted their members getting mixed up in. Calvin got quietly out of his flier, took his emergency kit out of the back, put on his shield and gun. He stepped through an upper door, gazed down off the atrium balcony, and saw Lieutenant Navarre below in the hands of a giant Ronnie Romper, the lieutenant being slammed doll-like into walls and furniture while the puppet snarled his question over and over.

"Where's Amalia Jensen?" Slam.

Calvin didn't hesitate. He'd seen stranger things in his career. Nor did he waste time wondering who Amalia Jensen might be. The important fact was that if this continued, Nichole's dinner date was liable to be ruined.

The security man glanced left and right, saw a dwarf zen tree in a heavy lead planter, and moved to pick it up. He looked over the balcony again, saw Ronnie Romper directly below him, aimed with care, and let the planter fall.

There was a horrid squelching noise. Ronnie Romper dropped to the carpet. Lieutenant Navarre fell onto a cushion, made a gasping sound, and grabbed his throat.

"Calvin, sir. Diadem security- Are you injured?"

Lieutenant Navarre looked with bulging eyes at the sprawled puppet. "Ronnie Romper?" he asked.

The security man drew his gun, reached carefully into the hologram, and snapped off the disguise. Khotvinn gazed lifelessly at the ceiling.

"Who's he?" Navarre demanded.

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"Don't you know, sir?"

"Never seen him before. He was asking after Am— after someone I know. But I don't know where she is, and I couldn't tell him because he kept grabbing me by the throat. And who he is I have no idea."

Calvin examined Khotvinn with care. "He's dead now. We won't be able to question him."

Lieutenant Navarre's breathing was returning to normal. He stood and looked down at Khotvinn's body, then at Calvin. He smoothed his ruffled silks. "Thank you, sir," he said. "I'm grateful for your intervention."

"Just part of the job. sir."

"I am in your debt." An idea came to him. "I'm beginning to wonder," he said. "Strange things have been happening to me. A robbery, a friend of mine abducted . . . now this. I wonder if this is the person that's been doing it." He shrugged. "Best call the police, I suppose." He reached for the wall service plate.

Calvin put out a hand. "Sir," he said, "if you deal with the police now, you'll be late for your meeting with Nichole."

Lieutenant Navarre looked blank. "Yes, I daresay. But it can't be helped, can it?"

Calvin was smooth. "Sir, if I might recommend . . . ?"

"By all means."

"The Diadem has an understanding with the local police. I'm certain that, should Nichole ask, the police would be happy to forgo any interviews till a more convenient time."

Lieutenant Navarre seemed startled. "You can do that?"

"I'm positive, sir."

Navarre rubbed his back. "I seem to be pretty well bruised."

"Fortunately not on the face, sir. I can take you to a

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doctor and a masseur on the way if you like, sir. But we'd have to leave now."

Navarre looked at the sprawled body and hesitated. "Should we leave this behind?"

"No one will disturb it, I'm sure.\*"

The lieutenant seemed to make his mind up. "Very well," he said, "I'll do as you advise."

Calvin gave a graceful, assenting bow. "Very good, sir."

Lieutenant Navarre removed his torn shirt and donned another. He looked at the selection of jackets he'd placed on his couch and paused.

Calvin spoke up. "If I may suggest, sir?"

"By all means."

"The white mourning jacket. Very suitable."

"Thank you, Calvin." Lieutenant Navarre drew on the jacket. Calvin helped lace him in, checking the jacket for weapons or hidden cameras as he did so.

"Shall we leave then, Calvin?"

"As you like, sir."

Lieutenant Navarre picked up his mourning cloak and carried it up the stair. Calvin followed on silent cat feet. Navarre activated the house security systems as he left and

stepped out onto the roof.

"Thank you, Calvin. For everything."

Calvin opened the door of the heavy Jefferson-Singh limo. "It was nothing, sir. All in a day's work."

## CHAPTER 11

Countess Anastasia watched on vid as Drake Maijstral stepped out of the Jefferson-Singh flier and into Nichole's arms. She noticed he was carrying a small bag. "Damn!" Her fist thudded into the arm of her stiff-backed wooden chair. The cigaret she was holding flung ashes onto a six-hundred-year-old carpet. A robot hastened to clean them up.

"We'll never get him out of there!" Her High Khosali parsing indicated near-apocalyptic frustration. "He's probably carrying the Imperial Relic in that bag."

Baron Sinn nodded philosophically. "The next move seems to be Maijstral's, my lady."

The Countess ground her teeth. "I like it not. Baron."

Baron Sinn liked it less. This meant he was going to be trapped in this house with an angry, restless Countess for a very long time. Perhaps he should give her a chance to work off her anger.

"Croquet, my lady?" he suggested, dooming himself to a day of chasing his ball beneath the kibble trees.

Her answer, tongue lolling, seemed the smile of a fiend.

Safely in Nichole's suite with Calvin and his associates on guard, Lieutenant Navarre toggled off the hologram of

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Drake Maijstral. Nichole laughed and offered her hand. Navarre gallantly sniffed her wrist, ignoring a persistent twinge of his bruised back.

"You looked very like Maijstral, dressed in mourning," she said. "I'm pleased to see you. Lieutenant."

"The pleasure," said Navarre, "is all mine." He was

speaking the truth- He was thoroughly gratified to discover that he felt very safe here.

Maijstra! turned off the vid and relaxed in his chair, happy. Nichole knew how to carry off a deception, and her foil, whoever he was, had played his part well, even to the duplicate of the diamond Maijstral wore on his finger.

A robot rattled past on an errand, making its usual bleeping noises. Maijstral clenched his teeth, then calmed himself. He was learning to hate the robots, but now was not the time for irritation. It was time to put forward his plan.

Tvi watched the vid with interest. She turned to the robot. "Bring up another bottle of the cabemet. The forty-four, if you please."

"Yes, madam."

Since her flight from the Anastasia residence she'd done fairly well. The first thing was to dump the Dewayne Seven and steal a new Jefferson-Singh Hi-Sport. Since she'd arrived on Peleng, she'd got used to them.

Then she'd found a place to hide out. It was a comfortable house of twelve room, apparently inhabited by a family whose interests took them to Nana for half the year. The household security was ancient and it had been child's play to reprogram it to treat her as a member of the family.

Now she'd have to find a way to earn a living. She sipped cabemet and thought about it.

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Stealing seemed like a good idea. She smiled. Life on Peleng was looking up.

"My name is Roman, my lord. At your service."

"Count Quik. Yours. Please sit."

Roman settled on a padded bench next to the Troxan. "I see you have returned to the methane environment exhibit."

"Not got look before properly. Nichole in way with globes. Many many crowdings."

"To be sure."

"I methane speak," said the Count.

Roman was inclined to wonder if he spoke methane in as singular a manner as he seemed to speak everything else, but the Count proceeded to demonstrate, leaning his pumpkin-sized head toward a microphone that remained as a relic of Nichole's visit. As the Count's voice pulsed through the supercool environment, the methane creatures blushed a delicate violet and began to cluster gelatinously toward the speakers. At their current rate it would take them about half an hour.

"Congratulations, my lord," Roman said. "You seem to have stimulated them admirably."

An answering communication moaned from hidden speakers. The Count listened and made his reply.

"I told them you are with- Interested they were." His head lolled in a peculiar Troxan manner. "Badly these speakers do. Troxans better makes speakers."

"Undoubtedly the best, sir," Roman said. The Troxan head was such a superb conductor of sound that they tended as a species to be very particular about audio equipment.

"Tell yourself," Count Quik suggested. "I tell will then the methane critters."

\*! am a member of Drake Maijstral's entourage."

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"Interesting. Translation problems many indeed. No word for 'thief in methane world.'"

"Perhaps a better world than ours, my lord."

"But boring-er."

"Duller. Yes, my lord. No doubt."

The Count chatted with the methane creatures. They groaned in reply. Roman waited for a lapse in the conversation.

"Mr. Maijstral," he interjected, "asked me to find you."

Count Quik's deep goggle eyes swiveled to Roman.

"Yes? Wherefore, Mr. Roman?"

"He hopes, sir, that you will consent to do him a service. He realizes this is an unusual request, but he hopes that once you understand the circumstances, you will do him the honor of acting for him in a matter of importance, in brief a matter concerning the Fate of the Empire. He hopes that the matter may be resolved quickly and satisfactorily, and in fine to your, and the Empire's, advantage."

Count Quik's expression did not—in fact could not—change, but it seemed to Roman that his gaze seemed to intensify.

"You intrigue, Mr. Roman. Please speak on. I am all ears."

Roman, as he prepared to unfold Maijstral's plot, reflected that, of all the times he had heard that last turn of phrase, this was the only time it might be, quite literally, true.

General Gerald gazed blearily at the young man on his doorstep. Since waking from his inutterably pleasant, thoroughly violent dreams at the first touch of dawn, he had climbed out of his armor and gone to bed, swearing to get

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enough sleep this time so that he wouldn't be caught nodding if Maijstral appeared tonight. The young man's appearance caught him by surprise. He didn't have visitors very often. Sometimes he wondered if he intimidated people.

The General could see the young man through the door without being observed himself. The visitor was dressed formally, but in a bright radical style that pushed at once the bounds of convention and the General's sense of the harmonic possibilities of color. Cheeky, the General thought, looking at him. Impudent. Needs discipline. Just look at the way his hands are stuck in his pockets, the hi-stick just hanging in his mouth. A tour in the service would do him good.

A tour in the service was the General's automatic prescription for many social ills. He opened the door.

"General Gerald?"

"Marines." Automatically. "Retired."

"My name is Gregor Norman. I am an associate of Drake Maijstral-"

Surprised boiled in General Gerald's sleepy mind.

"What's that to me?" he barked, his voice still on automatic pilot while he wondered what hell Maijstral was playing at. Some attempt to get him out of his house so that it could be rifled?

"Mr. Maijstral," Gregor said, "has come across something which may interest you. Something relating, believe it or don't, to nothing less than the Fate of the Constellation."

If this was a ploy, the General thought, it was a bold one.

General Gerald admired boldness.

He stepped back into his hallway. "Come in, youngster," he said.

"Thank you. General."

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"Leave the damned hi-stick outside. Don't you know they're bad for you?"

Gregor hesitated a moment, then snapped the offending stimulant in half and put it in his pocket.

At least, the General thought with satisfaction, Maijstral had an assistant who knew how to obey orders.

The robot wove silently through the kibble arbor on its way toward Baron Sinn. Sinn was using his mallet to knock bits of fruit about, looking for his croquet ball. Thus far he hadn't achieved success.

The robot proffered a telephone. "My lord. A call from His Excellency Count Quik."

The Baron straightened. "He knows I'm here?" The robot, not possessing a sense of irony, offered no answer.

Sinn glanced out onto the croquet lawn and saw Countess Anastasia smoking a cigaret and gazing with malevolent satisfaction at him—and at the scatter of red beneath the kibble trees. "Very well," he said. "Til take it."

The Baron, still kicking idly at fruit, took the telephone from the robot's manipulator. The robot hovered over fallen kibbles. Baron Sinn hesitated for a moment, glancing at the Countess and then at the robot, and then an idea struck him. His tongue lolled in a smile.

"Robot," he ordered, "pick up all the fruit and put it into piles." He held out a hand. "About this high. If you find a croquet ball, let it lie."

"Yes, my lord."

Sinn's grin broadened as the robot went on its way, then he touched the answer ideograph and the phone promptly projected a miniature hologram of Count Quik's round head before Sinn's snout.

"Good afternoon. Baron. Your most obedient."

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"Your ever faithful, my lord. It is a pleasant surprise to hear from you."

"Is day for surpsnings. Am myself surprised earlier."

"Pleasantly, I hope."

"I with friend spoke of Mr. Maijstral."

A rush of frantic energy sped through the Baron's nerves at the sound of Maijstral's name, but it was a few seconds before he was able to decipher the Count's syntax and make a guess at what Count Quik had actually intended.

"You spoke with a fnend of Maijstral's, my lord?"  
Wanting to be absolutely certain.

"Correct is. Requested assistance mine as neutral third party, yet citizen of Empire. I gave."

Maijstral's insulating himself well. Baron Sinn thought with a certain amount of admiration. And he moves fast.

He kept his expression amiable. "That was very generous of you my lord," he said.

"Offered compensation. Twenty percent. Declined."

"Of course, my lord."

"Disinteresting seemed best."

The robot was piling fruit into a small pyramid. No croquet ball yet.

Sinn, as if on cue, affected disinterest as he gazed at Count Quik. "What manner of assistance did Maijstral believe he needed from Your Excellency?"

"I bids transmit, my Baron."

"I understand." Sinn considered this for a moment. "Is there a place where you can be reached?"

"Yes. At Peieng Hotel now."

Behind his facade, Sinn cursed heartily. That was where Etienne, Nichole, and (presumably) Maijstral were staying, covered by Diadem security.

Delay, Baron Sinn thought. The longer the delay, the

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better chance of catching Maijstral outside of his par-amour's protection. He peered benignly into the hologram.

"I have no bid at present. Excellency. But I have no doubt that I shall receive instructions from my consulate to offer one,"

"Understandings, my lord. But dealings must be concluded in one local day. Thirty-eight hours."

Sinn cursed again. Maijstral seemed to have thought, of everything. "I have no concrete assurance of what His Majesty's government will or will nor offer," he said, \*"but I am certain they are willing to offer a fair price for return of the Imperial Artifact." Baron Sinn's ears pricked forward intently. "However, should the Imperial Artifact not be returned at the end of this adventure, I trust that your principal will take care to understand the consequences of such an unfriendly act. When great empires play for great stakes, the counters are oft at hazard."

"Understandmgs, Baron Sinn. Your servant, sir."

"Yours." Nuance, the Baron thought, nuance.

The Count's hologram faded. Baron Sinn noticed that

the robot seemed to have left a single round, red object alone during the course of its pile-making. The Baron walked over to it and prodded it with his mallet. It was definitely his croquet ball.

He lit a cigarel and addressed the robot. "Continue piling the fruit."

"Yes, sir."

Baron Sinn drove his ball back into play and strolled back onto the lawn. The Countess tossed her cigaret off the playing field and walked to her bail.

"I set the robot to clearing the kibbles away. I hope you don't mind "

The Countess betrayed no sign of chagrin. "Not at all, Baron." She stood above her ball and readied her mallet.

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"I should have thought of that myself, when I handed you my special ball. Please forgive my lack of foresight."

"Of course, my lady."

Countess Anastasia squinted as she took aim. "Was the call anything of importance. Baron?" she asked.

The Baron timed his comment perfectly. "MaijstraPs agent, my lady."

The stroke hit off-center and the ball spun of on a tangent. "Bad luck. Countess," said Baron Sinn, and prepared to roquet and drive the Countess's ball off the court, beneath her kibble trees.

He was beginning to enjoy the game.

"Of course I'll take the twenty percent, youngster! D'you take me for a fool?"

Paavo Kuusinen watched the game of croquet in mounting frustration. Nothing had developed at Amatia Jensen's place since the Humanity Prime goon squad had returned to its roost. Drake Maijstral was, it appeared, safely under Nichole's protection. Kuusinen had flown to the Countess's place in hope of seeing something dramatic, and found only a game of croquet and a robot piling kibble fruit.

Kuusinen sighed. He decided to fly to Lieutenant Navarre's in hope of viewing some new developments.

Since he'd been in on the beginning, he'd hate to miss the finish.

Amalia Jensen had spent the afternoon getting acquainted with the discouraging fact of her house being used as a barracks for a host of armed and belligerent men, and her response had finally been to throw up her hands in despair and retreat to her room. There she had been watching the video news, hoping to discover some news of MaijstraPs

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current whereabouts, and listened instead to a report about the current wave of odd crimes affecting Peleng City and vicinity: one theft from Lieutenant Navarre's house that involved an object of small value taken by highly expensive means; one violent kidnapping followed a short time later by inexplicable release; one equally inexplicable armed attack on Countess Anastasia's mansion; a violent intrusion at a country house, where robots were shot and the house torn apart; and now—a late development—a violent attack on Lieutenant Navarre by a Khosalikh in a Ronnie Romper disguise.

Amalia Jensen straightened in her chair. The newscaster, a supercilious Khosalikh, pointed out that Ronnie Romper disguises had been used by the perpetrators of the Jensen kidnapping. Facts seemed scanty at the moment, but this didn't stop the news writers from speculating.

Cold fingers touched Amalia Jensen's neck at the report that Ronnie Romper had been killed during the attempt, apparently by a visitor who happened onto the scene. The newscast hadn't identified the Khosatikh even as to sex, and she couldn't be certain that it wasn't Tvi. In fact it very likely was, since the tall Khosalikh had probably been too badly injured in the attack on the Countess's mansion to participate in further devilment.

The door opened. Pietro burst in. "Have you seen the vid?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why Navarre?"

She thought for a moment. "Good question," she said. "Perhaps they thought to find me there."

"And who was it that killed Ronnie? There's no identification at all."

"Something's going on."

"Damn right there is." This last was a comment from

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Captain Tartaglia, who had appeared in the doorway. Amalia quickly composed her features and tried to hide her reactive distaste at the sight of the man. Tartaglia scratched his chin and looked at the vid. "Maybe we should pick up this Navarre. Ask him some questions."

Amalia's heart thumped in alarm. "He seems to be well protected," she said.

"Take a look at his place, anyway."

"Police will be everywhere."

Tartaglia shrugged. "That's worth considering. Let me think about it."

The vid unit chimed. "Telephone call from General Gerald, madam. Marines. Retired."

Amalia felt a slow wave of surprise. She barely knew the man. "Now what?" she said. She turned to Tartaglia. "If you'll excuse me. Captain?"

Tartaglia shrugged again and turned to leave. Amalia accepted the call. Gerald's red face appeared on the vid. Amalia tried to seem politely interested.

"General Gerald. This is a surprise."

The General was grinning. "Drake Maijstral asked me to call you."

Behind her, Amalia heard Pietro's gasp of surprise, followed instantly by the sound of Captain Tartaglia's abrupt about-face in the hall and return to the room.

Amalia Jensen controlled her astonishment, and was mildly surprised at the coolness of her reply. Perhaps she was becoming accustomed to intrigue. "You are welcome to call at any time, General. I am surprised that Mr. Maijstral did not call with his own message."

"Perhaps he didn't want to get killed."

"Whatever our disagreements, we have not equipped every telephone on Peleng with an explosive device just on the chance that Maijstral might use it."

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"Perhaps he wants to be careful. I am given to understand that some of your people broke into his house this morning."

There was an annoyed grunt from Tartaglia.

"Let's get to cases, shall we?" The General appeared to be enjoying himself, "You haven't exactly covered yourself with glory in this business so far, and I think Maijstral's being quite reasonable in offering you a chance to buy your way out of this situation." The General's smile broadened, conveying pure, malevolent joy. "Maijstral wishes the bidding concluded in the next thirty-eight hours—one day. I'm getting twenty percent as middleman. Do I hear any bids?"

Tartaglia pushed Amalia Jensen aside and squatted in front of the vid, inside range of the holo pickup. Amalia prickled.

"General. I'm Captain Tartaglia."

The General appeared to consult his memory. "I don't recall any captain by that name. An ex-captain, yes. Someone who left the service of the Constellation in order to join a crank paramilitary organization with delusions of grandeur."

Tartaglia's mouth was a grim line. "I'm surprised to see you involved in this, General. The Fate of the Constellation is at stake. Seems like all you seem to care about is your twenty percent."

The General turned red—Amalia winced at the volume of his reply. "I cared enough about the Constellation to have served six hitches in the marines, puppy! Marines, I will remind you, who are ready to fight against the Empire whether or not they've got an Emperor or his blasted jism! I care enough about the Constellation to have made this call! If I hadn't agreed to act as middleman here, you might have been left out of the deal altogether. I suggest,

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therefore, you care enough to come up with a reasonable bid!"

"If that's the way you want it. General."

"That's the way Maijstral wants it, puppy! If I had any resources to call on I'd bid for the thing myself, but I know how long it takes for the military to process an unorthodox requisition for funds. So it seems as if the Fate of the Constellation is in your hands. Heaven and the Virtues help us."

"Amateurs have their uses, then."

The General raised an admonishing finger. "Money speaks louder than sarcasm, puppy."

Amalia could see Tartaglia's hands trembling with suppressed rage. "Very well. A hundred and fifty. But tell Maijstral this. If he favors the Empire, he'd better get ready to spend the rest of his life across the border. And even then the Empire might not be healthy for him."

General Gerald was visibly unimpressed. "1\*11 transmit that message, puppy, but were I you, I wouldn't make threats you're not competent enough to carry out."

Tartaglia's answer was short. "A hundred and fifty. Tell Maijslral."

"1\*11 do it and be back in touch. I expect the bidding will go higher." His eyes seemed to search out of the holo projection, looking for Amalia. "Miss Jensen," he said, "I'm very disappointed at the company you keep."

The General's image faded, Tartaglia began to curse, and Amalia Jensen was left with a growing admiration for Maijstral's technique. He had chosen the perfect foil—someone whose sympathies would lie with the Constellation, but who was nevertheless perfectly honorable, and who would consider any interference with Maijstral a breach of that honor.

"We'll pick up the General!" Tartaglia was saying.

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"We'll get MaijstraTs location out of him' And then—  
then—'\*

"He probably doesn't have that information," Amalia snapped. "Give Maijstral the credit for knowing his job. He's obviously running this through cutouts, and he wouldn't tell the cutouts his hiding place." She stood up and gazed into Captain Tartaglia's surprised eyes. "General Gerald has won any number of duels in the past, and I think if you sent your people after him, they'd come back damaged, you'd end up with a challenge you probably wouldn't win, and the Empire would get the artifact."

Tartaglia sneered, "Perhaps you think you should be running things."

"Perhaps Amalia should," Pietro said. His voice caught them both by surprise. "She seems to have a better idea of how to deal with this situation."

"Damn that Maijstral!" Tartaglia beat the wall in fury. Amalia could hear the surprised reactions of his followers to the violence and noise. "Damn the man!"

"Damn him, indeed," Amalia said. She was, as before, surprised at her coolness. "Damn him all you like. But stop threatening him, or we'll lose it all."

Tartaglia fell silent, red-faced and baffled.

"Exactly," Pietro said. "Let us deal with it from now on."

He stepped across the room to link arms with Amalia. They had been through too much together for Tartaglia to throw it all away.

The sounds of the Eroica, perfectly rendered by Gregor's Troxan speakers, boomed from Maijstral's walls. A robot, bumbling about some task, gave a low whistle followed by a series of bleeps.

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The last straw. Maijstral turned in his chair and shot the robot with his disruptor. The robot froze

Maijstral knew he would probably have to pay damages, but decided that hearing the Eroica unhindered was worth the cost. Maijstral called up Peleng City's Personal Notices bulletin board, where General Gerald had posted Humanity Prime's bid. A smile crossed his face. A hundred and fifty. That wasn't bad, for a start. The Imperials

hadn't tendered an offer yet.

Both sides had, however, made threats—the codes transmitted by both General Gerald and Count Quik made that clear.

This required thinking about. He told the vid to turn off, and the unit answered him with bleeping noises and flashing lights. Maijstral suppressed a spasm of irritation.

Both factions promised violence unless he sold the artifact to their side. If worse came to worse, the Empire could probably guard Maijstral better, but he preferred not to spend the rest of his life in hiding. And he didn't want to spend it in the Empire, either.

He thought about the situation for a moment, particularly in reference to his thoughts last evening, when Roman had mentioned his own bias toward the Empire. Then Maijstral smiled and nodded to himself. This called for a conspiracy.

Roman, who never trusted others to select Maijstral's food, was off on a provisioning errand. His absence provided a fine opportunity to inaugurate a small Romanless plot. Maijstral followed the crashing Eroica to Gregor's door and knocked softly.

"Gregor? May I speak with you?"

"Sure boss. Come in."

Gregor had taken one of the household robots apart and was examining its contents.

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Two down! Maijstral thought cheerily.

Gregor put his toots on his desk and turned down the fourth movement with a sharp command directed at his audio deck.

Maijstral padded to a chair and coiled in it. "Feeling well?" he asked

"Sure, boss." There was the merest trace of a bruise on Gregor's temple, but otherwise the semilife patch had done its work: reduced swelling, promoted healing, drawn up most of the bruise, and then expired in ultimate semilife bliss and dropped off.

"Gregor, both sides are making threats. I'm anticipating a certain level of danger here."

Gregor shrugged. "What else is new?"

"I'm afraid that neither of our clients may be happy without possession of the artifact."

"I'll be careful. Don't worry, boss, I want to keep my skin as well as anyone."

"It's not that. It's that . . ." Maijstrai feigned hesitation. "I would prefer our Imperial friends to suffer disappointment."

Gregor grinned. He leaned forward. "So would I. How do we want to work it?"

There was a smile somewhere deep behind Maijstral's lazy eyes. This was going to be easier than he expected. "It occurred to me that the artifact must have survived some serious fighting. It would be a great shame if the Empire, on obtaining the artifact, discovered that it had been hit by a disruptor bolt or two."

"And sterilized?"

Maijstra! raised his hands, palms-up. "They could hardly blame us."

Gregor cackled with laughter. "That's pretty good, boss."

"Roman can't know, of course. It isn't that he's pro-

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Imperial, just that he would so disapprove of cheating a client."

Gregor gave a conspiratorial wink. "No problem. My eyes are sealed."

"But if we were to sell the Empire any of His Majesty's sperm, presumably our Constellation friends would want assurances that it was sterilized."

Gregor frowned- "I follow. Somehow we'd have to let Jensen and her friends see the sample's been sterilized before passing it to the Imperials." He shook his head in bafflement. "That's a tough one, boss."

Maijstrai raised a hand. "I have an idea, Gregor," he said. "I believe it will work. Let's see if you agree."

"Baron Sinn. Your servant, sir."

"Count Quik. Ever yours."

"My consulate has authorized a bid of two hundred."  
This was a lie. Sinn was using his own line of credit—he, like General Gerald, understood this would take too long for the request to go through official channels.

"Will transmit, my Baron. My thanks."

Baron Sinn returned the phone to the robot and glanced from beneath the shade of the kibble trees toward where Countess Anastasia waited on the croquet court. She did not appear happy.

Unfortunate for her, Sinn thought as he returned to the game, swinging his mallet in a jaunty way. For some reason her play was off. The Baron was well on his way toward winning his second game.

"And then this giant creature jumped out of ambush. Wearing a puppet disguise, no less. He must have been insane. He seized me, threw me about the ptace, and kept asking after Miss Jensen."

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"That must have been terrible."

"He kept strangling me. He wouldn't let me talk. Even if he took his hands off my throat, there was nothing I could have told him. I barely knew the woman. Until you told me, I had no idea she'd been released- If it wasn't for your man, I don't doubt I'd be lying dead in my uncle's house."

"Do you \*hink it was the same person who broke into your uncle's house?"

"It's occurred to me. But that would mean the burglary is connected with the attack on Miss Jensen, and I can't think how that could be."

Nichole smiled, her mind bubbling with her own inward speculation. "Yes," she said. "Totally baffling."

Lieutenant Navarre propped his chin on his hand. He spoke thoughtfully. "Reminds me of a play I saw on Pompey. A strange complicated piece, written by one of our local playwrights. Drama, comedy, even a song or two. It had a glorious part for one of my favorite actresses." Pause. "She rather reminds me of you, my lady."

"Does she indeed?" Nichole put her hand on his arm. Her voice was a quiet purr. "Tell me all about it. Lieutenant. I'd love to hear everything you can remember."

It was almost time for siesta. Gregor was off on a brief errand to the nearest public phone in order to transmit the Imperial counterbid to General Gerald, leaving Roman to fix Maijstral's presiesta luncheon with equipment he had brought to the table on a cart. The hot dressing flamed in Roman's pan. Maijstral watched Roman's expert movements with admiration.

Time, obviously enough, for a conspiracy.

"Your salad, sir."

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"Thank you, Roman. Is that kava-kivi I taste?"

"It is, sir. An small conceit of mine."

"A splendid idea, Roman. Let it occur to you in future, by all means."

"Thank you, sir."

Maijstral tasted the salad again. Roman busied himself with putting away his cooking implements. Maijstral put his fork down and tapped his fake diamond against a front tooth.

"Roman," he said. "May I ask your advice?"

Roman put down his spatula- "Sir. I would be honored."

Maijstra! spoke in Khosali. The logic seemed to express itself better. "We have it in our power to effect the course of history."

"Sir."

"It is not a responsibility I have ever desired. My

lifelong interests, I'm afraid, have been rather more pedestrian. These elements of galactic intrigue have caught me entirely by surprise."

"The circumstances of life do not ask permission, but compel as they will."

Maijstral smiled. This was Khosali proverb, and Roman to the bone.

"Very true," Maijstral assented. "Circumstance compelled me into this situation, and I could, if I desired, let circumstance compel me out of it."

Roman's interest was obviously piqued. "By allowing the bidding to proceed as it will, and delivering the reliquary to the highest bidder?"

Maijstral put down his fork. "Just so."

Roman's ears pricked forward. "You wish not to be compelled in such a way, sir?"

Maijstral drew his ear back into a pose of cautious reflection. He contemplated his cooling salad and won-

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dered exactly how he was going to bring this off- He could tell Roman that Sinn and Amalia Jensen had threatened him, but that would just drive Roman into a righteous fury and before long Roman would start prodding Maijstral into challenging everyone in sight. Maijstral would have to find another way. "Roman," he said, "I have no desire to be responsible for the destruction of me Imperial line. It is the symbol of a civilization older than humanity. Regardless of politics, I do not feel that I have a right to say whether the Pendjalli should live or die."

"But honor compels you to maintain the honesty of the bidding."

"Yes." Maijstral picked up his fork and poked aimlessly at his salad. "You see me caught up in a dilemma, Roman."

"Sir, I hardly feel myself qualified to advise—"

Maijstral threw up his hands. "If not you, Roman, who?"

Roman's nostrils flickered in agitation. Maijstral was pleased with his own performance, but he knew that the cry of desperation was not entirely feigned. If he couldn't persuade Roman to a certain course of action, Peleng—and, for that matter, everywhere else—would become a far more dangerous place for all of them.

"Sir," Roman said, "pray allow me to think for a moment."

"Of course." Maijstral feigned a renewed interest in his salad and watched Roman through hooded eyes. The Khosalikh's nose twitched; his ears inclined back, left, right; his hands played over the cooking gear. Roman was clearly fighting something out in his mind.

"Sir," Roman said, "could it not be said that some duties transcend honor, and that the preservation of life is

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one of them? Could it not furthermore be said that the preservation of innocent life is in itself an honorable duty?"

Relief and joy bubbled into Maijstral. Carefully he suppressed all signs of it. "Well . . .," he said.

"The Imperials, of course, consider the royal family itself the expression of a transcendent ideal, whatever the opinion on this side of the political boundary."

"Roman," Maijstral said, "it would mean deceiving our clients."

"That it would, sir."

"It would mean deceiving Gregor. Someone with his background would never understand our appreciation of the Pendjalli ideal."

Roman thought for a moment. "That would be difficult, sir."

Maijstral raised his napkin to his lips. "That is why we should plan now. While Gregor is away."

"Three hundred."

"Four-fifty."

"Seven hundred."

"A thousand."

"I didn't expect to see you until the swap, youngster. It might be dangerous for you if you're seen here."

"I took precautions. My boss has sent me with a proposition, General."

"Yes? You interest me."

"Mr. Maijstral isn't totally without sympathies in this job. General. He would prefer that one side—the human side—comes out on top."

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The General's eyes twinkled. "He does? Tell me."  
"Only too."

"Fifteen hundred."

"He wants it how?"

"Cash, Captain."

"Cash? Not a credit counter?" Pause. "There may not be that much cash on the planet."

"I am assured there is- There is always a demand for untraceable funds in even the most ordered society."

"Mr. Romans. Am pleased."

"You're too kind, my lord."

"Please share brandy."

"Your servant."

"Surprised you to see. After threatenings I thought you would stay close."

"Mr. Maijstral has sent me with a proposition. He is not entirely without conviction in this matter. He has a sentimental affection for the Imperial household, and wishes them long life and success."

"Very interesting- Please say more and continue."

"Wait a minute, youngster."

"Sir?"

"This sounds more complicated than necessary. How do I know you're not going to pull a switch?"

"The cryo container will be in plain sight the entire time. You'll be able to observe it, and Mr. Maijstrat won't touch it. If we pull a switch, you'll know."

"But Mr. Romans, forgive me. How certain can we be of Imperial spunk?"

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"Large areas of the Imperial genetics have been mapped, my lord. Certainly a comparison can be run just before the exchange."

"Gregor."

"Yes, boss."

"I shall have to run an errand tonight. Please don't mention my absence to Roman."

A smirk. "Right, boss. Like you say."

"Twenty-one hundred."

"Roman?"

"Sir?"

"I shall be away from the house tonight. I'm sure you can guess why."

Pause. "Yes, sir. Will you need my assistance?"

"I suspect the Peleng City sperm bank has only rudimentary security."

"As you like, sir."

"Please do not mention to Gregor that anything out of the ordinary has occurred."

"Indeed not, sir."

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty-eight fifty."

The Imperial Artifact sat gleaming on Maijstral's desk. He had just returned from his raid on the sperm bank and was still dressed in his darksuit. His bound hair was piled on the top of his head. He was wearing image-intensifiers

over his eyes; his hands were sheathed in gloves that detected the flow of energy. The house was silent save for

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a bleeping robot—the last—bumbling about in the outside hallway.

Before him was equipment for the storage and preservation of Khosali sperm. He had stolen no sperm himself—he had to use the Emperor's genuine article with the mapped Pendjalli genes, otherwise the deals he'd made would fall through.

Carefully he traced the patterns of the reliquary's design. The pulse of electrons beat against his temples.

He thought about his plan, and part of his mind quailed. He was needlessly complicating things. He was adding appreciably to his own danger.

Patterns formed in Maijstral's mind. Toots moved efficiently in his hands.

There was a click. A part of the artifact rotated, then slid aside. Frost formed in delicate patterns along the engraving as cryogenic chill touched the air.

The artifact was open, and at his mercy.

## CHAPTER 12

Confident in their dreams, the methane creatures in the Peleng City Zoo pursued their slow life as they slid through their frozen ammonia sea. Though they surely possessed language and limited understanding, their watchers were not certain whether or not to credit them with genuine intelligence. Insulated from an outside that would have vaporized them in an instant, the creatures crawled at glacial speed through their habitat, absorbing nutrition and each other, casting off waste and new individuals. Their perception limited to sound and touch, they were happy in their enclosure, safe from overly disturbing contact with the amusing delusions outside.

Those watching through the zoo monitors would have been surprised to discover that the methane creatures did not credit the watchers' reality. Instead the methanites were convinced that the odd pulsings directed toward them from the speakers were a form of consensual hallucination,

an unintended by-product of their own vibrant fantasies. The methanites, for much of their history, had been constructing a long dramatic work—an elevated, intricate mosaic, abstract as an opera, torrid as a romance, filled with gods and devils, humor and philosophy, wonder and strange-

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ness, the whole of which commented upon and criticized itself as it went. The endless work had taken on a complex life of its own, novel plot twists appearing unforeseen out of what had seemed to be simple dramatic devices, new insights into character blossoming with astonishing regularity even in characters so old their birth was coterminous with that of the species that had created them.

Attempts to communicate with the methanites had seemed, in the ammonia sea, to take on aspects of these spontaneously generated insights. This was, the creatures concluded, a new, intense form of hallucination, and they began a long discussion into the nature of their own subconscious, wondering whence such thoughts derived, a debate that (to date) has not been resolved. Count Quik's explanation of Majstral's mode of living had sent a shock wave through the small methanite community; perhaps the concept of "thief\*" could be integrated with the Great Work, perhaps not. The concept presupposed material possessions, which the methanites did not have, and which they could not manipulate if they had. The notion of possession seemed, at the very least, a radical exercise in speculative philosophy. The methanite subconscious, the creatures concluded, was proving more inventive than had previously been suspected.

We should not feel too superior. The methanites' physical horizons may be limited, but their mental life is lively. Consider also how the methanite experience may be taken as a paradigm of our own. We, like the near-zero creatures, live bounded by conceptual walls of our own making, and they go by many names: religion skepticism, ideology, propriety. High Custom—indeed, High Custom is a deliberate exclusion of some modes of experience in favor of those considered more elevated or worthwhile. High Custom at least admits to its limitations. The totality

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of experience, the agon of corporal existence and the universe ... no cultural or ideological construct seems to

deal with the macrocosm at all well. The methanites have chosen their illusions, and seem happy with them. That is more than many of us can claim.

Paavo Kuusinen was feeling very much like a creature surrounded by walls not of his own making and was beginning to wonder if the events of the last few days might not, in fact, be some odd product of his fevered mind. He was frustrated with a day of watching people go about what seemed to be very ordinary lives—how could, after the last few days, everyone behave so normally? Kuusinen finally gave up his watch and went to his hotel for the evening. At least it would give him a chance to bathe and change clothes. His room seemed faintly surprised to see him—he hadn't been home for almost two days.

On rising, he ordered first breakfast and scanned the room's computers for any recent developments. The police remained baffled, Maijstral remained in Nichole's suite, and—Kuusinen's ears pricked forward—Nichole had announced Maijstral as her escort for this evening's farewell ball in honor of the Diadem's departure.

He paged through his messages, found his invitation waiting in computer storage, and ordered it (and the magnetic code strip that would get him past Diadem security) printed out.

At least tonight he'd be able to get a look at everybody. Maybe their behavior would tell him something.

"You'll excuse us. Lieutenant, I hope."

"Certainly, madam."

Lieutenant Navarre bowed, sniffed Nichole's ears and

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Maijstral's, and stepped from Nichole's parlor into her withdrawing room. The door slid shut behind him. Nichole looked at Maijstral with bright eyes. He smiled.

"A new passion, my lady?"

Nichole made a face. "I said, did I not, that you knew me too well?"

"He has been here two nights. There was no need for him to stay—he could have left wearing his own face- And

now I find the two of you finishing breakfast."

She took his arm and sighed. "He is a startling man. He has a trick memory—can't forget anything. It's astonishing, the clarity of his recollections. And he's done things, Drake. Saved lives, risked his own. He's been doing all this while I've been taking tours in front of the cameras. With him, it's all been real."

"I wish you joy, Nichole."

She laughed. "Thank you, Drake. You know, I'm very glad to see you in one piece."

He smiled and kissed her. "Happy to be in one piece, my lady."

"Shall I order second breakfast?"

"Thank you, no. I've already eaten."

"Here. Sit beside me."

Maijstral removed some fax from his place and idly scanned the lines as he handed them to a robot. "A play, Nichole?"

She gave him a coven smile. "Indeed. Lieutenant Navarre suggested I would be good in it."

He looked at her. "Is he correct?"

"It's a marvelous part. The character is a manipulator and she plays half a dozen strong roles just in maneuvering the other characters into behaving as she wishes."

"Will you do it?"

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"The character isn't exactly young. Once one starts doing mature parts, one can't exactly go back to playing ingenues."

"But you will do it, yes?"

"\*! think so." She bit her lower lip. "I wonder if I'm up to it. It calls for such range."

Maijstra! took her hand and squeezed it. "Courage."

She smiled wanly. "Yes. I'll do it. I know I'll do it. But

I'd just as soon agonize a little more over the decision if it's all the same to you. I'd hate to think I was taking it lightly."

"While you are agonizing, my lady, allow me to show you something." Maijstral pulled the lace back from his wrist, reached into a pocket, and raised his hand to show two small cryogenic vials in his palm. He rotated his wrist, showed Nichole the back of his hand, then rotated his wrist again. There was only one vial in his hand. Nichole nodded approvingly.

"Very good," she said. Maijstral made the motions again, and both vials appeared in his palm.

"Do you think, my lady," he asked, "that you can possibly learn to do this by tonight?"

Nichole looked stern. "I am not participating in any conspiracy, Maijstral, not without knowing what it's all about. Not even for you, Drake."

He bowed to her while the vials appeared and vanished between his fingers. "Naturally you must know, my lady," he said. "But I must caution you not to repeat anything I tell you to Lieutenant Navarre. If he found any of this out, he'd have to challenge half the people at the ball tonight." He looked at her and smiled, anticipating her reaction, the vials dancing in his fingers. "Nothing less," he said, "then the Fate of Civilization is at stake."

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The ideographs for "happy journey" and "sad leave taking" floated solemnly through the air of the ballroom, oblivious to the dancing media globes. The orchestra, on an a-grav balcony near the ceiling, played music suitable for strolling about and being seen. Below the orchestra two Elvis impersonators cut each other dead. Etienne stood in solemn scarlet, fingered the hilt of his rapier (a reminder of his duel), and yawned politely into the faces of his admirers- Nichole was dressed in a slightly old-fashioned black gown that revealed her glorious pale shoulders and which featured panniers. She fended off questions about Drake Maijstral with practiced ease. Politicians and local celebrities basked in the strong light; the self-conscious sought alcoves and hovered by the punch bowl; others clustered in knots, their faces to the wall—an Imperialist knot at one end of the room, for example, or a Constellation knot at the other. Each knot frowned, scowled, shuffled its collective

feet.

In between, another knot. Maijstral, Gregor, and Roman, facing outward, open to influence. Each smiling, each for reasons entirely his own.

"Yes. I don't need the glass anymore, thank the Virtues. The bruising's all gone." Covering a yawn-

\*I notice you are armed this evening. Are you compelled to another encounter?"

Scowling- "I'm afraid I can't stay. I don't talk about that son of thing."

"Drake."

"Nichole." He sniffed her gently, then kissed her wrist. Globes jostled for the best view. Nichole, smiling, spoke

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in an undertone. Her lips, to the complete frustration of video lip-readers, barely moved.

"I've asked the orchestra to play the Pilgrimage to the Cinnamon Temple for twice the usual number of measures. I trust that will suffice."

"Thank you, madam. I believe it will suit very well." He turned to the others in his entourage. "Nichole, may I present my associate, Roman?"

"Happy to see you again, my dear." For the benefit of the cameras. "We are old friends, of course."

Resonant sniffs. "I am honored, madam. You are most lovely tonight."

"Thank you, Roman. You look well."

"Very kind of you to notice, madam."

"Nichole," said Maijstral, "this is my junior associate, Mr. Gregor Norman."

"Mr. Norman."

"Ah. Charmed. Madam." Gregor, confronted far too suddenly by the appearance of a woman who personified years of adolescent yearning, lunged forth and seized

Nichole's hand in his own damp palm. Nichole, with an assured turn of her arm, carefully avoided the dislocation of her elbow. Her smile remained tranquil. She turned to Roman. Gregor blinked sweat from his eyes and silently cursed himself.

"I hope you will come see me, before I leave. Perhaps tomorrow morning."

Roman's tongue lolled. "I would be delighted, should Mr. Maijstral not be needing me."

Maijstral gave an indulgent smile. He had never ceased to be a little bemused by the mutual attraction between Nichole and his servant. "Of course you may go, Roman," he said. "That is, assuming that any of us are still alive by morning."

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"The Jensen woman is here."

"I have seen her. Countess."

"I don't like this Fast stratagem, Baron. It seems overly complicated to me."

"Maijstral wished to continue his life here in the Constellation. The Empire has no preference either way."

"But you trust him."

"Yes and no." A hesitation. "He knows what will happen if he disappoints us."

"Yes." The Countess's voice growled with satisfaction. "That is true. If he is afraid, he is our servant. Nothing else matters."

"The Imperials are here, Amalia."

"Yes, Pietro." She smiled. "Imperials doomed to disappointment. My favorite sort."

"You seem in good spirits."

"Why should I not be? We've won. And according to the broadcasts, the Imperial who died turned out to be the one I would have preferred dead." A moment's reflection.

"Not that I would have wanted anyone dead, of course."

"Of course. I understood what you meant."

"And the one who was really . . . sort of nice ... is still alive." She smiled, and took his hand. "Besides. After this is all over. we have our own plans."

"Lieutenant Navarre?"

"Yes, Mr.—I'm afraid my memory, sir ... ?"

"Kuusinen. Your most obedient servant."

"Of course. You must forgive me."

"But certainly. The last few days must have been a strain."

Navarre looked about uneasily. He was still glancing

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over his shoulder every so often, looking for threats—mad puppets waving magic wands, that sort of thing.

"Yes," he said. "True."

"I wonder if there has been any news of your attacker's identity?"

"It appears he was a deserter from the Imperial Army. No one seems to have any idea how he got here, or what he thought he was doing. I suspect the creature must have been mad."

"No doubt. There is no word on his accomplice?"

"Accomplice, sir?"

"If your deserter was one of the Rompers involved in Miss Jensen's kidnapping, then he had a partner."

Navarre glanced over his shoulder again. He saw Nichole and smiled, his blood warming- She smiled back- "I have wondered about that," he said. "Of course, the security here is first-rate."

"Of course."

"Still. I'm glad I'm only on this planet for a short while."

"Your obedience, gentlemen."

"Count Quik. Your servant."

"Miss Nicholes. Most pleasant is my beseeing you."  
"Thank you, my lord. If you will excuse me?"  
"Certainlies." Turning to Roman and Maijstral. "Should we be about things?"

Nichole reached into her pannier with her right hand, felt the touch of the cryogenic viai. She practiced the switch, once, twice. Nodded to Etienne in passing, and practiced the switch again. Her heart was beating a little faster than usual—she wondered if her nervousness showed.

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This wasn't the type of performance she was used to. Lives depended on this.

She cast a glance across the room to Lieutenant Navarre. He was clearly visible: tall, copper-skinned, cloaked in mourning. She had the feeling that he would do far better in this kind of intrigue than she; he was, after all, a man of action- He was speaking to man in an Imperial-cut coat who looked slightly familiar. Navarre glanced over his shoulder, saw Nichole, and nodded. At once her heart lifted.

Nichole performed the switch, flawlessly, the best she'd ever done.

She returned Navarre's smile and moved on, surrounded by the floating silver globes-  
General Gerald loomed above the throng, his massive chest crowded with medals. He looked sternly down at Maijstral and briskly sniffed his neck. Maijstral sniffed back, his ears pinned back, his manner just as crisp. The General turned to Gregor.

"Are we ready, youngster?" Gregor bowed, his lace cuffs swishing the floor.

"At your service. General.\*" General Gerald frowned. Try as he might to behave otherwise, there was something about Gregor that was definitely Non-U.

"Let's gel about it, then," he growled.

Countess Anastasia stood motionless as a statue and watched Roman with eyes of ammonia ice. Baron Sinn's tongue lolled with satisfaction. "Definitely of the Imperial line."

Count Quik's melodious voice piped up in the small

room- "Satisfaction, then?"

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"Yes, my lord." Baron Sinn gave the vial to Roman, who drew a pocket disruptor.

"Please step back. My Lord Baron," he said, and quickly sterilized the analyzer, killing anything of Nnis CVI that remained in the machine. He bowed to the Baron. "Your servant," he said.

Baron Sinn hefted his small leather bag of cash. "Yours ever," he said.

Roman made his conge, "We shall meet again, my lord, as pilgrims to the Cinnamon Temple."

Roman and Count Quik took their leave. The Countess took the Baron's arm. "It's too complicated," she said.

"We have little choice. Our other options could have endangered the Imperial Relic."

"Nevertheless," the Countess said, "I find it difficult to believe in this miraculous switch."

"It seems well thought out."

"Simplest plans," the Countess said in her best High Khosali, "are easiest undertaken."

"How true," said the Baron piously, wrinkling his nose in distaste at this exchange of profundities. "But the best stew requires many ingredients." He felt the Countess's hand stiffen on his arm. Truly, he thought, he was learning how to deal with this woman.

"Paavo Kuusinen, madam. Your servant."

"Mr. Kuusinen. I believe we have met?"

"Very kind of you to remember, madam."

"Please walk by me. We shall converse."

"Delighted, Miss Nichoie." She put her left arm through

his right. He cleared his throat. "I wonder, madam, if I

might have the honor of the Pilgrimage?"

"I'm afraid that dance is taken, Mr. Kuusinen. Perhaps the Crystal Leaf?"

"Enraptured, madam." Beat. "Madam, may I inquire if you are a bit nervous? Is there a way I can assist you?"

Nichole stiffened. "Why do you ask, Mr. Kuusinen?"

"Your right hand, madam. If you'll pardon the observation, you appear to be clutching something in your pannier."

Nichole's hand jerked from her pannier as if stung. She shot a look at Kuusinen, then calmed herself. "A gift, Mr. Kuusinen. It was presented to me just before my arrival, and I haven't had time to open it. I am in some suspense; I must be showing it."

"I understand, madam. I hope my impertinence is forgiven."

She gave him another look. His face was entirely too composed for her liking. "Naturally, sir," she said. And wondered.

"Mr. Maijstral?" The question came from a hovering media giobe. It was a male Khosali voice.

"Sir?"

"May I inquire, with all delicacy, about your relationship with Miss Nichole?"

"We are old friends, sir."

"Perhaps more than that. You have spent three nights in her company."

"Have I?"

"Are you saying that you have not?"

"I suggest—'with all delicacy,' to use your own idiom—that your questions imply far more than ever my answers shall." He cocked an eye at Lieutenant Navarre. "But now, if you will excuse me, I must abandon this banquet of delicacy. I see another old friend across the room."

Captain Tartaglia, his rangers by his side, watched the vid with fury. What was the interviewer yammering about?

Why didn't he ask him a meaningful question, such as where the hell was the Emperor's jism? If Tartaglia had been there, you could bet Maijstral would have to answer a sharp question or two.

Gnawing his tips in anger, Tartaglia searched the background for sight of Amalia Jensen and Pietro and saw only the erect, massive figure of the traitor General Gerald marching toward the back of the room. The invitations to the ball had been in their name, and neither of them had been willing to surrender their invitations to him. Damn them for insubordination!

Tasting blood, Captain Tartaglia growled at the video. Someone would pay for this if Maijstral's scheme was only a trick-

"Yes." Amalia Jensen smiled. "Definitely the Imperial culture."

"With your permission, madam."

Gregor drew his disruptor and, taking careful aim, fired three shots into the analyzer. The machine fizzled and died. General Gerald, looming behind Gregor, gave a massive chuckle.

Smiles spread across the features of Pietro and Amalia. "Sterilized," Pietro breathed. He hefted his bag of cash.

Gregor removed the vial from the machine. "The Imperials will receive this sterile vial. You, in return for your cash, will receive the remaining live culture. Until the dance starts you can keep me under observation to confirm that all will be as planned."

"Fear not, sir," Amalia said. "We shall."

"Mr. Maijstral," Gregor said, "will be on the side of the dance set away from any transfers. The vials won't go near him." He cleared his throat. "I suggested that. I thought you might like it better that way."

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Maijstral and Lieutenant Navarre walked arm-in-arm down the length of the ballroom. "Please don't underestimate the pressures under which you will both live," Maijstra! said. "Being watched all the time. Endless security arrangements. Intrusive questions."

Navarre cocked his ears in the direction of the hovering media globes. "I could get used to it," he said. And managed, for once, to stifle the impulse to glance over his shoulder.

"I could not. Lieutenant, and I had a certain amount of practice before I ever met Nichole. But I wish you more success than I."

"I thank you, sir. You have been more-than generous, considering the circumstances."

The orchestra fell silent, and the audience tapped their feet in appreciation. Trumpets rang out. Lines for the Cinnamon Temple began to form.

Maijstral took Nichole's arm and sensed her nervousness. He squeezed her hand. "Courage, madam," he said. "I have every confidence."

"I'm afraid, Maijstral."

"You will do very well. Your stage fright, I seem to remember, always ends as the orchestra calls the overture."

"The overture just ended, and I am still trembling."

Green fires winked in Maijstral's lazy eyes. "The dance begins, madam. And with the dance, the comedy. For that is what this is, nothing more. We should laugh at this circumstance, not feel reproach." He kissed her hand and led her to her place.

"Count Quik. Your servants."

"Sallie Eirond, my lord. I saw you at the zoo yesterday."

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"You seemed in familiarity."

"I spend a lot of time mere. I speak methanile."

Pause. "Do you, indeed?"

"Paavo Kuusmen, madam. Wilt you do me the honor?"

"Amalia Jensen, sir. With pleasure."

"Your very obedient."

"Yours."

Kuusinen made a caper. "Allow me to remark, madam, that you seem quite recovered in spirits after your misadventure."

"Recovered, yes. Thank you."

"It cannot have been enjoyable, first being held prisoner and then becoming the object of public curiosity."

"I am the sensation of the moment, Mr. Kuusinen. Other sensations will follow, and I will return to thankful obscurity."

"You seem to be enjoying your brief encounter with celebrity."

"I am enjoying myself, sir. But perhaps not for that reason,"

"Baron Sinn."

"Honored, my lord. Althegn Wohl."

"Mr. Wohl, I just recovered a bag belonging to Mr. Maijstral. Would you mind passing it along in his direction?"

"Ah- Oh. Certainly, my lord."

"I am obliged to you, sir."

"Pleased to see you, Etienne."

"Your servant, Maijstral. As always."

"You have not found Peleng to your taste. My condolences."

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Etienne jiggled about dutifully, one hand restraining his sword from lashing the people to either side. "Thank you for your sympathy, Maijstral. Though you might keep some in reserve. I'm scheduled to do Nana after this." He blinked. "Oh," he said. "Sorry, Maijstral. I forgot you were born there."

Maijstral cocked his head to one side and frowned. "You know," he said, "perhaps the glass suits you after all."

Etienne twirled one of his mustachios. "Do you really think so?"

"Your servant, Miss Jensen."

"Would you mind doing me a small service, sir?"

"Not at all, madam."

"I have found a bag belonging to Mr. Drake Maijstral. Would you mind passing it along the line toward him? I am certain he is anxious without it."

"Count Quik."

"Elvis Presley. Of Graceland."

"Honored, sir. I hope seeing Memphis soon."

Sergeant Tvi watched the dance as she lounged on her borrowed couch before the vid. The warm, buttery smell of leaf crumpets filled the room; she dusted yellow pigment from her finger as she ate. This life, so far, wasn't bad at all. She was wearing stolen jewels, and later that night (and before the ball ended) would probably go out and harvest some more.

Her only current problem that she couldn't get off the planet—she didn't dare use her Imperial passport and she didn't know anyone on planet who could get her some new identification. Her training, unfortunately, hadn't encom-

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passed forgery—as long as she was with the Secret Dragons, Imperial consulates could give her perfectly authentic documents at any time.

Tvi saw Baron Sinn moving down the set with Countess Anastasia as his partner, and her ears flattened. She pointed an imaginary spitfire at them both. "Boom," she said. Right between the Countess's stiffened shoulders.

The media globe panned down the set past where Nichole and Maijstral were dancing more or less in the center, and then Tvi noticed Amaia Jensen moving up the set, partnered with a slight man in an Imperial-cut coat.

Her ears ticked forward. Perhaps, she thought, there was a solution here.

"I am told this bag belongs to Mr. Maijstral. Could you please send it along toward him?"

"I am Mr. Maijstral's associate, madam. Let me make certain it is the bag he lost."

Roman opened the bag and saw a substantial bundle of cash. He closed the bag.

"This is indeed what we missed, madam. Our thanks for its return."

He looked down the set and caught Maijstrai's eye.

"General Gerald."

"Countess Anastasia."

A frigid silence prevailed.

"Gregor Norman, madam."

"Your servant, sir. I say—I have just received this bag, which I am told belongs to Mr. Maijstral. Would you mind propelling it in his direction?"

"Why not? Give it here."

Gregor's temporary partner was appalled as Gregor fer-

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reted through the bag and swiftly determined that it did, indeed, contain something approximating the correct amount of cash. He looked down the set, caught Maijstral's eye, and waved.

^The ears of Gregor's partner went back, and she bared her teeth. This was more than Non-U. It was sordid.

Paavo Kuusinen received a bag and felt of it before passing it on. A smile began to cross his features.

"They certainly have very active imaginations."

"To be sure."

"I have a theory. Perhaps it is the sort only an aristocratic dilettante could arrive at, but let me give you an idea. . . "

"Your servant, Mr. Quijano."

"I thank you. General. Yours."

"Things should be over soon, youngster."

"Yes. Miss Jensen will be relieved when Captain Tartaglia moves out of her house."

"She should have thrown him out."

"It was easier for her to seek shelter at my house."

The General raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

Pietro's face flushed. "We've been planning our future."

General Gerald smiled. His face was not accustomed to it and the result was somewhat more horrific than if he had turned red and yelled "I hope it is a happy one, youngster. I think you're very well suited."

Pietro, mildly paralyzed by the General's appearance, took some time to react to what the General had actually said.

"Oh. Thank you, sir. I'm sure we'll be very happy."

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"Sir. I have come upon this . . . object . . . which I believe fell from the pocket of Baron Sinn yonder. Would you mind terribly passing it up the set toward him?"

"They won't believe that we exist?"

"We are figments, if you will, of their subconscious. That is what I suspect."

"I can't . . . think ... of anything that would contradict that interpretation."

"If true, it would prove a most illuminating view into their psychology."

Maijstral, preoccupied with dancing about Nichole and watching sidelong as the bags and vials progressed in the dance, had been listening to the high, resonant voice for some time before its familiarity caused him to glance toward the short, globe-headed figure on his left. Count Quik.

Count Quik, speaking Human Standard with absolute

coherence. The Count's usual manner of speech, Maijstral realized, was purely an aristocratic affectation.

A bit startled, Maijstral almost missed a step. He recovered and danced on.

Tartaglia was in a rage. "Can you see it? What the hell is going on?"

"Maybe we should change the channel, Captain."

"Mind your own damned business."

"Sir. I believe you reverse here."

"Oh. Thank you, ah, madam."

Gregor clenched his teeth, jammed the leather bag in his armpit, and ducked beneath his partner's arm to his correct place. His line took two steps back without him, and just

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as he caught up they surged forward again. Gregor wiped sweat away and smeared cosmetic on his sleeve.

Damn this dance, anyway. He hadn't had enough time to learn it.

Now, at last, it was his turn to stay still while the third couples made a passage. Mentally counting out eight measures, Gregor reached into a pocket arm and came up with the sterile vial. He turned right on the eighth measure and did a back-to-back with his new temporary partner, a Tanquer in a pince-nez with smoked lenses. This uncovered a view of the pretty girl who would be his temporary partner in about forty-eight measures, and Gregor winked at her- She seemed surprised. Gregor and the Tanquer finished their back-to-back and commenced eight measures of siding.

"Sir," he said, producing the vial, "I have just picked up something belonging to Miss Amalia Jensen. Maybe we should give it back. Would you do me the favor of passing it down the line?"

The Tanquer's nictitating membranes slid shut, which, together with the smoked glass, produced an odd effect. "Very well, strange young person," he said, and took the vial.

Gregor capered back to his permanent partner and blinked

sweat from his eyes. Thank God that was over.

Paavo Kuusinen looked down the set, saw something moving toward him. Looked up, saw something coming that way.

He thought a few figures ahead, made a rapid calculation. He hooked his arm through the arm of the Khosalikh next to him. swung the man around.

"Wait. Sir. This is next figure."

"No, sir. Now."

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"Sir." The voice was pained. Kuusinen had just altered their progression. He and Kuusinen had just changed partners.

Amalia Jensen gave him a surprised look as the dance swept her away.

"Baron Sinn."

"General Gerald."

Gloating. "Try denying now that you're a spy."

The Baron was imperturbable- "I am a private nobleman, trying to do my Empire a service."

Hah, thought the General. You think we're going to get the real artifact, and that you're deceiving us by letting us think yours is going to be sterilized when it's not. But I saw your spunk get sterilized, and know all you're getting is small meaningless coils of dead protein. So there. Hah.

The plot made the General's head hurt, but one thing he knew. This was better than whipping the Imperial fleet. More personally satisfying.

"Navarre will be finishing his business here. The estate auction is in five days."

"I see."

"I've got one more stop on my tour, and then I'm going off to have my feet done. We'll meet on Fantome, and start making arrangements for the play."

"Perhaps"—dancing about her—"I'll manage to attend the premiere."

"The pickings would be good, Drake, but can you do a good imitation of a broken heart? You'd have to, you know."

Thoughtfully. "I suppose I could summon a tear or two."

"It would have to be more than that. After all, you're

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supposed to have engaged in a passionate and desperate romance with me here, all while I was falling in love with the handsome lieutenant. Going to the premiere might be more than your heart could bear."

Maijstral considered this while Nichole circled him. "Perhaps you are right. A mere display of manly grief wouldn't be enough."

"Pity we can't tell the truth. The public would be enraged to discover that you and I were faking a romance in order to pursue our various intrigues—the Diadem's followers insist on the authenticity of their illusions, and they'd want to pay us back for fooling them."

Maijstral reflected on his decision, four years ago, not to seek membership in the Diadem. He had no reason, he concluded, to regret it.

"I shall have to console myself with a recording," he said.

"I will send you one, but only if my performance is good. If I'm awful, I will burn every copy."

Maijstral smiled. "I shall consider the recording's arrival inevitable, madam." He turned left, Nichole faced the other way. He and Nichole would be separated for a while. This was the marching bit.

"Mr. Kuusinen, we meet again."

"Nichole, ever your servant."

Kuusinen was her new temporary partner. She didn't trust the man at all. And there was something about his smile she didn't like.

"Your servant, Miss Jensen."

"General Gerald."

"Your Mr. Quijano tells me you are going to join the  
Pioneers together. May I offer you my congratulations?"

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Not many people are willing to do the hard work of  
colonization these days."

"Thank you, General."

"Your father would have been proud of you, miss."

A slow smile spread across Amaia's features. "General," she said, "I do believe you're right."

Maijstral was anticipating another attack of his residual  
childhood terror, but was pleasantly surprised to discover  
that his heart no longer quaked at the appearance of the  
Countess Anastasia. Instead it was the Countess who looked  
uncomfortable, standing stiffly, her shoulders thrown back  
unyielding as a yoke.

She looked at him with diamond-chip eyes. "How  
could you?" she asked.

How could I what? Maijstral wondered. Wreck her house,  
shoot at her servants, free her victim, deceive everyone in  
sight?

"Sorry, Mother," he said. "Force of circumstance, you  
know."

The accident wasn't Nichole's fault. Maijstral's plan  
called for three vials, as he was unwilling to trust to the  
coincidence of Nichole receiving both vials at the same  
time. He was being cautious, but he was also wrong.

The live culture, moving down the set toward Amalia  
Jensen, arrived first. Nichole smiled, accepted it with her  
left hand. Her right hand touched her pannier, where the  
other culture waited, ^or luck; but this wasn't the switch  
yet—she had to reach out with her right hand for Kuusinen,  
touch fingers, and walk around him. Then caper, then  
repeat.

At the end of the repetition, she turned to her right,  
ready to ask her new temporary partner to pass the vial on.

But the new partner, a bewildered, elderly Khosalikh with more than his share of muzzle rings, had just received the sterile culture, and was holding it out to her.

Hands swung together. The vials clattered. The Khosalikh humbled and banged them together again. Terror clutched Nichole as the vials clattered to the floor.

Paavo Kuusinen watched carefully at the objects tumbling from Nichole's fingers, perceived the look of horror on her face. Time seemed to stop.

Maijstral caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and froze in midmovement. The Countess thudded into him and drove her heel onto his instep. He didn't feel the pain.

Pietro Quijano stared in surprise as he danced across the set. He could have sworn he'd seen a vial clatter across the floor.

Baron Sinn saw the accident clearly and bared his teeth. His partner was frightened and took a step back.

Up and down the line, a sense of catastrophe began to spread. Few knew precisely what had gone wrong, but everyone realized that something had gone awry, and the rhythm of the dance was lost as heads began to crane left and right. Media globes swooped left and right, looking for the source of the turbulence.

The elderly Khosalikh murmured an apology, bowed, and picked up a vial. He looked at it in puzzlement. It looked identical to the one he'd just held- But was it?

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Maijstral stood stock-still, picturing the Countess with a gun, Amalia Jensen with a gun. Imperial Marines and Constellation Death Commandos, all with guns. The Countess breathed insults at him, calling him an ungrateful wretch, a scoundrel, an incompetent, and no son of hers.

He wished the latter, at least, was true.

Paavo Kuusinen stepped forward. "Pardon me, madam," he said, and bent to pick up a vial at Nichole's feet. "This, sir, was yours," he said.

The elderly Khosalikh looked from one to the other. "It

was?"

Nichole looked from one vial to the other and realized that her call had come. She made her decision; her hand dipped into her pannier and came up with the hidden vial. She took the vial from Kuusinen, made the switch flawlessly, and passed the switched vial to her left. "For Baron Sinn," she said.

The Imperial Marines started to fade from Maijstra's mind.

Nichole looked at the old gentleman, who was still gazing at his outstretched vial. She took his hand in hers, helped him turn around. "That is Miss Jensen's," she said. "Please send it down the set."

The Death Commandos began to turn transparent.

People began to remember their part in the dance. Gradually the lines sorted themselves out.

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"I believe, sir," said Gregor, "that this is where you reverse."

"Oh. I don't doubt you are correct. Thank you, sir." Gregor smiled in satisfaction. At least he remembered this part.

Pietro gnawed his lip as he operated his second scanner. He could hear the murmur of the crowd as, following the dance, they crowded toward the refreshment buffet.

His scanner rang. Relief flooded his mind. He looked at Amalia and grinned.

"It's the live culture. Now we know for certain the sterilized culture went the other way."

"Too complicated. I knew this wasn't going to work."

Lights flickered on the scanner. Baron Sinn rotated the display so that Countess Anastasia could see it.

"It's the Imperial Artifact, my lady. Unquestionably."

A certain dismay clamored in the Countess's mind.

"Maijstral pulled off his switch, then."

"Apparently."

She conceded defeat. She squared her shoulders. "Long live the Pendjahl," she said. Her vice was like a trumpet call. Muted, perhaps, but sincere.

Baron Sinn echoed her. "Long live the Imperial line."  
[n reverent tones.

He put the vial in his pocket and offered the Countess his arm. "Perhaps, my lady, it is time for us to depart."

Because, Maijstral thought, he found he could not act any other way. Somewhat to his surprise, there had proven more scruples in his makeup than ever he suspected. Even though he did not want to live in the Empire, or desire an Emperor over him, he could not coldly condemn the Impe-

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rial line to death, not when it meant so much to so many billions. If a threat to the Human Constellation resulted—and that was by no means certain—then that threat would have to be dealt with when it occurred. Maijstral could not assume the right to disrupt a millennia-old civilization on the half-chance there might be a conflict years down the line.

Besides. It was the Emperor's to begin with.

Baron Sinn had assured him the matter would be handled delicately. Concubines of good family would be found in the farther reaches. None would be impregnated for several years. None of the heirs would be revealed for decades. When they were placed before the public, rumors would be started; one of the other two artifacts had been discovered, or the Pendjalli had simply cloned poor Nnis in secrecy, against all tradition, and refused to admit it.

The resolution would be satisfyingly like an old romance. The unknown heir, raised as a foster child far away, would become the next Pendjalli, to his own surprise and the surprise of everyone else. And all because of an odd scruple in a thief. It warmed Maijstral's heart to think about it.

Was he being sentimental? he wondered. He could not tell.

"Sir?"

Maijstral turned to the globe hovering at chest height. It offered a human voice.

"Madam?" he replied.

"There seemed to be some manner of intrigue going on during the Pilgrimage, involving people passing things back and forth. Are you aware of the nature of these events?"

Maijstral shrugged. "No one passed anything to me," he said. "Perhaps you should ask someone else."

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"Are you going to be accompanying Nichole for the rest of her tour?"

Maijstral recollected that he should be suffering intimations of a broken heart by now.

"That has not been decided," he said. "Events have rather taken us by surprise."

And on that ambiguous note, Maijstral ended the interview.

Paavo Kuusinen, unnoticed, slipped from the hall. His face bore a smile.

His stay on Peteng, he decided, had been quite satisfactory.

He would have a lot to tell his employer.

He knew he would see Maijstral again.

CHADTEC13

Captain Tartaglia took careful aim with his disruptor. "Ready," he called. "Aim. Fire."

Fingers tightened on triggers. Silent, invisible energies flooded the darkness of Amalia Jensen's backyard.

Somewhere in the darkness, a nightbird called.

"Cease fire," said Tartaglia, and looked at the small vial propped on a chair.

It seemed unchanged. Tartagha felt vaguely disappointed. I have destroyed you, inhuman scum, he thought, but the thought failed to comfort him.

Amalia Jensen put her pistol in its holster. She patted the pocket where Tartaglia's credit counter rested. She'd be able to pay her debts tomorrow. "There's a shuttle heading to the launching station in two hours," she said. "You and your people have ample time to book passage."

"Two hours?"

"Time enough, don't you think?" Amalia took the vial from the chair and held it up to the starlight. "I think I'll keep this. A souvenir." She put it in her pocket, then saw his frown and laughed. "I've earned it," she pointed out. "I was the one who was kidnapped."

Tartaglia conceded. "If you insist." He reflected that

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he'd still be able to make a terrific report to his superiors, and expect commendations and a promotion. The Strong Hand, he thought, would be nearer the top.

Amalia produced an envelope and handed it to Tartaglia. "My resignation from Humanity Prime," she said. "And Mr. Quijano's."

"Hm. What I might have expected from the fainthearts."

"Fainthearted? We're joining the Pioneer Corps, Captain. It's what we should have done in the first place."

Tartaglia told himself he didn't much care, and to concentrate instead on the commendations and promotions he could expect. For some reason he couldn't get excited about either.

He began- giving orders for his troops to pack and head toward the shuttle.

The strains of "Farewell, Comrades, Farewell" floated over the terrace. Maijstral took a breath of cool air and contemplated his profits. Lord Giddon would be satisfied, the diamond ring would be redeemed, there would be enough left for some long-term investments. Always as-

suming, of course, that no new Lord Giddons showed up.

"Have you seen Gregor, Roman?"

"I believe he made a friend. One of Countess Tank's young ladies."

"That's the last we'll see of him tonight, I suppose."

Maijstral looked at his servant with cheerful regard. Everything had come out all right.

"Roman, I think we have done very well this evening."

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose that for our ultimate success we should thank Mr. Kuu—Kuusinen, was it?"

"I believe so, sir."

Maijstral frowned. "I'd like to thank him personally,

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but I suppose I should continue to stay out of it. There's no reason he should connect me with this."

"None whatever, sir."

Maijstral turned at the sound of footsteps behind him. Etienne stepped out onto the terrace with a young lady on his arm. Gold winked around one eye. Maijstral bowed.

"I see you have restored the glass, sir."

"I have, Maijstral. I think it suits me well."

"So it does."

Etienne turned to his lady. "The glass came about as a result of the Pearl Woman business. I suppose you've heard about it?"

"Yes, sir. I must have watched the record a dozen times. My heart was in my throat the whole time. I was so afraid for you I thought I would die."

Etienne smiled. Maijstral stepped forward.

"You will excuse us, I hope?"

"Certainly, MaijstraL Wish me luck on Nana."

Maijstral sniffed Etienne's cheek and received a poke from his starboard mustachio. Roman followed as he stepped back into the ballroom, seeing a few last dancers whirling to the last song, the rest slowly filing out. Maijstral observed Nichole walking arm-in-arm with Lieutenant Navarre and remembered to sigh.

It was time for him to work on his broken heart.

"Who is it?" Amalia called from the kitchen, where she was supervising the new robot as it stowed away the guest dishes and crystal that Tartaglia's rangers had used during their stay.

Pietro asked the room to give a holoview of the person on the roof. He squinted at the brightness of the daytime image. "I don't recognize her. A small Khosalikh in a Jefferson-Singh. Wearing a lot of jewelry."

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"You don't say!" said Amalia. Pietro was surprised at the delight in her voice. She stuck her head out of the kitchen and looked at the holo. She frowned as she studied the image, then nodded. "I'll go meet her," she decided.

"Is it someone I should know?"

"I'll tell you later. It's a long story."

Amalia stepped onto the a-grav and rose to the roof. She shaded her eyes in the bright morning sun. She couldn't be entirely certain. "May I help you?" she asked.

"Perhaps." The Khosalikh also seemed uncertain. "Possibly you don't recognize me. My name is Tvi." Joy filled Amalia's heart.

"I recognize the voice perfectly well."

Tvi's tongue lolled as AmaHa gave her a hug.

"I was uncertain of my reception."

"I think we can put politics aside for the nonce. May I offer you first breakfast?"

"Delighted, Miss Jensen." She held up a paper bag. "I

brought some leaf crumpets."

"After all we've been through, I should think you could call me Amalia."

The smell of harness webbing and lubricant rose in General Gerald's nostrils. Mild regret filled his mind. He had disassembled his battle armor and was now crating it for storage.

Maijstral wouldn't come now, he was certain. The glorious battle he had anticipated would never take place.

He had no reason to feel disappointed, he thought. He had performed a singular service to the Constellation, and though his role would never become public, he could take satisfaction in a job well done, a long career crowned by one last glorious intrigue.

It was just a pity there wasn't more violence.

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Pietro had just realized who, precisely, Tvi was. "This is one of your kidnappers?"

"Yes." Amalia grinned. "The nice one."

"The nice one!" Pietro's hands turned to fists. "She held you hostage!"

"Just doing my job, Mr. Quijano." Tvi licked jam from her fingers. "Normally I disdain violence, but it so happened I needed the work."

"Needed the work." Pietro repeated the words without seeming to grasp their meaning. He shook his head. "And now"—he pointed a breakfast fork at Tvi—"and now you propose to make Miss Jensen"—the fork swung toward Amalia—"Miss Jensen, your former victim, your agent for further crimes."

Tvi considered this summation. "That is correct, Mr. Quijano."

"And her former victim"—Amalia smiled—"proposes to accept."

"Amalia!"

"Well, why not? Tvi is going to be an Allowed Burglar

whether we say so or not. Since she's going to steal, why not act as an agent in negotiating with the insurance companies and collect ten percent when she sells the stuff back? Particularly since I seem to have had some recent experience at these sorts of negotiations."

"Why not?" Pietro's mind floundered. "Why not?" His fingers began to crumble a leaf crumpet. "As I recall, your former position was that Allowed Burglary was a shameful remnant of a decadent Imperial culture, and that theft ought not to be allowed under any circumstances, and punished with imprisonment when it occurred."

Amalia looked at Tvi. "Perhaps," she said, "I found being held hostage a broadening experience. In any case,

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I'll only be working for Tvi until she can steal some appropriate identification and leave Peleng. Besides," she added sensibly, "it isn't as if I'm making her steal."

"Sophistry, Amalia."

"Plus, if I'm to join the Pioneers I'll have to have my epilepsy dealt with, and Tvi's theft might as well pay for that as anything."

"I don't suppose," Pietro said, "the word of a fiance stands for much in all of this."

Amalia put her hand on his. "I'm afraid not, love. My friendship with Tvi predates our latest, ah, arrangement."

Pietro sighed. "Friendship," he said, resigned. "Arrangements." He concluded there was little more to say on the subject. Domestic bliss, he thought, was largely a matter of compromise.

Sensibly, he reached for another crumpet and ate it.

It dissolved on his tongue like the taste of a new world.

Maijstral kissed Nichole's hand. "This, I take it, is where my heart gets broken for good and all."

Nichole smiled. "I'm afraid so, Maijstral." She patted the settee. "Come sit by me."

Maijstral glanced in the direction of her parlor as he sat. Morning light was flooding in the windows. "Lieutenant

Navarre?" he asked.

"Giving his first press conference."

Maijstral raised his eyebrows. "Isn't that flinging him to the ravens a little early, my lady?"

She gave him a look. "He may as well get used to it. If he's going to get frightened off, it's best to know now rather than later."

He sighed. "That's true. Paying court to a member of the Diadem is not for the faint of heart."

She looked at him and put her hand on his. "I didn't

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aim that remark at you, Maijstral. I understood your decision entirely, much as I regretted your making it."

"I did not take offense."

There was a moment's silence- "So what will you do, Drake, to assuage your broken heart?"

There was a quiet glow deep within his lazy eyes. "Loot Peleng of everything I can carry off. It's the least this planet can do considering the trouble I've had here. Some of my targets are days overdue."

"Sounds as if you'll compensate for romantic disappointment well enough."

"I'll manage, my lady."

She smiled, squeezed his hand. "Are you pleased, then, Drake? With your part in this?"

"I cannot say I welcomed this, or am thankful I was involved. But it seems to have come out well enough, especially considering the potential for mayhem. I may even say that, for most of us anyway, I have achieved something of a happy ending."

Nichole's laughter rang in the room. "I suppose you have! Tell me—was it the ending you intended?"

His eyes were completely hidden. "Near enough, my lady," he said- And with that she had to be content-