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Horizon Alpha

by Douglas R. Mason

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CHAPTER ONE

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Standing with mathematical accuracy in the center of the boulevard, the android appeared to be giving a generous twenty meters' free passage on either hand; but there was no doubt that its multifaceted, revolving eye, on the crown of its black dome, would check out anything down to termite size that tried to pass.

Experience over the last six years told Gunnar Holt that he hadn't a thing to worry about. Ever since he had outgrown the physical norm for Horizon Delta, the androids had left him alone. Now, nudging the two-meter mark in height and with the flat, powerful physique of a mountaineer, he could look down on any android he met

A less reflective type might have judged that the androids were backing down from a challenge they could not meet, but he knew better.

As a youngster, before he had spoiled the distribution curve, he had judged the power behind an android's arm. Single-handed, one had put down a riot in Barnston precinct when food deliveries had been in a snarl. With men clambering on it like flies, it had methodically carved up a milling crowd, leaving a swathe of dead and injured.

The first hint that he was one apart had come by accident. He had been pushing himself to reach the dormitory area, hurrying to beat the curfew, and had found that he was already too late. The duty guard at the check point had already lined up half a dozen delinquents and was recording identity serials to levy a fine. Gunnar Holt had walked on, determined that he would not submit until he was physically stopped.

There was no doubt that the android saw him. It made an indecisive move, then packed it in and went back to its recording chore.

When it happened a third time, he made a deliberate experiment to see how far he could go. Unbelievably, it was true. For some reason, the androids were not programmed to list him as one of the flock. His foster parents, aware for some time that they had taken a cuckoo into the nest, were glad to sign off and see him given an early admission to the male dormitory area.

So he had freedom, of a kind, to make his own way about the city.

At first he had used his rest days for travel. Day journeys on foot, giving himself time to clock in at his own pad and the refectory service he had to use. That meant only one meal on those days and a growth of self-discipline to mark him out even more.

Northwest from Barnston precinct, he reckoned it was eight kilometers to the outer ring of hydroponic farms and the ultimate perimeter of the city. Northeast it was four; Southwest, six. Southeast was more interesting. Once he had taken two days and pushed to the end of the main axis. Twenty kilometers at the least count

What had taken time was the park. Recreation areas in the precincts were adequate for exercise, but this had a quality of size that filled the mind. Thorntonheath Park, the board said; halfway house on his long journey.

It was a quiet place to rest the mind, since every precinct, like his own, was in a frenetic muddle of planned obsolescence and rebuilding. The park and the libraries divided his free time.

A high ration of primate curiosity had driven him into the jungle of higher education. Using the teaching machines, with programs from the archives, which the android librarians allowed him to pick for himself, he beat a path through mathematics and engineering out and beyond the needs of his job as a recycling operative which finally closed the circle of *apartheid*. He was a minority of one.

So now, Gunnar Holt carried on down the fairway on a collision course with the stationary android. Today he would force the issue to a confrontation of his own choosing. He would make one of them actually move out of his way.

Its scanning eye stopped turning and fixed him in a direct beam. Even after all the years of success, the direct challenge dropped his skin resistance and a crawl of tension edged along his nerves. At five meters, he could read the detail on the specification plate. It was a top hand, a section leader with a decision-making capability and charge of ten standard units.

At four paces, he was beginning to think he had pushed his luck. Curiosity, far from being the helpmeet of evolution, had led him to a terminal situation. The android was showing uncertainty but, on balance, was still opting for holding the pass.

Holt suddenly felt angry. The tin man was an artifact, even conceding that a self-energizing power pack and a robot repair service made it independent of human intervention in its life cycle. He had studied the history and technical background of robot development and could visualize the circuitry that was currently sorting the angles. It had no conceivable right to interfere with him.

Anger routed fear. Now he was near enough to see his own face reflected in the polished black casque. Elongated further by the curve of the metal, it was a long, Indo-European job, topped by thickly waved red hair that added a few more centimeters of height, cleanshaven, composed, and unsmiling. He was pleased to see that it gave no sign of the uncertainty that had possessed him.

He said, evenly, "Stand out of my way, Sergeant."

It was unnecessary. The android was already on the move. In a flash of intuition, Holt recognized that it had to do with his mental set. His own doubt had triggered off the debate in the mechanical cortex. Very subtle engineering there; the android was sensitive to the microvoltage seething around in a human skull.

The way ahead was clear. On impulse, Holt stopped and spoke again. "Wait. I am not satisfied that your adjustment is correct. Show me your program."

This time, there was no hesitation. The android deftly unclipped its chest console, swung aside the flap, and fished out a flat dispenser of microtapes, which it held out for inspection.

Other than on the screen of a teaching machine, it was the first time Holt had seen one, but the layout was self-explanatory. There were many hundreds of instruction loops, schemes of action for any eventuality, except the one that had come up. Without a playback unit, he could not make any assessment. But it gave him food for thought. Sometime, he might work on one of these zombies and adapt it for his own use. Alter its programs. Though to what end, he did not know.

Holt returned the capsule, "That seems to be in order. Just remember me, next time we meet. Carry on."

"Very good, Excellency."

Thortonheath Park worked its usual therapy. There was turf underfoot, and a ceiling of palest cerulean blue at fifty meters that hinted at indefinite distance and in fact took up the full height of Horizon Delta.

On the perimeter, the ten levels of the city he knew were stepped back like the processional way of a ziggurat so that there was no abrupt cuff of masonry to stop the viewing eye. After the rabbit-warren complication of Barnston precinct, it was a considerable holiday of the spirit to stand and look about.

It was a vindication of a sort for the efforts he had to make and the isolation he was in.

Gunnar Holt had long accepted that his privileged position had won him no friends. Over the last few years, he had become as solitary as a man on an island. He had taken it as part of the package deal, but without any enthusiasm. He was not a loner by nature, reckoning, with truth, that there was a limit to the time a man could live out of himself as out of a valise.

He began to walk slowly across open space toward a small copse set on a low ridge, which was skillfully landscaped to give the illusion of great distance.

It was comfortably hot, knocking the 20-degree mark. He unclipped his belt and slipped off his fluted, metal-cloth tabard. Cumbersome to carry, he left it standing like a headless trunk on the grass. As it was a work day in the precincts near the park, it would be in nobody's way. Long before sixteen hundred, when the release bell rang, he would have reclaimed it

A small flock of white birds rose uneasily from the trees ahead, circled twice, and settled back out of sight. There was also a movement at ground level. Somebody was trespassing on his private garden.

Holt quickened his pace to check out the phenomenon and reached the winding path up the flank of the ridge in five minutes flat

Up close, the dwarf trees threw a pattern of shadow that was tangibly cool to the skin. There was no one in sight. He went directly for the top, cutting corners on the zigzag, until he made it to a clearing where a round white gazebo on a single fluted column looked over the treetops like a dovecote on a pole.

When the park was busy, there was always a patient line waiting to look out from this vantage point, the only one of its kind on Horizon Delta. Today he had the ridge to himself. He went up the spiral stair in the column, sure that whoever had been in the copse must be up above.

Confirmation came before he was halfway. Climbing up had taken its toll. Heavy breathing amplified by the hollow-drum structure was beating back down the well

When he came out onto a circular platform, he was a full minute finding the source. Then he recognized that a bundle of gray cloth, on a bench seat under a window in the curve of the wall, actually contained the living presence of a very senior citizen.

He said, "Are you all right? Can I do anything for you?"

Breathing had been a full-time chore for the oldster and left little over for sorting sensory data. The voice was his first clue that he had company. Parchment-thin eyelids flicked back and a pair of washed-out blue eyes transformed the rubble into an intelligent observer.

Holt was used to being given a second look, but he now saw surprise on a scale that made him feel beyond the human pale.

"What is it?"

"Who are you?" The voice was hardly more than a whisper. At the same time, the old man slewed stick legs off the bench and heaved himself painfully to his feet.

It was not a tour en Pair, but it used up whatever reserves were left in the physical locker. There was pride in it; a gesture that had to be made. Economical in its way, because it cut any number of corners. Before Holt caught him and lowered him back to the seat, they had looked at each other eye-to-eye. The man's presence was explained. They were two of a kind.

There was an interval of silence. On his closed circuit of pain, the old man could neither hear nor speak. Holt filled the time with a bleak look into the future. So it would be with himself years ahead.

To date, he had found enough to do exploring the environment to its physical limits, with an undefined notion in the back of his mind that there would always be progression. Here was a skeletal signpost to bring him up short. A lifetime, no less, had ended where it began. Who was to say that there was anything about himself to claim success, where this one had so patently failed?

Speculation cut off as the oldster rejoined the symposium with a question of his own.

"Who are you?"

"Holt. Gunnar Holt. From Barnston precinct. How is it we have not met before? I am often here."

"No time for regret on that score." The words came across like individual beads on a counting frame. "I am George Sutton. *Was* is the better word."

"Are there others?"

"Not that I know of. But for years now, I have not moved about very much. I think not. Statistics are

against it. How much do you know about the city?"

"Roughly the size. I would say it has an elliptical form. Lies on a Northwest-Southeast axis. Ten levels. Could hold twenty million people."

"Go to Burton precinct in the Southwest. There's a library. Don't be put off. They have books there."

"Books?"

"The ones you want are in the vaults. Make them bring them up for you. Or better still, go down yourself and look around. Then you'll understand. Horizon Delta is only a part. Only a part."

Sutton had exhausted himself and leaned against the backrest with his eyes closed. Breathing was shallow: short rasping breaths that made his throat swell with effort as he fought to get air down to where it would do some good.

"Don't try to talk. I'll get you home."

A rictus like the lipless grin on a skull supplemented a feeble headshake. "Not a chance. I came here to die. A high board to take off from. Shift me around so that I can look out."

When it was done, Sutton seemed to find a small reinforcement of libido, though Holt had to bend close to hear what he was saying. There was a lot he wanted to ask, but he reckoned there was a certain protocol in the diamond moment of dying. Communication should be from the ship to the land.

Sutton looked at the engineered prospect as though it were an ocean he had found after an infinite trek through dense bush. He was speaking to himself as much as to Holt, finding comfort in a proposition that had been part of the furniture of his mind. "There are things known and there are things unknown and there are doors between."

Even if he, personally, had never been able to find a way through, the belief that a way existed had been the mainstay of his isolation.

He followed up with another, urgent this time to get agreement. "Don't be brainwashed into accepting the assumptions of society. What is, is not necessarily right. The majority opinion is nearly always wrong."

He went very still, and it seemed likely that the oneway link was closed for good. Holt straightened up and looked out over his head.

Suddenly Sutton twisted around from the view and gripped Holt's arm with unexpected bony strength. His voice was almost a shout.

"Have you been into Woodslee precinct?"

"No, I never have."

"Go there. It may be important to you."

"Where does it lie?"

But Sutton was not listening. The grip on Holt's arm had gone slack. Breathing notched up to a frenetic tempo and then cut off in the mid-rasp, with a rattle that shook the whole rickety fabric.

A bird flew out from the copse and went in wheeling flight across open ground. An excursion module for the migrating Ka.

Gunnar Holt was used to being alone. Even in the packed living quarters of his home precinct, he was one by himself. Sutton's death underlined it in a new way. It was not natural. Man was a social animal. He needed his own kind.

Optimism had always worked to bring him around to suppose that in the long term he would make out. But Sutton's life cycle was against it. It could happen to him. There was no rational expectation that it would not.

But although he could not prevent the birds of depression from flying around his head, he reckoned it was only prudent to stop them nesting in his hair. There was time to get to Barnston. The journey back would take him past curfew, but that was no problem.

Eight boulevards ran from the park: four along the major axes, four taking intermediate compass points. Precincts were listed on check boards at each outlet.

He picked up his tabard, still waiting for him on the grass like a dumb, surrealist landmark, and followed the boundary to the Southwest exit.

An android standing four-square in the way turned deliberately and watched him read the manifest.

It would not all be lost ground. By cutting through connecting avenues, he could get to Barnston without backtracking through the park. In any event, it was the first advice he had been given in a long time and he could not pass it up.

On impulse, he called over to the android, "Come here. Show me your program."

When it was in his hands, he tipped the spools out and shoved them back in random order. It was not much, and he was hardly conscious of having crossed any Rubicon; but it was a declaration of intent. From being a passive consumer of whatever the system chose to hand out, he had gone over to an offensive, with real choices and personal responsibility.

Seeing more of the game, the action made more impact on a hatchet-faced onlooker, less than half a kilometer distant, who was building a hard-edged reproduction of the set on a well-tuned actualizer.

He voiced his opinion with the querulous harmonic of one who time and again has been proved right by events and who judges that if only people listened to him, there would be less angst suffered by one and all.

"You see, Carlos, the canker spreads. I said years ago that Sutton should have been dealt with. Now he has met another one and infected him with his opinions. I say act at once. There is enough trouble on Horizon Delta without encouraging an anarchist."

Carlos Foden, centrally placed on a long console spread, answered indirectly by speaking to the operator on the right wing, who completed his duty trio and gave more nourishing food for vision than anything the holographic web of the actualizer could net in a long search.

"What do you say to that, Joanna? He is by way of being your protegee."

The form of words was harmless enough, but the interrogee recognized the underlying sneer. Between the lines, she was being credited with a lapse from scientific detachment, which was only to be expected, in the speaker's book, from an emotion-led woman.

There was also more truth in it than he could guess at. She had spent more time watching Holt than strict scientific interest demanded.

But Carlos Foden ought to have known better than to job, and the face behind it was unruffled by any cat's paw of passion. Masklike and profoundly symmetrical, like nature's own self, its magnolia skin covered a satisfying oval distribution of subcutaneous fat. It was topped off by a generous ration of honey-blond hair taken severely back and tied by a bootlace bow of electrum ribbon.

"You are both very good at making difficulties where none exist. The project to leave Sutton under observation was agreed by Council. Some useful records on reaction to isolation have come out of it. Nothing new, but such a natural experimental situation could not be neglected. It was good sense. What harm did he ever do? Certainly, I first reported Holt's existence. If proper monitoring had been done, he would have been picked up before. You know as well as I do that it is on report. We shall hear soon enough if any action has to be taken."

Foden made a pantomime of being battered by argument and appealed to the left-winger. "There you are, Prenton. You have your answer. Our environmentalist colleague would record Nero's fiddling while Rome crumbled around her head."

Prenton was not easily appeased. "It's all very well. But Holt has gotten ahead of Sutton. Sutton was already old when he came across the Burton libraries. We should send a party down to destroy that collection."

"You worry too much. Nobody else will see it. Before long, decay will have done the job. Now that our Joanna is so interested in Holt, she won't let him out of sight. More important is the development at Woodslee. Fortunately it is not our affair, or Joanna would have let it spread as another God-given piece of experimental design."

Once again, it would have been easier to let it go, but she had her end to keep up. She knew what was behind it.

Joanna Taubman, as a ward of the Senior Administrator in Wirral City's Management Board of three, had met the attitude before. There was always the suggestion that she had freewheeled into high office on the strength of the name bond with Dr. Gordon Taubman, who had now held onto the top civic slot through two five-year terms and looked set to found a dynasty.

There was enough truth in it to be irritating. She was an ambitious girl who had a fair judgment of her own worth and knew she would have made it, eventually, whoever she had been. But as a realist, she had no objection to starting halfway up the ladder. It meant that she could handle research projects that would not have come her way in the first working decade of adult status. By the time she came to her three-year stint in the Horizon's creche unit, she would be established as an authority in her own right.

For that matter, Taubman might well fix it so that she skipped the childbearing bit. Almost certainly she could get it cut to one child instead of the statutory two. A further cutback on population for the Horizon was seriously tabled, even though slow wastage had dropped the Alpha numbers to the 100,000 mark.

She said, "There is no comparison between the two. Woodslee is a security problem. What is happening there is not understood by anybody."

It shifted the argument off course but gave George Prenton opportunity to air another grouch.

"The Council was wrong about that ten years ago, and it's still wrong today. There's only one way to deal with mutants, whether physical or mental. I say exterminate. The planners had good sense when they built lethal capability into the air exchange. There's a precedent, too. It's easy, painless, and humane. They legislated for this kind of situation, and now heirs to the system haven't enough nerve to operate it."

Again it had come around to thinly-veiled criticism of the city boss. This time it also involved his other legal ward.

Guy Taubman, equal in age with Joanna, had made assisted progress in the security service. He was now the youngest member of the committee of six that directed law and order under the direct authority of the managing triumvirate. He must have had some say in the policy on Woodslee.

Joanna Taubman had a number of reservations about her legal brother and the validity of some Council policies; but no hint of it showed. "There is no question of loss of nerve. Your solution is over-simple and is no solution at all. Who is to say that the Woodslee situation could not erupt elsewhere? Until we know its cause, it would be stupid to empty the area. They do no harm. The reverse is true. Statistics show they work harder and spend fewer hours in the entertainment areas than any other precinct on Horizon Delta. Granted there is more mental breakdown, but it leads to suicide, aggression against the self and not the group."

Foden said mildly, "That's all right Joanna. George isn't blaming you for Woodslee. But just for the record, I'll remind you that it isn't as innocent as you seem to think. Political action has started up. Direct attacks on the guards. More than twenty knocked out already. It may not be possible to contain them inside precinct boundaries for much longer. Then Prenton could be right."

Joanna left it alone. She made deft tuning movements with a set of smooth tapering fingers that would have been more naturally adapted to picking through a pattern book of exotic brocades. She brought up a clear picture of Gunnar Holt, moving with an athletic swing down the center of his boulevard. He was well on the way to Burton precinct, with the air of one who carries an oar on his shoulder.

Holt reached Burton precinct with an hour to spare before the official closing time of the public utilities sector, which housed schools, libraries, display galleries, and admin machinery needed to keep its half-million inhabitants at a muted tick.

He had not been there before and judged at once that there was better-than-average provision for the culture vulture. Not that there was any about Reconstruction ploys were over for the day. Passing through the Coliseum district on the way to his objective, he had seen that every actualities stadium was showing a House Full sign. Like everywhere else on Horizon Delta, the third estate was hooked on continuous free entertainment Bread and circuses.

Maybe Burton had been built over a site with a tradition for scholarship. The library complex filled seven levels, with one subject area opening from another in an ascending spiral.

Holt spent twenty minutes casing this monument to information. It was an incredible deposit at that Scree, weathered from the slopes of scholarship. Still, except that there was more bulk than he had yet seen in one place, there was no gain on a qualitative kick. A trial sample from a mathematics book brought no surprises.

Sutton's special mention must be reserved for the hidden written material. That would be something to see in its own right, insofar as he had never handled such a primitive tool as a printed book.

At the height of the spiral, Holt leaned out over an ornamental baluster and looked down into a well like an amphitheatre, with crescents of study carrels enough to seat a thousand students at the least count.

Acoustic cowls were in molded yellow wood, teaching machines were neatly shrouded in pale apricot hoods. Tall, Sat spars, stalactite and stalagmite, ran in well-drawn curves to mark out areas. It was all set up as a powerhouse to belt the accumulated wisdom of the millennia into the captive ears of the eager young.

Seemingly, they all had other fish to fry. Except for android librarians sitting, with infinite mechanical patience, at intervals around the set, the place was empty as the inside of a drum.

Holt was turning away to get back to the central inquiry kiosk, when a small movement of color caught his eye. A knot of lime green fabric was making progress down a narrow alley of storage racks. Its owner was invisible, but there was a character lead in the motion. Even at a distance, there was a rhythmic bounce that communicated zest.

As he watched, the green marker stopped dead, made a 360-degree turn, went on to a count of three, and spun again. Whoever lay beneath was not so committed to research that there was no time for the small personal gesture.

Discounting androids, there would be no audience for it.

Even as the thought crossed his mind, the librarian at the end of the gulley jacked itself ponderously off its station and disappeared in pursuit.

Holt was already on the way down when the scene played itself again in total recall. There was something that did not gel. He was halfway down the spiral on an inside track and went to the ornamental rail to look again.

From the shallower angle, he could not see either of the protagonists, but he could remember well enough that the android's dome had been half a meter below the level of the top shelves. That could only mean that if the cloth was carried on a human head, the wearer was at least taller than an android.

On the ground, it was not as easy to see where he was going. Circuiting the well had clouded orientation. Interconnecting passageways were identical. Come to think of it, there was some credit due to the green topknot in finding enough libido to truck along such a rats' maze.

Working from first principles, Holt made for the inner rail to look up and identify the point from which he had seen the action. Two dog-legs and he was there, with a bonus that made a further check unnecessary. On an alcove table, there was a flat, gray document case with a library admission counter on it and a serrated identity disk, which had been used to check into the complex, lying on the polished top beside it.

It was a local registration. Face up, it carried BURTON PRECINCT in Tempo Inline with an identity number. On the reverse, there was a neat index-finger print and the name Shesha Haddon written in a round, flowing hand by the owner.

Holt quickened his pace like a hound dog given a sock. All told, this Shesha was bizarre not only in name. Head coverings were never worn in the city. She would stand out as an oddity. If indeed it was a female quarry. But then it would surely have to be with that name.

The section curved away and ended as a cul-de-sac. She had branched off left or right through one of the narrow, connecting ginnels.

Confirmation came suddenly from close by and on the right. A warm, clear voice, with a harmonic of loathing in it, said, "Don't touch me. Go back to your desk."

Holt fell easily into a pattern of direct action as though claiming a birthright. He went up the side of the bay, scattering tubes of tape in a small cascade, until he was crouching on the flat top with his head brushing the roof.

There was no remaining area of doubt. Shesha Haddon was female and as nubile as they had ever come

in the long history of the planet.

She was standing with her back to a bulkhead that closed off the section and, even under stress, she had fetched up in an evocative stance, like a highly sophisticated bas-relief.

Palms were flat against the wall and a little way out from her sides. Her head was tilted to look up at him, over the dome of the android, which had penned her in the corner.

It was a taut, hieratic pose, all fluid line and satisfactory conjunction of plane and curve; round breasts, almost fully defined by a fine, metallic-mesh tunic top in silver gray; long legs only just making the elegant end of the thin-sturdy continuum. A mathematician's delight for any age.

Her face was calm, serious, structured on a wide oval; high, clear forehead; straight nose; eyes enormous, gold-flecked, and luminous with intelligence; Melanesian lips full, everted, and currently open to mime astonishment.

She was taller than the android, but not by so much that she was comfortably outside its area of doubt. That, and her individual style, must have triggered off its checking zeal.

There was another factor, which only registered on the eidetic image that Holt carried on his retina in the drop to the deck. This high-level piece of biological evolution had another claim to notice. Racial integration had long ironed out extremes of skin pigmentation; but Shesha was a throwback to another age. She was an exotic, regal bronze.

Belatedly, the android sorted the data and decided that it was being involved in a riot.

Its revolving eye steadied on Holt, and one flexible arm was whipping around to its chest console to send out an all-stations call when he straightened up and spoke very nastily into its convoluted ear.

"Get back to your desk."

Not built to knuckle its forehead to the squire, it nevertheless managed to look respectful and backed off. "Of course, Excellency."

Holt was left facing the girl, who did not appear to have moved in any particular and simply stared at him as though he was freshly uncorked from some Eastern bottle.

To make progress, he said, "Shesha Haddon, I presume?"

It was an inspired opening to communication on the highest plane; but not, on the other hand, loaded with any special menace.

It was, therefore, with complete surprise that he saw the brilliant eyes fill emotionally with tears before she covered her face with her hands.

At the same time, a keening wail on a rising and falling cycle began to pump around the set. The android, thinking it through in the privacy of its alcove, had come to a decision to call in the marines.

CHAPTER TWO

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Joanna Taubman had her hand on the hatch when Prenton's voice stopped her dead.

It sounded as though vindication had come his way on a big scale, and departmental jealousy drew her back.

Prenton was sorry he had not waited for another minute. Once she had gone, he would have been free to initiate a report of his own.

Carlos Foden had already left his scanner and was watching Prenton's small screen. Thinking that an ally would do no harm, she waited in the anteroom long enough to call through on the intercom to her brother, who had unexpectedly stopped by to pick her up.

"Guy. Come through. That beady-brain Prenton is on to something that might just bring in security. You might as well see it first hand."

By the time they went into the monitoring center, Foden had transferred the signal to the main actualizer and one end of the oblong room was transformed into a lifesize presentation of a library area.

The action seemed innocent enough, though the muted wail of the siren added a harmonic of tension.

Prenton, who had seen Holt jump from the shelf top, was tapping impatiently with a stylus.

They saw Holt move forward and touch the girl's arm. His image said, "Steady now. They won't harm you."

There was digestive pause and Prenton filled it with, "You see. Here is another one. A regular Hottentot this time. How is it nobody has noticed her?"

It was a good question. Even at second hand, Shesha Haddon would be hard to overlook in any size of crowd.

Joanna Taubman let it pass as simple rhetoric. After all, he knew the answer as well as anybody. The monitor could not be everywhere, and it worked a finely calculated, sampling pattern. It was a chance in a million that she had not been picked out. But unless there was some force operating to upset the basic laws of chance, there was no probability of its happening again in the next ten decades.

What was more to the point, on a personal kick, was that the girl was altogether too attractive and that she did not want to see Holt get himself involved.

Holt had the girl by the arm and was leading her between the racks. Prenton scanned the floor area and they saw androids, summoned by the call, converging on the open end of the aisle from all sides. It would certainly be a test case.

The couple was three paces from the opening when it was closed by two androids approaching from either side.

Holt said sharply, "What is it?"

Switched by the alarm to a definite common program, the androids spoke together in a tinny duet, "You are required to surrender your identity disks and await further instruction."

Holt motioned the girl to wait and went ahead. There was no mistaking the edge of contempt as he said, "*Required?* Required by who, for godsake?"

"Whom," said the right-hand marker, who had been programed by a purist and wanted the record straight.

The scholarly intervention singled it out for attention, and Holt bore down on the pedagogue in two strides. Before its synapses could work around to an avoidance pattern, he had thrown a series of switches on its chest console and was fairly snarling down its ear. "You are under external direction. Do you understand?"

"Certainly, Excellency."

"Take this tin zombie here and throw him out."

Not programmed to react to its own kind, the left-hand man was in a state of pathetic indecision. Working on its original emergency briefing, it tried to go forward toward the girl. Its legs were still moving, when it was picked bodily from the floor, held at full-arm stretch to clear all obstacles, and carried off.

But others were crowding in; a solid phalanx to block the way. It was going to need allies.

The watchers saw Holt leave the girl, climb over two intervening racks, and come in at the back of the gathering crowd. Once there, he picked strategically placed agents to work for him. Now the noise level was building up, as the first android developed all the power in its pack to shove ahead and complete its mission. Shelves buckled, and a whole length of casing leaned out, spilling a flood of tape capsules.

They could no longer hear what instruction Holt was giving, but there was no doubt about the end product. The android population of Burton precinct's library complex was set fair for mayhem and civil disturbance.

Guy Taubman said urgently, "Contact my office. Get them to draft in special services units. They're under direct control from our own security center. They won't take any notice of local interference."

Foden, resenting good advice, said, "It will take time. They're all committed at Woodslee making a cordon."

"I know that the situation there is stabilized. One section can be withdrawn for long enough to sort this out."

It was an optimistic forecast. The library would have to be made over.

Prenton said, "Use the gas, I say. There'll be no settled peace down there while we allow malcontents like Holt their freedom. Now would be a good time. There's nobody else in that area except androids. I can't see what the objection is."

The solution had occurred to Guy Taubman, but he reckoned it was none of a monitoring official's business to make executive suggestions. He said coldly, "That will be decided by the Council on advice from my office. Keep security informed."

Outside, he said to his sister, "Prenton panics too soon. What is it after all? Two deviants out of millions. A bit of physical damage that can be repaired in five minutes. They can't get out of Horizon Delta. If there's any serious trouble, we can pick them off anytime we like."

"It's unusual to hear you say that."

"Why?"

"With the Woodslee trouble, it might be thought that your Committee was not operating too well."

"That's another matter altogether, and very few people know about it."

"It won't be Prenton's fault if they don't."

"That's all right. It suits me if he builds it up."

"Why do you say that?"

The walkway had brought them to a garden suburb, where the large, individual houses of the ruling notables of the city were landscaped among lawns and trees. A low-angle February sun was standing like a coin on the distant rim of this penthouse level of the city. There was a red-and-green four-seater shuttle parked beside a reduction bay to take them on.

Guy Taubman saved his reply until he had keyed in the destination data on the auto pilot and the car was rising slowly in a flurry of fallen leaves.

"It suits me, because I want to take a party down there and sort it out myself. A little hot war would be good for my career."

Social studies had at least given Joanna the form of words. "But what about the *people* down there?"

"People? Are you serious? Rodents. Men must have something to occupy their time. We have refined zoo management."

Shesha Haddon was glad to see Holt back. Although not directly attacked, the random noise had a disturbing undertow of threat. But when he said, "This way. Over the top," without the option of choice, she did not immediately move from the spot.

Like Holt, she had gotten used to guiding her own boat. Isolation could only be endured by building pride. He was acting like an android-variant and she resented it.

Holt, already halfway up the wall, dropped back to the deck and said, "Look, this diversion won't last. Any minute now, they'll sort out the angles and come searching for us. Here, I'll give you a leg up."

Obligingly, he put his back to the shelving and made a stirrup with joined hands.

The gesture in itself was no additional argument, but honor was satisfied by the explanation. She recognized that he was only wanting to be helpful.

She put her hands on his shoulders, went up in a smooth flow of action, and dropped lightly on the other side.

Holt was left with a disturbing set of sensory data to sort through: a brief pneumatic pressure, some square centimeters of velvet-bronze skin, close enough to his eyes to identify its even grain, and an individual pollen cloud, which could have stood up, alone, to represent the female idea.

He followed over and they ran side by side down an empty corridor with the noises of battle mounting behind them.

It was a good, if lucky, choice of route and brought them out into the entrance lobby, where the reception desk stood empty, since its duty personnel had answered the emergency call.

Shesha Haddon stopped dead and had to lift her voice to beat the racket. "My tally. I left my entry tally back there."

"That's all right. You won't be needing it."

"But my identity is with it. Without that I don't have a bed."

A more suave escort would have said that she would have a sure welcome in anybody else's; but Holt took it on its face value.

"That's a point. But we can't look for it until they cool off. Even then, it may be under a load of trash. How far do you have to go?"

"Not far. I live here in Burton. But there's the curfew."

"Do they challenge you, then?"

"Sometimes yes, sometimes no. But I can't bank on getting through. I guess I'm hard for them to classify."

Holt, with some years' backlog to make up, took a stride forward in grooming talk. It had to be delivered at a semi-shout, which took some of the intimacy out of it. "You are in a class by yourself. Don't worry. We'll work something out. I came here to look at some written records. We could do that and then weigh the situation again."

"*Written* records? I've been coming here for years and I haven't seen anything like that."

"Would you be interested?"

"Until I get that disk back, I have nowhere else to go."

It was qualified enthusiasm; but the tone was working on the right side. Still remembering his own reaction to meeting Sutton and finding his group number increased by 100 per cent, he reckoned she was managing to play it very cool. But then, in her case, there would be another consideration. Being too eager would devalue the feminine mystique. Even in a shouted dialogue.

Fortunately, there was work to do to get the partnership off the ground on a working basis.

"Search around. The entrance to the vaults must be controlled from the kiosk."

As she found it, the noise from the body of the hall cut off as if a switch had been thrown. Her voice echoed around the set in a sudden silence. "Would it be stacks? There's a key here, labeled Stacks."

Android feet in unison were clumping toward the lobby, when he shoved it over. In the facing wall, an elevator indicator board glowed with the same word and a section of grille folded away to show a waiting cage.

They had a dog's-eye view of metallic legs crossing the parquet toward them as they dropped.

It was a silent world. In the small cage, meant for a single librarian to go down to fill out a request slip, there was only a narrow dielectric between them. Used to avoiding contacts, they were acutely conscious of the other's breathing presence.

This simple biological chore, amplified by stress, moved Shesha's metallic net in a very eye-catching rhythm. Holt had to work at it to find something non-loaded to say, and when he spoke, they spoke together and stopped.

When the channels were clear he said, "After you."

"I was only going to say that I'm not usually given to emotional displays. But suddenly meeting you like that was a shock. After all this time, it takes some getting used to."

"I know what you mean. Don't think I undervalue it myself. Actually I had the edge. Some of my surprise had already rubbed off on an earlier meeting."

"Someone else, like us?"

"An old man. He died. He told me about Burton libraries. That's why I came here."

There was no doubt about her intelligence. She was on to the significance of the "old" bit in a flash. "So he lived his life out here. Many, many years like this."

"Don't worry. It won't happen to you."

The cage had stopped and the grille was opening. Holt put a hand on her arm, moved out of self-consciousness in an altruistic bid to communicate comfort. Hyaline as jade, cool to the touch. She stood still as stone for a fraction of a second and then walked out into a narrow corridor.

"How can you say that?"

"Just a hunch. There's change in the air. After all, I met Sutton and now you. Nothing can be quite the same for either of us. It's an omen."

"Omens can be bad or good. Dying isn't so obviously on the credit side. And this place isn't so marvelous."

The passage they were in was not much above head height and dimly lit. For centuries, it had only been used by androids, and the air was heavy with a sickly smell of decay. It was a featureless maze of long storage racks, close-packed with books of every shape and size.

Holt said, "Better leave a trail."

He pulled the center book off the shelf on his right and the binding tore spongily away in his hand.

At the end of the row, Shesha was looking at a spreading mottled blight that had begun to grow from floor level and had already climbed four shelves on a three-meter spread. "How did your friend ever manage to read these?"

"There must be others."

It was a reasonable proposition, but twenty minutes later Holt was doubting it himself. Leaving a track of marked shelves, they had covered a kilometer of identical alleyways in a ranging circuit, skirting areas of decay, where the fungoid growth had joined tentacles across the gaps in a floor-to-ceiling plug of sponge. With the roof lights still working inside the mass, it seemed to have a living presence. The word made flesh. In some areas, whole sections of shelving had collapsed into long barrows of trash like seed beds for new growth.

Every fifty meters, intersections in the aisles had been used to make a small room with a round table and half-a-dozen chairs. In its heyday, researchers had been allowed to work in direct contact with the coal face.

Shesha Haddon blew the dust off a chair and sat down, making a clear statement of disillusion. There was no grouch, but he reckoned it was time he had a better idea.

"We'll go back to the cage. There must be other levels. This was the lowest on the indicator."

"I wouldn't like to see a lower one. All these books. All mean something. Imagine all the thought that

went into producing them. Millions of man-hours. Now turning into mushrooms. It's frightening, Gunnar. It's like a huge tomb of dead minds."

She shivered. The fine skin of her arms had gathered itself into gooseflesh.

Hearing his own name was a pleasing novelty and held up his reply. Too long, in the event, because it was never given. Another invasion of privacy, at a deeper level, had him losing balance, so that he fell across the table, knocking over a chair on the way and coming to rest, face down, like a sacrificial victim on a green altar.

Shesha Haddon's "Eek" made a period and was justified on all counts. It was no good thing to be in this crypt with company; but to be there alone, or with a putative corpse, was one farther on along the angst continuum. She positioned a chair and hauled him back until he was sitting upright in it, with his arms hanging straight down and his head slumped forward on his chest.

As a convenient way to keep him pinned to his seat, she stood astride, holding his thighs with the inside of her knees and half sitting on him, while she unclipped his tabard and felt for a heartbeat.

It was there all right. Very slow and steady, but a lot of power in it. A mirror would have been useful. Breathing on a mirror would have been a good check. She was beginning to feel dizzy herself and held on to the back of the chair. Time seemed to wash through the complex like an underground river.

Less alarmed, knowing he was still among the quick, her mind ranged off on an imaginary dialogue—one of the gimmicks she had developed over the years to beat the pressures of isolation. A man and his friend were speaking:

"And how are you?"

"Not well. In fact, I breathe on a mirror every morning to see if I'm still alive."

"And how does it turn out?"

Gunnar Holt had felt a momentary blank when his mind was evenly divided on whether to pursue the morbid bit about the vault or take action to warm her up or simply to say that it was a very long time since anyone had used his name in natural friendship.

The vacuum was filled by a rush of imagery that blotted out the local scene and left nothing over for personal, physical management. In a curious way, he was out cold and yet conscious that what he was seeing was as real as the underground library. Uncountable events were happening simultaneously, but given enough time he could sort them all out. Dimly, he knew that it would indeed take a lifetime to untwist and evaluate every separate thread of what was there present.

Trying to make sense out of it, in a familiar serial fashion, he focused on a huge ship in a river estuary with the land on either side, crowded to the water's edge with towering building blocks.

Then he was underground, in the same general area, moving through a long, bright tunnel in an excursion module that moved on two wheels in a slotted track.

From there, he was sitting against a stone wall in an open field with warmth beating on his skin and a brightness shining on his closed eyes. He knew it was a sunny day and he said as much, articulating slowly like a drunk making a point.

"It is very sunny today."

In the context, it was way out. But it was evidence of life at the center of the heap. Shesha put a hand flat on either side of his head and lifted it. His eyes were open, but unfocused, pupils dilated and the iris concentrated in a gray-blue band. She was leaning close, as though to look in through a keyhole and see what was going on in the secret room of his head, when the absolute silence of the vault was broken by a soft, sliding rumble as a set of shelves, corroded paper-thin, settled under their own weight.

Intellectually, she knew what it was, but it seemed a prelude to being buried alive. A gust of fetid air fanned past carrying gray spores of rot.

Shesha took two handfuls of hair and shook his head. In the depths of his confusion, he heard a voice he could not identify calling urgently, "Gunnar. Gunnar."

The sun went out and was replaced by a face that filled vision. All eyes and open mouth. His hands grabbed automatically for a defensive hold, and the chair passed a point of no return and fell back.

The jar of it brought him back to the here-and-now, with Shesha belatedly beating at his chest and trying to break free. He shifted his grip and smothered the movement by a neat roll that allowed body weight to work for him, so that she could only strain back her head and try to spit like a cat.

Intuition told him that long explanation would get him nowhere, so he brought down his mouth and effectively stopped the action.

For a count of five, she struggled to turn her head.

Then he felt her lips go soft. Some inner mechanism had decided that in spite of appearances, there was no threat to life in the situation.

Warily keeping her immobilized, he said, "What was all that about, then?"

"You're hurting me."

"Is it safe to let you get up?"

"Safe for whom?"

"You tell me. I was minding my own business, leaning on a wall, when you started in beating at my chest."

"Let me get up."

Holt did more. He pulled her to her feet and brushed the dust off her back. Action completed the therapy, and he said, soberly, "Now I remember falling toward that table. What happened?"

"I don't know. You had some kind of blackout. I was trying to bring you around. Then I heard a very creepy noise and yelled at you, and you did this bear routine."

"What creepy noise?"

"Shelves falling, I think. We must get out of here. It's a dreadful place."

"Why not you?"

"What?"

"Why only me? Why didn't you have the same experience?"

"I don't know. I did get a peculiar dizzy spell. Unless I was too occupied trying to waken you. It might have got to me a fraction late."

"What might?"

"Whatever it was that got to you—and I daresay there's plenty of it about."

She was impatient to get away and moved off at a near run.

There was, in any event, nothing to be gained from this level. Clearly, they had overshot the lode-bearing area. Conversation wilted and died the death as Shesha pushed up the pace, anxious for out.

On the home stretch, she was three paces ahead, with nobody to break it gently, when she saw that the cage was gone. On the afternoon's showing, it looked as though new friends came at a high price. Her tone had a hint of blame in it when she said, "It's gone. The cage has gone. They're going to leave us here."

Holt could not look surprised. For the last hundred meters he had kept to himself a growing knowledge that it would be so. Whether it was just intelligent guessing or whether some external agency had shoved its finger among his synapses, he could not decide. But there had been a clear notion in his mind that the shaft would be empty.

Then he saw the back of the wall, which had been concealed by the rear wall of the elevator itself. There was a long, conical stain like a termite hill on the gray stone. He could not have seen it when they arrived, but he had seen it in his mental image of the empty shaft.

It was no time to add to her problems. He said, "Press the recall."

Again, it was no surprise when response was negative.

Not on the ESP link, Shesha Haddon spoke it out. "They've stopped it." He was already moving away, and fear of being left alone prompted another transmission on a rising note of alarm, "Where are you going?"

Holt had sized up the nearest rack and was clearing the top shelf of its pulpy load. Then he was back with a two-meter metal strip, which he shoved in the grille.

His frail plank was bending under strain, and he was thinking out an alternative when the holding catch broke and he was suddenly off balance.

It was all good knockabout stuff, and, undermined by recent events, Shesha Haddon laughed until tears came to her eyes. In a curious way, it established him as a sympathetic type. Maybe some cagey element in the subconscious heap had been fighting a rearguard, fearing that there was a catch in it somewhere. But anybody who could fall flat on his face had to be genuine.

She went down to a full knee bend beside the trier, and when she could speak, she said, "You fall about a lot. What is it this time?"

She came very near to getting the lever wrapped around her neck. But laughter was giving her persona a further dimension. Holt realized that there was not much of it about on Horizon Delta. There was the mechanical entertainment of the Coliseum belt, but it hardly carried over into the daily life of the people. It wasn't surprising either, when you got right down to it. Laughter was a product of situations where there was the possibility of sudden change. Policed by androids and following rigid patterns of behavior, there was no change for anybody.

Shesha only latched on to his first reaction to strike her dead and became apologetic, "I'm sorry. You looked so surprised. Are you all right?"

"Surely. I was just looking at you. You're a beautiful girl at any time, but when you laugh like that, you're incredible. One thing's for sure, you shouldn't be living in this cellar. You're a natural for that sunlight I was in back there."

"Sunlight?"

"A natural light. Going for free outside the city."

"I know about it, of course, as a fact, but light is only light. What does it matter what the source is?"

"I don't know that, either, except that the experience of it was different from anything we have."

Shesha put a finger on the flaw in the argument. "It was an illusion. You were here all the time. You *imagined* it."

"All right, we'll have to leave it at that. I can only say it had the ring of truth about it."

Holt grabbed the lintels and leaned out into the shaft. Light was dim and confusing. Up or down, it was difficult to see a definite end. But to go farther down seemed pointless. Somewhere between where they now were and the top was the level that Sutton had found important. There was also the further point about getting out anyway, but he put that aside for more study.

He said, "Using the only material we have plenty of, a few more shelves should do it. Bustle around, young Shesha, and clear a rack."

It was the thin edge of the wedge again, on the hey-you waveband; but she reckoned she owed something as an entertainment tax.

When he had half a dozen, he pulled back the left-hand gate, slid one through the, lattice on its edge, a meter from floor level, and rammed it hard against the far wall. He put another one as high as it would go and then pushed back the gate until they jammed.

Holt tested the first one with his full weight. It was rock steady. The metal was wafer-thin, but he had it on its strongest section. He hauled himself onto the second and found he was head and shoulders over the threshold of the floor above. It looked cleaner and more used.

"Pass another one up."

This time it was a looser fit, but he reckoned it would serve. He was some time getting the most favorable site, and Shesha called up the shaft, "What are you doing?"

She was leaning out, rim-lit by the light behind her. White teeth and shining eyes suspended over a dark pit.

"Nearly through. Hand up another shelf."

"You're not going to do that funny falling trick?"

"I'll watch it."

With the lever in position, he had to concede that she had a point. He could only get purchase on it by body weight, and leaning out to do it would make recovery impossible when the catch released.

As though reading his mind, Shesha called, "It's not possible. Let me come up."

Without waiting for a reply, she appeared on the outside of the ladder carrying another plank.

"What's that for?"

"Slot it in chest-high, as a hold-fast."

"Good thinking."

"I'll push the lever and you can catch me."

"Not so good."

"It's logical. I couldn't hold your weight, but you could hold mine."

Put that way, there was sense in it. When the device was rigged, he anchored himself to the top beam and clamped his left arm around her waist.

Shesha took her feet off the foothold and braced against the wall, so that she was almost horizontal to the lever, and began to push.

Holt shut his mind to every thought except holding on and keeping her safe. Close cooperation with another human being was a new thing in their experience. Few activities could be closer, or with more on-the-spot penalty for failure. He felt every muscle in her abdomen harden against his arm as she took the strain.

When the pay-off came and the plank whipped away, it was like grappling with a lithe fish that was trying to struggle free for a head dive into a tank.

It was a long second before they were stable, and he was blaming himself for letting her do it. Then he had swung her around between himself and the fixed half of the grille and was pinning her back to it with an overkill of force.

Shesha Haddon reckoned that the way of a helpmeet was fraught with hazard. She had not allowed herself to think about the black void under her head and had pushed with eyes tight-closed. As she opened them, there was a muted clatter from the pit as the lever hit rock bottom, like any apple, and reaction sent a muscular shudder through her whole body.

Hemmed in as she was, it had to work at it to get to first base and Holt felt it as though it was his own. He said gently, "That's all right. You're okay. One step and you're out."

She saw that his face was running with sweat and correctly guessed that his main concern had been for herself. It was a lot to digest. More seemed to have happened to her in the last few hours than a period of years. Playing for time, she forced a light tone. "You've gone into that bear routine again. I can't move."

Twenty minutes later, Holt looked up from a littered table top and said soberly, "Well it's all here. We could spend a month on the detail, but the layout's clear to see. If anything, it makes the setup more of an insult than I thought. Why didn't Sutton try to get out?"

"You said he was an old man. Maybe he opted for the devil he knew."

She was looking at an artist's blow-up of the technical drawings. At the top, it had Wirral City, and it was in four colored bands. Horizon Delta lay at the bottom of the heap. Above it were two other enclosed

strata, and the top, labeled Horizon Alpha, was open to an azure blue sky with nicely balanced masses of baroque cumulus. Clearly, it was an elite sector, a garden city with well-spaced housing and huge, open spaces.

Wirral City itself was planned as an ellipse, almost filling a peninsula between two deep estuaries. What they had believed to be the whole city was only a part.

Holt said, "What I do not understand is how they got away with it at the time. There just isn't any link between the Horizons. From the beginning, they were planned for different populations. Horizon Delta has twice the number of Horizon Gamma. Then Horizon Beta seems to be a narrow, sealing layer given over to androids."

"Alpha is open to that sun you were talking about. Hardly any people."

"That's where we're going."

"How?"

"There has to be a way."

"You said yourself there was no contact between Horizons."

"Perhaps the answer lies in Woodslee precinct."

"There's just one snag."

"Which is?"

"First we have to get out of here. What would you say was happening up top?"

The hiss of an elevator gave a part answer. Their research center was located within view of the reception point. They saw a cage materialize *in* the empty shaft, and two android figures moved jerkily onto the landing.

Holt said, "I've never seen this type before. Maybe somebody outside Horizon Delta pulls the strings."

Even at a distance it was clear that they were taller than the usual run. Instead of a dome, each had an ovoid head with rudimentary features.

Sighting had been mutual. The first out of the trap raised its left arm straight from the shoulder as if to point.

Holt dived across the table and carried the girl to the floor, as flame spat with a dry staccato clatter and shells snarled like hornets through the reference points in space they had lately filled.

CHAPTER THREE

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Flat on her back, in what was becoming repetitive as a training loop, Shesha Haddon pondered whether she would survive this onset of friendship into a viable future.

She was not given long to think it through. Holt rolled his weight off her chest in record time for the

sequence and said urgently, "This way, keep your head down."

Three-seconds-fast scuffle on hands and knees, with nervous doubt whether she was not setting up a target every bit as vulnerable as her head, and Holt was pulling her to her feet in the shelter of a book-lined passageway.

They ran hand-in-hand for an intersection and zigzagged fifty meters before he called a halt. "Listen!"

Even-paced footsteps sounded from far left and far right. Shesha opened her mouth to speak and found herself gagged by his free hand.

The androids had separated to the two end aisles, which ran the whole length of the sector. The one on the right had halted. His partner was moving in toward the center of a row. Midway, he turned again, through a connecting aisle, then followed the next row out to the perimeter. When he stopped, the other one began to move.

The pattern of search was simple but effective. In this sector, shelving ran in long parallel lines with staggered, connecting gaps. From either end a whole row was plain to see. With one covering, the other could work along and flush out the connecting alley. Then as it monitored the next, its fellow could repeat the drill and move up one.

Slow, but strategically sound. Eventually they would be driven back to the rear wall. Checkmate by two rooks.

Holt signaled for a further withdrawal, and they crossed three more rows before he stopped again. Here, two intersections had been widened to make a study alcove with a round table. Standing beside it was an empty library cart.

Footfalls from the rear were faint, but still clear. Shesha, with her mouth close to his ear, said, "What can we do?"

"Stand at the end of the row. Don't show yourself. Count the steps on that side. I want to know how long he's gone from the end. Also, how far away."

While she was busy, he loaded the cart, clearing two shelves to pack the lower tray and pile the top in a solid meter block. When he shoved it along to where she stood, she had it all worked out.

"Forty-three seconds on the long haul, thirty-five when the gap is nearer. He's four rows away on this side. Just started another short trip."

It was very neat. Next time, he would narrow it to two. But it was the longer journey. Holt raced through the calculation. Everything depended on exact timing. He waited for the android to move, then he maneuvered the heavy cart into the aisle.

Fifteen meters to go. The android reached the gap, went through and turned into the home straight. Vectors were set out in Holt's head like lines in an animated diagram, with a precise collision point at the end of the row.

Very slowly, he got way on his ram, bending low, with his head level with the top of the pile. Then he put every ounce of effort into it.

Hands dropped on his waist. It was too late to tell her to stay out of it. There was nothing he could do except guide the cart.

For a nonasecond, he thought that the extra force had defeated his timing and that they would reach and pass the row too soon, giving the android an open target with their backs. Pounding along, he could no longer hear the footsteps. Then the tin man was dead ahead, with its arm whipping up as an earnest of phenomenal reaction time.

One shot ripped into the top hamper as Holt dropped clear. Then the cart struck.

The android went down like a rag doll. Shesha called, "Don't forget the other one," but Holt was throwing rubble aside to get at its console. He was sure that men had programed it and it was against logic that they would start something they could not stop.

It was struggling to orientate when he found the panel. Miniature switchgear, with a master key for non-op. When he threw it over, he was dealing with a collection of scrap.

He had it by the legs and pulled it clear as the other began to fire from the end of the row.

Shesha screamed, "Leave it!" Then when she saw he would not, she was beside him taking a leg.

Three rows on, she used enough breath to say bitterly, "Are you some kind of zany collector?"

"Hold it."

Holt had the chest cage open and was fishing out a forearm replacement unit. Instead of a carbine, it was developed for maintenance capability with a selection of power spanners and screw bits. It was the clip mechanism that interested him.

Shesha was going frantic. "Be quick! You have no time!"

Holt had seen what he wanted—simple snap-on catches with multiple jacks to link up the cortex: local controls centered in the cybernetic limb.

He whipped off the carbine arm, pointed it inside the chest cavity, and fired twice.

Shesha, with her back to a bookcase, breathing heavily, said, "But they're made of *metal*. It won't work against one of them."

"It depends where they're hit."

She put her finger on a major flaw in the argument. "But it matters wherever *you're* hit. And if you can see an android to shoot at—it can see you."

"So we make sure it doesn't see us until we're good and ready. Come on."

With only one to dodge, it was easy enough to slip out of the net. Listening and moving, they worked around until they were between the remaining android and the elevator.

Holt said, "It can go on for days without refueling. We can't. Eventually, it has to catch up. I've got to finish it. While I still can. Go to the end of the row."

Although it was unable to see them, the android's aural direction sensors had beamed delicately onto the conversation. It zigzagged through two intersections without stopping to check left and right. There was one row of shelves between them and it was hurrying for the connecting gap.

Holt picked a bulky volume at random and lobbed it down the aisle. It dropped flat, with a percussive smack as the android's carbine arm appeared like a pointer.

For a second it wavered. First impressions had been that the action was on the left. Noise from the right was difficult to interpolate on the graph. But the logic of its construction had to be followed. It stepped clear and turned to left.

Holt was standing four square, like a competition marksman. He raked the target in a long burst, from hip to ovoid head, and was still firing into it, with ricochets screaming every which way, as it crumpled with seams hammered open and its head circling on its neck stall in a last frenetic surge of power.

Shesha Haddon's voice stopped him. Even from short acquaintance, the act seemed out of character. The black eyes that looked at her hardly held recognition. He had become a stranger.

"What is it?"

"Gunnar. Enough is enough. It's finished."

"You didn't do what I said. You might have been in the way."

She felt that it could have been put better. He could have said, "You might have been hurt", but, rapidly adjusting to the new era of violence, she recognized that it was not the time. Instead, she shifted the collection of scrap until she could unclip the carbine arm and preferred it like a good hound dog.

This time she got a compliment from Attila. "You learn fast."

"I'm a very clever girl."

Holt checked the armament. An exhausted clip had poked itself out from the arm he had used. He ferreted around in the debris for more of the same and found four others neatly slotted in the chest cavity.

With a return to civil usages that did not go unnoticed by the squaw, he said, "I want to look at the controls on this one. Could you go and dig out the spares from the other? Watch the switches or it might sit up and make a grab for you."

"I wouldn't like that."

Watching her pleasantly undulating walk down the aisle, Holt reckoned she was taking a chance, even with the mechanism at non-op. A second thought was that, in spite of appearances and the emotional bit, early on, she was a very cool operator. Too good to be a mole in Horizon Delta. He began a systematic check of the torso. One thing was for sure. There would be others of this type. If they were to make any progress, he had to know what made them tick.

Shesha Haddon collected three full clips in record time. The blank head had a malevolent look which was still present in imagination when she had covered it with the V of an open book.

On the way to join the ganger, she stopped off at the table where they had spread the works on Wirral City. Holt had collected a sheaf of pull-outs of working drawings and schematic diagrams. She also picked out a folio, "Wirral City. The Dream Takes Shape," which at a quick glance, earlier, had seemed less banal than might have been expected.

Rehearsing what she would say, a dialogue began in her head. "Here are the clips, Gunnar, and I brought these. They could be very useful."

"That's fine. You think of everything. I really don't know what I did until I met you."

Holt spoke first when she was still five paces off, straightening from the floor, with both carbine arms like

grotesque extensions of his hands.

"What have you got there?"

"Literature on the city."

"Oh. Well. If you want to carry it, bring it along. There won't be much time for a quiet read. First things first. It's time we had a meal."

That was a reminder. Shesha stopped trying to put her finger on the spot where the conversation had gone off course. "I have to get my registration disk."

"The time for registration disks has long gone. By some quirk of chance, we're outside the reference grid of Horizon Delta."

"Does Horizon Delta know that?"

"Never allow yourself to be brainwashed by the assumptions of society. They may be wrong."

"Who said that?"

"Why couldn't I have just said it?"

"It doesn't sound natural. It sounded as though you were saying it in inverted commas."

Holt thought it was a little hard that he should have drawn a critic. He said, "It strikes me that if you have one nonfeminine trait, it is a tendency to press too hard for the truth. Why couldn't you just accept it like a stone tablet? Actually, Sutton said it, and I think there's a lot of truth in it."

"But surely it depends on the society? A good society would be based on good principles and its assumptions would be worth accepting."

"Who decides what is good?"

"Well, you couldn't leave it to any deranged nut who wanted to please himself."

"To the average man in Horizon Delta we would be deranged nuts."

"But we *know* we're not?"

"I do. I'm not too sure about you."

Shesha was standing straight up against a bookcase as though cornered and prepared to sell life dear. It was important to her to get this relationship founded on rock. She said, "Why shouldn't I apply the proposition to what you say and refuse to be railroaded? You're losing the argument, so you have to be personal. I'm surprised you didn't say, 'I'm right, because I'm bigger.'"

"What are we arguing about?"

"I don't know. You started it."

Holt leaned his carbines carefully against a rack and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Shesha."

"Here, present."

"I'm very glad I met up with you. You're a vindication of all I've been thinking for years past. I intend to get out of this place. I would like you with me. Are you coming?"

"Yes."

"You could still go back. We could find your disk. There'll be danger. We might not do it. In fact, we can't be sure that there's anywhere else to go."

"I've already said yes. Are you trying to make me change my mind?"

"I don't want you to have any false ideas about it."

"Any *assumptions*."

"All right, it was pompous. Shall we get on?"

Still hanging on in the monitoring control, although it was long past his tour of duty, George Prenton had found a reasonable grouch. There was no hook-up with the lower levels of the Burton library complex, and Holt and the girl were out of sight.

He watched the special branch operators bring the reception area into order; but for him it was *Hamlet* without the prince. Or, more particularly, the princess, since Shesha Haddon was still a potent image on his voyeur's eye.

Normally, the office closed at eighteen hundred hours and a robot recorder ran a sample check until the morning shift, with provision for an alarm call, if a precinct security android felt the need. The skirmish in Burton library had come under that head. Being already on site, he had tripped a relay to hold fast on an all-stations call and sourly kept a vigil on the neat, tidying-up exercise that the ten special androids organized.

Two had peeled off the stick to go below and flush out the deviants. It would have been interesting to watch the brown one being cornered and destroyed.

Even with nothing better to see than a dog-eating-dog exercise of androids reprogramming other androids and setting them to work in a new way as an unskilled labor gang, he was held by the thought of what was going on.

Wanting to see the two hunters come back, carrying the quarry, he set up the elevator area on the main actualizer, so that he could stand close and see blood.

Consequently, it was like a direct blow when Holt and Shesha Haddon stepped warily from the elevator, not half a meter distant from where he stood on the perimeter of the holographic screen.

Instead of being a figure laid over an android's shoulder, the girl was carrying an android's arm in the crook of her own.

They walked toward him, and before the image melted out of focus, she was so close that he could see brown skin through the lattice of chain mail. Sound being less selective than vision, her voice appeared to come from somewhere inside his own head in a warm contralto, after the picture had gone. "There's one by the kiosk, Gunnar."

Prenton fairly leaped from his console and was tuning for a wide-angle shot when the sound track erupted in a clatter of carbine fire. He had the whole reception area in view from a point above the street exit. A special android was draped over the counter with its right arm stiffly down and still firing a

continuous burst into the parquet.

The librarian was stock still, neatly bisected from the crown of its dome—dead, but unwilling to lie down, with a spiral of ticker tape pulsing out from a slot over its left aural sensor.

Bonnie and Clyde were running for the door under the viewing eye. Prenton had a foreshortened view of his Apsaras going ahead, while Holt stopped to check around the set. Then they were both gone.

Belatedly, two special androids appeared from the corridors. One was the section leader, and he recognized that affairs were moving too fast. He extruded an aerial antenna from the crown of his ovoid head and put in a direct call for advice.

Prenton picked it up, although it was not for him. He heard the Alpha security office answer and the duty operator, whose voice he could identify, say coldly, "What is your problem? You have ten armed men. The instruction is to destroy the two deviants. Why have you not carried out the order?"

"Now we are seven," said the android with unconscious pathos. "These deviants are exceptional. It will be difficult to be selective. Others may be killed *if* we attack them in a crowded place. My program is definite on that point. Only a designated human may be restrained."

"Unless there is a special instruction."

"Of course, Excellency."

"You have it. The two deviants must be destroyed, wherever found. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly clear, your Excellency."

"Get on with it, then."

Prenton debated whether to inform Foden or the junior member of the team. He settled for Joanna Taubman. Indirectly, it was a line to the top administrator. It would let him know that the security office was not doing too well with a very small assignment.

He expected to get the general-purpose desk android and a picture of the Taubman home on the video screen; but to his surprise it was the girl herself. Head and shoulders, precisely tuned like a studio portrait, with a thin band of cerulean blue fabric lining the foreground to show that he was not talking to a nude.

She did not look all delight when she recognized the caller. Maybe she was waiting in the service lobby expecting a call that she wanted to keep to herself. That might well be necessary, with a security creep permanently on the premises.

"What is it?"

"I thought somebody ought to know that the trouble down in Burton is not cleared up. In fact, I reckon it could be very serious. Security has given the specials direct instruction to neutralize the two deviants. *Wherever* they are found."

"Will they resist?"

"They already have. Three specials have been destroyed. They are armed. If they shoot it out in a crowded place, there will be a riot."

"What are you getting at, Controller?"

It was his title, but Prenton recognized that it was used to put him in his place.

"Somebody ought to be ready with a decision. We can't afford to have more than one Woodslee."

"Like a decision to shut down a sector and use gas?"

"Like that."

"I'll put it to my father. If he thinks it necessary, he'll call an emergency session. But it couldn't get off the ground for an hour or two. Council members might be anywhere at this time."

Prenton's sardonic eye made her add, "Well, you know what I mean, some of them have a long way to come."

It was not much improvement. She remembered, too late, Prenton's irritating habit of giving an erotic twist to the simplest statement. This was playing into his hands. Many leading Alpha citizens had set up offbeat establishments outside the city in the wasteland.

She signed off, coldly, with formal thanks for his public spirit.

Prenton, left looking at a blank video, thought, "Upstart bitch. Patronizing. The whole tribe make me puke. Keep your eyes wide open George, boy. Some little thing might come out of this to bait a hook for as big a fish as Dr. Gordon Taubman. Be a public benefactor and get them out of the body politic."

Taubman, himself, received the latest bulletin in his second-floor belvedere at the back of the house.

It was a handsome semicircular room with the straight wall lined with shelving that camouflaged a pivoting entrance section. The remaining 180 degrees of arc were entirely glassed. There was a sense of being suspended in mid-air.

Sitting at his desk, Taubman looked out on an uninterrupted vista of parkland. Even the boundary wall, set from the house in every direction, was concealed in a ha-ha.

The official residence of the Senior Administrator of Wirral City was, externally, a pastiche Georgian manor. No plug-in architecture for the elite. It had facilities for Council meetings and hospitality on the ground floor and family accommodation above. A force of military and general androids, one thousand strong with a grade-one executive computer, acted out the role of personal bodyguard for the chief citizen and final enforcement agency for any policy the Council might get up to.

It was a position of strength, very much to Taubman's liking, and he had no intention of giving it up.

Joanna Taubman announced herself to a grille on the left of the revolving section and got a curt invitation to go through. "What is it?"

He had hardly changed in all the years she had been one of the household. Thick-set, heavily built with a large, squarish face and underslung piranha jaw, Taubman was not a man for casual, grooming talk. When she was through the hatch, he waited for her to speak.

"Prenton thinks the two deviants on Delta are going to give trouble. He says security has given orders for a hot war. He thinks there ought to be a decision on the file to use gas."

"He takes a lot on himself."

"In this case, he could be right. But it is my belief that the deviants are harmless in themselves. I would like to see them brought up to Alpha."

"What does Guy say?"

"I haven't seen him; but from what he said earlier, he might agree with Prenton."

"And you think that would be bad?"

"The Council might think so, if they weren't asked."

"I'll take a look for myself. Fix it for me in the operations room. Get Guy along, if he's in."

It was not widely known, certainly not by Prenton, that the monitoring equipment was duplicated at Government House. He was unconscious of the audience that joined him briefly and then bypassed his office to pick up the same transmission that he was getting.

With the resident expert at the console, the Taubman group picked up the action at the entrance to the Burton precinct refectory.

Conversation in the long, oblong dining hall faltered and died the death. It was the tail end of the dining period, but there were still several hundred citizens at the trough—Most had seen Shesha about the precinct, but in any public place she had instinctively been self-effacing, slipping in early or late and settling unobtrusively in a corner. This time, walking down the middle of the room with Holt, she was tracked in by every eye.

One of the android staff shuffled out from the pantry and stood in the way. Its file held no record of Holt, and it wanted to be clear before he tried to get on the ration strength. "All citizens must take meals in their own precinct."

Shesha Haddon, with more time to look around, saw.

That there would be no support from the human faction. Conditioned from birth to the system, they took it to be right. Also, they looked on Holt and herself as freaks. Given the word, they were likely to join the hunters.

Before she could take analysis any further, Holt had pitched his voice to carry to every part of the room and was saying, "Give me your program."

There was electric silence, as the crowd waited for the pay-off. When the android flipped out its black box and preferred it with obsequious zeal, there was as much disappointment as anything. They had expected to see the stranger cut to size.

Holt felt the atmosphere and to some extent understood it. He was aiming to publicize android frailty and hoped that interest in that angle would outweigh unpopularity for one playing God.

He tipped every spool down the nearest food-disposal chute and handed it back. Then he made a public demonstration of control procedure. "Now this robot has no set program. Notice on the chest console there is a bank of micro switches. At present, it is working on the pre-set instruction tapes. This switch on the extreme right, as you face the panel, puts it over to manual control. Throw the key down. Then it responds to verbal direction. Watch."

Holt went through the drill and had the android do a quick-quick-slow shuffle around a table.

A gray-haired man in the blue coverall of the medical service called out, "It might work for you. But you've got to stop the bastard first. You can't do fancy settings of its switches when it's beaten your head in."

There was a general mutter of agreement.

Holt said, "I know that. Maybe you'll think of a way around it. I'm just showing you the layout in case you find a situation where you can use it."

Continuing the brief, he set his tin man on a course for the door. "Stay at the door. Do not respond to any instruction except from me. Stop any other android of any kind entering this room."

"Very good, Excellency."

Holt picked out three more from the pantry and sent them on the same mission, stationing one at each of the entrances.

The man who had spoken up was busy gathering support. They watched Holt override the dispenser and collect two meals without a credit registration and finally surrounded his table in a jostling crowd.

Shesha Haddon, rising to the occasion, went on eating as though the celebrity spot was her natural locale and, if asked, she would throw any peasant a biscuit.

Holt said, "What is it?"

A younger man, who had gotten himself to the front of the press, put the case. "What are you trying to do? This is a peaceful community. You're causing trouble. There'll be a report on this and we'll suffer. Entertainment vouchers stopped. Food restrictions. Besides, there has to be order. If everybody went around like you, there'd be anarchy. Didn't you ever hear the saying, 'If a man does no work, neither shall he eat?'"

Holt finished his pudding and shoved the disposal container into the chute. He said, "That's right You have the right of it. There has to be order. But it has to be of our own making. We have to say what form it has. No human being should take direction from a metal zombie."

The gray man was *in* again with, "You haven't read your history. Until men gave the rule book to the androids, there was nothing but confusion. Food shortage, insecurity, disorder. You want to turn back the clock. What's this guard business at the doors? Are you expecting trouble?"

Holt stood up and some of the truculence went out of the front rank. Violence, except in the Coliseum theatres, was a novel experience, and they reacted by being poised for flight.

He spoke over their heads and brought in everybody in the hall "Listen, there's a change on the way and you'll have to get adjusted to it. I can't say I understand it all myself. But there's information here that will surprise you." He held up Shesha's collection. "Horizon Delta is only a small part of the city. There are levels open to natural light. I know we have been brought up to think that our enclosed world is a natural stride in progress. But it wasn't seen that way by everyone. I believe we have been sold short. God knows why. Maybe, at one time, people *were* ready to trade anything for security. There's something going on in Woodslee precinct, which might explain more. We are going there to find out. Think about what I say. Don't accept that whatever is, is right. It isn't by a long shot."

Shesha Haddon gathered up her papers, tucked her surrealist carbine under her arm, and stood up beside him. The ring around the table was ten deep and showed no sign of moving aside to let them pass. It looked as though they would have more to fear from their own kind than the general-purpose androids.

The mob was throwing up spokesmen all the time, in a sudden, late flowering of the ancient democratic tree. A small, dark woman climbed on a table at the edge of the crowd and shrilled like a witch, "Not so fast. Don't let them skip out and leave you to face the piper. Look at that great, brazen creature there

with him. I've seen her. Who does she think she is, dressing like that? Nude as a needle under that net. All high and go-lightly. Thinks she's a nine-day wonder when she's a black freak of nature. Hold them, I say, and call the precinct security. Otherwise we'll all be imprecated."

Support for the proposition had to contend with a diversion from the rear. The sentry at the main door was having no luck. Without a program to fall back on, it had stuck to its latest brief of refusing entry to androids. Getting no cooperation, the two special agents fired simultaneously and dropped it in a heap of scrap.

The effect on the crowd was immediate. Although they were hearing carbine fire for the first time, its menace was obvious. There was a rush for the three exits away from the noise.

Timed to a nonasecond, two active types, who had reached the far doors together, flung them open as a special android began to shoot up the sentry at that end. The remnant of the burst screamed down the length of the diner. The woman's voice, notched up to a shrill falsetto, gave the public mind a focus. "It's that black witch. She has the evil eye. Give her to the androids."

As the doors swung closed, Holt moved off and found he was alone. Shesha Haddon was still trying to sort out the personal attack. It was totally unexpected. She was used to being alone, but she had never felt direct antagonism. The sheer injustice of it blanked out the other danger.

Holt was back in two strides and grabbed her arm. Fire from the other doors had the crowd milling toward the center, and he had to use his weight to beat a path to the pantry.

Movement had shaken Shesha Haddon out of her state of shock, and she pulled free to take the counter in an independent vault. Behind the bar was an oblong service area with double doors leading to a preparation and storage room. Holt spared a second to check out the set as they went through. Special androids were methodically clubbing a way through the press. He reckoned, bitterly, that he had brought her to the dead end of the rat's alley of all time.

Between them, they shifted a heavy, steel-topped table and upended it against the door. There were two resident kitchen staffers, clearly full of doubt about how to react. He took their programs and set them to hold the barrier.

After the burst of action, Shesha was standing in the middle of the room as though she were fresh out of libido. She said, "There's no way out. She's right. I'm bad luck."

There was not much time, but Holt saw that she was hurt and that therapy was needed before introspection turned the wound septic. "Don't ever think it. That was jealousy. Any woman alive would envy you. You're the most beautiful human being I ever saw. Now snap out of it and search around. There has to be a way."

It was a partial success. She was in fact the first to come up with an idea, as the posse lined up outside and began a systematic fire pattern to cut out the door.

She said, doubtfully, "There's a freight hoist. Brings up the staples from the service tunnel."

Holt said, "Get in."

"What about you?"

"Get in. I'll follow."

Crouched in the small cage and all set up for urn burial, she dropped out of sight.

The indicator winked down to Loading, and he counted three before the motor hummed to life again and it was on the return leg.

A carbine arm shoved itself through the remnants of the door and began to traverse from far left. He reckoned it was an even thing, whether he was shot or sliced by being slow for the cage, which he had to start before he could get in.

Then he was in darkness with a hammering overhead as the android fired blind into the open shaft.

There was time, in a racing succession of thought, to review the events of the day. It was incredible. The stable, humdrum world of Horizon Delta had erupted around him. There would be no going back, no sweating it out for a lifetime like Sutton. For good or ill, he no longer had a choice.

But that was as it should be. A human animal was dynamic. Forward or backward. Standing still was death. The big question was, which way was he set?

Shesha Haddon's brief spell in the box had left a faint residual pollen cloud that brought her into the equation.

It was forward. It had to be. She was resurrected from a golden age as an earnest of how it should be.

As he crawled out, she said, "Where now?"

A hostage to fortune at that. Trusting him to have an answer.

"Woodslee, where else?"

"It's a long way."

"We have a lot of time."

"I hope so."

"Believe it. We are indestructible."

"If you say so."

"Say that again with absolute conviction."

"If you say so."

"Give me half a minute and I'll think of a suitable ballad to sing, when walking down a drab-gray service road with an exotic Scheherazade type."

"As I recall, she had a very dodgy time."

"Then we must hope that history does not repeat itself."

CHAPTER FOUR

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Dr. Gordon Taubman had seen more than enough. A long public life, treading a delicate path of nonaction between power groups who wanted their own nominee in Government House, made him wary

of all sudden decisions. Having his hand forced to make one brought out all the latent irritability of his nature.

He fairly rasped out, "How long has this been going on? Did you know of it, Guy?"

"This has only blown up over the last twenty-four hours. The man Holt was known about, but the girl showed up on the monitors today. They're not important."

"How can you say that? In all the years I've held office, I can't remember civil disturbance on this scale. It will have to come before a special session. There'll be awkward questions asked. Security is directly my charge. They'll want to know why preventive action was not taken. There's no answer to that. It ought to have been. What was law enforcement doing?"

"I'm not in charge of law enforcement."

"Don't give me that. I put you there because I want to know what goes on."

"You know we've spent a lot of time on the Woodslee business. Compared with that, this is nothing. He's had a bit of luck, but it can't go on. Next time the specials catch up, they'll nail him good."

"I wouldn't bank on it. Damn it, to all intents and purposes he's one of us. He knows what he's doing. Properly organized, Horizon Delta could break out. It's only a question of using power. Then where would we be? Overrun by human rabbits. Life as we know it would be finished. The first principle of high-density accommodation is that you design it for somebody else."

Joanna Taubman said, "Surely that isn't likely. You saw how the people reacted. It will be like that wherever they go. By accident, they have the privilege of stature and education. It sets them apart. They'll be hounded. My belief is, we should take steps to get them out."

The security wing thought otherwise. "This is another symptom of a big disturbance. The whole area is ripe for trouble. At Woodslee, there's no rhyme or reason in it. They have ample food. Leisure engineering is first class. They start to riot for no reason. You can see it build up on the monitors. A small crowd collects and they all move together, as if they could read each other's minds. Sound recordings have been checked and doublechecked. Nothing is said that gives any clue to the violence that follows. It's random destruction for its own sake."

"That's not what we are talking about. The Council knows all that. The containment policy is working, isn't it?"

"Up to a point."

"Well then. These deviants are the new issue."

"There's a strong opinion gathering ground that the question of using gas should be debated. In fact, some say security could use it without further reference. There is a Council ruling giving emergency powers."

"Only if Horizon Alpha is under threat. That is not so."

"Who is to say? It could be. We could look back at this time and see it as a starting point. Now we can deal with it."

Taubman thought around the issues. He had no interest either way in life forms on Delta. But ill-considered action could set him up as an easy target for every kind of crank. Liberals, humanitarians, religious groups. Leisure on Alpha gave scope for every kind of excess. Splinter factions could unite over

some emotional angle and swing enough votes to put him out.

He said, "It's a Council matter and I judge it urgent. Go and tell the ombudsman, Guy, that I want an emergency meeting. Tonight. It's now nineteen hundred. Make it for twenty-one thirty. That's time for them to finish any business they have and get along. Meanwhile, Joanna, I want you to edit the record. Prepare a ten-minute digest of the main events to show to the Council. All right?"

"Check."

"What is it, Guy? You know what to do."

"While you have the city fathers in session, I'd like to push an idea I have."

"Which is?"

"Nobody from Alpha has been down there within living memory."

"Why should they? We get all the information we need."

"That's so, up to a point. An investigating team might pick up something that doesn't show up in the record. Also, if Holt and the girl are still at large, they could be dealt with."

"So?"

"I could take a group."

It was enough out of character to make Taubman pause. He had lived with his ward long enough to know that self-interest, first, last, and all the way, was the key that wound him. Secure in his own slot, he was not too bothered by it, but for clarification he asked, "What's behind that? Since when have you been interested in welfare?"

"It's a popular angle. The elections come along in the autumn. Something down in the book would be a help."

"I'll see you're re-elected."

"You could be out yourself."

With a reputation for plain speaking, Taubman was ill-equipped to be at the receiving end of truth. There was something in it. He turned his head away so that the dislike in his eyes was masked. He would have to watch that one. In ancient China, in times of famine, a young man would wheel his aged parent to an exposed hillside, with a pleasing sense of duty done. Psychologically, this was the same ploy. In all else they had broken with the traditions of the naked ape. But the young were still full of push.

He said, "I'll see how the session goes. It's a useful card to have. Strictly it ought to be the head of your committee to suggest that and pick his man. But we'll see."

Joanna Taubman had listened to the exchange with growing interest. Partly prepared for it, she was not surprised. She had no greater opinion of her brother's basic drives than her guardian had. Her own research angle was intellect-led, and she did not want to find Horizon Delta an empty desert before she had any worthwhile data. Also, she knew she did not want to see Holt dead.

Using more tact, she said, "Guy wants to vindicate an extermination policy. Perhaps in the long run it will come to that. But I'm sure you don't want your administration to be labeled on the record as the one that had to do it. Why not get the Council to send a big group? Some security and some, uncommitted, with a

fact-finding brief. If it's possible, I'd like to come in under that bracket."

Taubman had already sailed too near decision. He said, "I'll think about it. Lay on the attendants at reception. Come into the press box if you like. I'll be in my room until twenty-one fifteen."

Indestructible she might be, but untiring she definitely was not. Shesha Haddon could not look pale, but she could look weary. She leaned on the closed grille of the Stanacre precinct information silo and said, "How far is it to Woodslee?"

Holt pulled out of the stream of traffic and came to rest beside her. It was a busy time. Fifteen minutes to curfew and this main artery was congested from edge to edge with hurrying people who hardly spared them a second glance.

"Not very far."

"You said that at Ashfield."

"We can't go direct."

"How about that? How do they keep getting ahead?"

"It can only be that they know where we're going."

"How, though?"

"Work it out. Somebody brought in the specials. They stay within five minutes distance whatever we do. There has to be a monitor watching and relaying the score."

"I've felt that recently. Since I met you, in fact I've felt that I was being watched."

"That's a co-lateral of charm. I watch you all the time."

Basically honest, she said, "I've noticed and I don't mind. In fact it's a pleasant change. But seriously, I can sense it. Both of us. There *is* somebody watching."

"Not everywhere, though. Down on the stacks level, we were outside the range."

"I can't tell. It was too busy."

"It figures. There were more specials upstairs, but we got away with murder. Whoever was watching did not expect to see us come out of the elevator. Otherwise, he would have sent more specials down."

"So, down among the fungi is safe. Why?"

"Those levels were already off limits before the monitoring system was installed."

She talked around it, thinking aloud, "There's no progress from precinct to precinct at that level. Only local storage silos for books or what-not. Also, if they're so smart about following us by vision, I'd guess they're okay for sound as well. They'll know what we're planning before we do it."

Sensitive now to changes in the crowd, they felt the ripple of anxiety that spread in from the way they had come. It had happened before. The specials were closing in again.

Holt said, "Time to go," and put an arm around her waist to move off. For ten paces they went along with the play of her hip companionably under his hand. Then she pulled away. "It's easier if we walk apart."

It was true, but it was no gain on the mental front. Holt could not think beyond the next quarter hour. The streets would empty. They would be set up like clay pigeons for anybody to fire at. This seminal day would end with a whimper.

They had worked ahead of the spreading circle of alarm and were coming into the first open square of dormitory blocks. The center of the circulation area ran the full height of Horizon Delta. Residential capsules had been stacked in a honeycomb, and escalator tubes stood like organ pipes to syphon the human tide off the deck.

In the open, they felt more exposed to the viewing eye. Shesha Haddon said, "How do they do it?"

He was on frequency enough to know what she was talking about. "Selected points, built-in and well concealed. Near enough together to follow a movement. As we go out of range of one, we come into sight from another."

"In the lighting ports, then?"

"Very likely."

"Could there be a dead spot?"

With his mouth brushing her ear, Holt said, "It's worth a try."

They cut across three pedestrian feeder lanes and joined a line for the first elevator. With pressure on to get to base before curfew, it was not a popular move.

High-density living had produced a habit of avoiding close social contact. Although they were packed together in the feedways, people rarely looked at each other. It was a defense mechanism against overexposure to contact stimulus. Holt realized that it was working for them as long as they went with the crowd. A kangaroo could join the homeward rush without comment, if it kept a steady pace. Going out of line, however, was shoving themselves in front of their eyes.

The rhythm of movement began to break up. Neurosis, close to the surface, pushed up a volcanic cone. A woman saw Holt loom up dead ahead, with the severed arm poking out from below his shoulder, and opened her mouth in a shrill scream.

If the object of the exercise was to avoid attention, he had picked a loser.

It was too late to back out. Startled eyes, which had been blankly unfocused, tracked around to find the source of the trouble.

Being thrust into the role of monster, Holt felt an unexpected rush of aggression. Using his weight, he beat a path to the elevator, as its door sliced aside for the next load. He pulled the girl in beside him and had the door closing again as the crowd surged toward them.

There was a howl of anger that was cut off as they rose clear.

"Did you have to do that?"

"Anybody who isn't for us is against us."

"That makes a lot of people."

"We'll talk about that some other time."

At the third level, he took them out and sent the cage on up. Then he ran along the feeder corridor to the next tube. When its cage stopped to unload, he pushed in and stubbed the key for down one.

It was a brief ride, but long enough for hostility to flare up from the half dozen still aboard, who wanted to go on. Penned at close quarters with the maniac, they kept it to shrill complaint.

On the second floor, he missed two and took the tube to the highest level, then passed three outlets, went down four levels, backtracked to the first, went up two, and followed the service road two-thirds around the square.

They were in an area where rebuilding was in process. All accommodation capsules were rated for a life expectancy of five years. That meant a fifth of the complex was always under demolition and reconstruction. Since the replacement capsules were identical with those taken out for recycling, it was a meaningless chore, but it kept more than half the population of the Horizon in work, with the illusion of purpose.

A movable crane was parked against the unfinished outside wall, with its operating cab swung over to let the engineer climb out onto the last plug-in roof section.

Holt checked around the set. They were alone on this level. He said, "There's a thing. The monitor couldn't have a fixture in that moving crane. Up you go."

Once inside, he hauled up the flexible steel ladder. Sitting on the floor, they were invisible from the building and from the square. He said, "Well, what do you think? Are we still being watched?"

She said, uncertainly, "I don't think so. But then I don't know that I'm in a very receptive state right now."

"We'll take the chance. No android can get near without giving us notice."

It was, indeed, absolutely silent. Colder too, as the city moved into the evening phase with heat channeled to the residential units, so that there was a temperature drop in the circulatory areas to make them less of a draw and the warmth of the nest a positive attraction.

Action during the long day had kept personal angles to a minimum. Now, shut in a two-meter-square box, they were aware of a tension in the dielectric. Holt cleared the floor and spread out the charts. Thirty minutes after curfew, the sky lighting would dim down and there would be no light for reading.

There was nothing specific on Stanacre, but there was a schematic diagram of the whole city, which showed that the precincts were on the same general plan.

Each was a complete urban complex. There was a basic lattice of giant plumbing, which functioned as load-bearing support for the internal levels of each Horizon and as the arteries for a recycling system. Some basement levels appeared to have been left from an earlier structure.

Shesha Haddon said, "That explains the library area at Burton, it must be very old."

Vocabulary had changed. The main boulevards, hatched in red, were given the legend Metropolitan Throughways. The avenues were Zonal Interconnections. Central in each precinct was a squat tower core, which was a principal structural member for the whole city and ran up through the three enclosed Horizons to flower as an open-air terminal in Horizon Alpha.

These were labeled Executive Silo. At the junction with each Horizon, they were massively solid and made a huge capital for a fan of cantilevered roof supports.

Thinking aloud, Holt said, "That's obvious place to look for a way through; but there isn't any machinery I know of that could cut through that lot."

The girl asked, "Where does the power come from?" —and leaned over to follow the plan. Momentarily the soft pressure of her breasts against his arm distracted him. Then he realized that she was unconscious of the fact, and he made an effort to concentrate on the plan.

Four ducts, on the same scale as the Throughways, came along the main axis of the city, at the same depth as Burton's low-level bookstores, with, vertical shafts, like wells, connecting in the precincts. Delta was served by the left-hand trunk, then Gamma; Beta had only two take-up points, Alpha six, spaced out evenly along the axis.

That was the distribution, but the question hung about unanswered.

Holt found a smaller diagram, showing the city on its peninsula like an oval cake on a serving platter. Two-thirds sat squarely on rock foundation; but the Northwest was built on striding tripod legs, and the ground below it had been cut away in a succession of parallel channels.

Stylized rotors, flow arrows, and blue shading explained the action. If it had been a water mill, it would have been neat and impressive; but Holt was looking at the scale and his mind gagged at the monumental size of the structures involved. It was daunting.

He said, "This I can hardly believe, but it must be so. God, they were builders, the people who set this up. We have a heritage to claim."

"What have you found?"

"Look. A good seven kilometers of the city is on stilts at the end of the peninsula. There's a series of deep canals joining the two estuaries. It's a tidal system. Power for free and forever. The tide reaches the Mersey before it reaches the Dee. It's been diverted to flow under the city. The simplest and cheapest power source you could ever find."

"It doesn't help us to get out."

"I don't know. Every Horizon takes a share. Like life blood. Engineers would leave a way through, in case of emergency. A power failure would throw everything out. The smart alecks on Horizon Alpha wouldn't leave a thing like that outside their control."

"It'll be an android operation, with self-correcting gear and a detailed breakdown of fault-finding. We have that in the precinct executive blocks. Even the general-purpose androids have an automatic repair scheme."

Holt stuck to his guns. "True enough; but power is the key. It might never be used, but there will be a way of getting there."

Shesha Haddon was still doubtful, "The same is true for Horizon Delta. If the power failed, we ought to be able to get to the source, but I've never heard of it. Power is taken for granted, like air."

"That's because we're the poor relations of the system. They'd *know* up there, if it failed. They'd be the ones to do something about it. It's another insult. Paternalism on a grand scale. And you see how it turns out. Millions of little people, who hardly know whether they're alive or not. Eating, sleeping, continually tearing down and building up the hive. A termite situation, strictly for termites."

Any answer of assent or disagreement was stillborn. The sky, twenty meters above the cab roof, dimmed

down in the rapid twilight they had known all their lives.

With it came an awareness of the cold. Holt stood up slowly and looked out. The unfinished level was deserted. From the outside window of the cab, he could see the foreshortened slits of light from the face of the block they were on and the checkerboard pattern of windows from the other sides of the square.

Shesha was a dark shape against the pale spread of the documents on the floor. She was methodically gathering them together. An involuntary shiver sent up a dry rustle of paper.

"You're cold."

"Don't worry. I'll be all right when I get used to it."

Holt, working by touch and a memory of the geography of the cab, opened a locker that ran under the operating console. There was cable and some cans, a tool kit in a hold-all, and a tight roll of fabric. When he had it out and held up against the dim light, he said, "This will help. Coveralls, I think."

He held them to ease the awkward chore of wriggling in, and it re-established physical contact without strain. A pad of fine silk pushed against his chin. His hands could stay almost naturally on her shoulders, and could pick up the muscular tremor that was still going on.

Holt said gently, "You can relax, Shesha. You don't have to worry about me."

Unexpectedly, she twisted around to face him, eyes and teeth suspended in a warm shadow that brushed pneumatically against him.

"Why not? Don't you like me? Do you think I'm a freak, like that woman said?"

Holt was working outside the range of experience. But a sure instinct told him that it was not the time. Maybe she was making affirmative signals, but it was partly a move to prove something to herself. She didn't have to prove anything for him. With this human being, he wanted to get off on the right foot.

He put a hand on either side of her head, long fingers probing under her hair and feeling the smooth, firm shape.

He kissed her forehead, her eyes and then, very lightly, because he had only so much altruism, her mouth. He said, "You must know what I think about you. As of now, you haven't much choice. Only me. We're going to Horizon Alpha. Don't doubt it. Then there'll be a whole raft of people falling over each other to get your notice. Then I'll join the line and tell you. Okay?"

A subdued voice said, "If you say so."

Turning to a practical issue, he said, "I reckon if we lie along the diagonal, we can stretch out. It would be good thinking to get some sleep."

He was right within a centimeter. With his head jammed in the angle, he could almost lie full length. Shesha followed suit, pushed against him by the logic of the container. Incredibly, she was asleep almost as soon as she touched down, in a vote of confidence that was double-edged.

For Holt, it was the longest night in memory. The odd centimeter made the difference between viable discomfort and active torment. Moving every five minutes to straighten aching limbs in turn, he was infinitely careful not to disturb her. Her head, which had gotten itself supported by his arm, gained weight until it was like holding a lead pig. The metal, nonskid quilting of the deck impressed its pattern on his flesh. Some sleep he must have had, because he was surprised by the light. Suddenly the darkness was

gone and Shesha was kneeling over him, looking at him as though she had been there, waiting, for some time.

It was a serious, considering face. Still as a carving. Epstein eyes enormous. Black silk cowl of hair swung forward in two smooth wings.

Natural light, making a longer job of it, nevertheless surprised the assembled Council on Horizon Alpha. The delegate for Shotwick, a large, balding type, who had traveled in from a mock-Roman villa he maintained outside the city limits, voiced a general grouch when he grabbed down his angle-poise intercom and said, "Chairman, will you give one good reason why we haven't taken a vote? This is the craziest meeting I ever was at. Ten hours by the clock. There isn't anything else to say. I propose that the motion be now put, without further debate and without any fresh summary from the chair."

The Shotwick precinct emblem glowed red on the detailed division board that filled one wall of the council chamber, and senators for Pensby, Plymyard, and Whitbyheath vied with each other to underwrite it.

Refined reaction time, cultivated over years of practice as a clay pigeon shot, gave the edge to Whitbyheath, and the computer, which stood in as legal adviser, shoved a printed tape onto Taubman's desk.

He did not need to read it off, to know what it said. No more stalling was possible. The vote had to be taken. It would have come to the same thing in another half hour, strictly on a time count. Then the computer would have taken over the question for itself and delivered a ruling that made the constitution binding.

Still watching from the press box, where an actualizer team was making a record for the daily newscast, Joanna Taubman reckoned that whichever way it went, justice was being mocked.

Taubman's long, crafty rearguard against decision had no element of social concern in it. It was a political exercise, pure and simple. With election for another term coming up, he did not want to be identified with a policy of repression. Though why he should bother was a black mystery. The voters were not likely to care overmuch about any action that had no direct bearing on their own comfort. As long as the lid was kept on the lower levels and their way of life was un-threatened, they would settle for a talking dog in Government House.

Maybe he had a sense of history at that. He wanted a clean, if empty, record.

But the delegates were of a different mold. Their leisure exercise was politics, and they had a stake in manipulating events to loosen up the pattern. After listening through the night, Joanna Taubman picked out Holmes, the delegate for Shotwick, as the leader of a faction that could well have a narrow majority.

Against them, Taubman's personal group had only a *laissez faire* argument dressed up as liberalism.

Taubman said, "I have no alternative, but I bring this matter to a direct vote with great regret. The substantive motion, as I have it, is that the law enforcement committee be given emergency powers—which would include the use of large-scale depopulation to pacify disturbed areas on Horizon Delta. There is a precedent. But everyone must understand the nonreversible nature of such action. I give notice that after the vote I have a related proposal to table."

There was a move of weary assent. Holmes grinned around at his supporters. The count flickered across the computer spread, and a panel glowed green with AGREED in Gothic Condensed upper case. Below it was the nominal roll in green of the supporters and the roll of dissenters in red. Nineteen to seventeen.

Two votes had put the destructive power of Attila under the thumb of Guy Taubman's committee. His chief, sitting with the executive officers of the regime at a long table below the Chairman's dais, shrugged his shoulders and looked around at Taubman.

The leading citizen was unruffled. He said, "Very well. If that's what you want. That's all right. So long as you are sure. This is a one-way ticket Associated European Communities will accept that a city's internal affairs are its own business. I am sure we can trust Controller Beasely to use the power with discretion. I indicated that I had another suggestion. It is this. No on-the-spot survey of Horizon Delta has been made for many years. I propose to send a small party to take a close look and report back to the law enforcement committee. This will not take long. I suppose the senator for Shotwick will not object if use of suppressive equipment is held off until they return?"

Holmes said bluntly, "How long?"

"A few days. Fourteen as a maximum."

"Make it seven."

"Very well. A seven-day moratorium. I take it you will leave the composition of the party to myself and the executive officers? Such an investigation is made more necessary by a report I have, which is not yet public. Two deviants, who have been seen on recent newscasts, have now evaded the monitor service. Special androids in the area are unable to locate them."

Joanna Taubman felt a certain reluctant admiration for the timing of it. Taken an hour earlier, it would have sparked off a long discussion on personnel. At this stage, it was through on the nod, with Holmes convinced that he had gamed every point in the debate. With a free hand to choose where he liked, Taubman was content to let him think it. He said, with a show of geniality that was spread impartially on either faction, "Well, ladies and gentlemen, I hope you will do me the pleasure of taking breakfast before you leave. I have notice that it is ready to serve."

It was a nice touch, as though he had planned it all to the minute and knew precisely how it would be. Not missed by Holmes, who looked thoughtful as he heaved himself out of his reclining chair.

Shesha Haddon said, "I hated to disturb you. I guess I've been selfish. I slept through; but it must have been rough on you."

Holt looked at his watch and heaved himself upright on a dead leg. "Half an hour of morning light. We've left it late, the crane crew will be here any time now."

"What about the specials?"

"They'll be about. Just drop your spectacular head below window level."

He lowered the ladder and joined her beside the hatch.

"What are we waiting for?"

"The crew. When they turn up, they can move the crane across the square. We were last seen over on this side. I'd guess they've spent the night checking out every cozy-home-unit in the block."

Female curiosity drove Shesha Haddon to a slow knee stretch, until she could look over the lintel. Holt had his hand on the slack of her pants to haul her back, before she had the time to do more than register a flash picture of the set. But it was enough.

"Three specials with a whole tribe of precinct guards. Coming over here."

Holt went for the console on hands and knees. Building site hardware was not his province, but there was a basic logic about switchgear, which made the controls plain enough. There was a power feed to the track to move the whole crane around the square, an altitude regulator to sink the turret on its rams, a whole panel for delicate maneuvering of the grab, and two handles to swing the jib.

It was a very flexible outfit. A skillful man could pick out a pop rivet and stand it on its head.

He pulled down a red lever through a quadrant marked OP-NONOP, and a low hum filled the cab. Then he whipped into the raised bucket seat and looked out.

She had spoken no less than truth. In the short interval, the leading androids had moved to within twenty meters of the ladder. Behind them, the field was strung out with ten guards in line like a party of beaters. Having checked everywhere else, there was only this plateau. They were all looking at the crane. The quarry had to be there.

Confirmation came when they saw him materialize in the raised seat. The leader stopped dead and the column halted. The three specials lifted carbine arms.

Holt heard the cab door open at his back and thought, "The fool. She's going to give herself up. They won't want to know." Then he was juggling with the gear to drop the turret and swing the boom.

Plexiglass exploded around his head in shards as he got the ponderous lattice of steel swinging onto the plateau. Noise of carbine fire was so near at hand that it puzzled him. Then he spared a nonasecond to spin around and look for Shesha. Flat on the deck, she had an arm poking over the threshold and was turning to compensate for the swing.

With the rotator held down on full power, the boom began to pick up momentum. He had dropped it to sweep a meter above surface level. When it hit the extended line of androids, there was hardly a check in its motion.

Every last one grabbed by reflex for the beam that hit it, and the racing boom carried a dead weight it was never meant to bear, out over the open drop.

It was so fast that even Holt was unprepared. He had gone around 360 degrees and was off for another circuit before he knew what to do.

He counted "One, two," out loud, as a rough estimate of distance run, and used all his strength to slam the levers into reverse.

No machine ever built could take the strain. Every circuit on the board escalated into overload and the turning gear jammed solid. The tip of the boom, full of centripetal urge, did its best to complete the circuit and broke away, in independent flight, like a boomerang, with its quota of androids still hitching a ride.

The rest, shaken loose, went into free fall for the piazza.

Holt was in time to see Shesha Haddon's legs disappearing through the open door and threw himself across her ankles. When he hauled her in, she had two reasonable complaints, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"There was no time. I didn't know it would work out like that."

"Do you have to keep grabbing me by my pants. It's very undignified."

"I can only get hold of whatever seems best adapted for the position you are in."

In all honesty, she had to concede it was fair enough.

Circumstances looked like remaining unfavorable for some time ahead. With the door open to a sheer drop, the only way out of the cab was over the twisted girders of the balancer boom.

Heat levels were rising for the open areas. She peeled off the coveralls and knotted them as a useful sling to carry the carbine arm. Then she climbed out through the shattered rear window of the cab like a flying Gandharvas.

CHAPTER FIVE

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Stanacre precinct was opening its doors as they backtracked through the dormitory area to pick up the boulevard that would take them on to Brimstage. From there, one of the avenues ran direct to the outer ring of Woodslee precinct.

Shesha Haddon said, "Living to the full is surely great; but how long can you do it without food?"

"A well-built girl like you can live for a week on her fat."

Reckoning that familiarity was working against the claims of courtesy, she walked an arm's length away for a good two hundred meters. But since Holt did not seem to have noticed, curiosity drove her back. "What are you thinking about?"

"I don't understand why it's so quiet."

"It's early. Nobody travels any distance before nine hundred. They're all busy having breakfast. What do you think they eat on Horizon Alpha? Peacocks' tongues and that?"

"Why are there no androids about?"

"They could hardly be on the line for the soup kitchen. Unless they top up energy cells. Perhaps they've been called off."

"You just could be right. They know where we're going and they can wait until we get there."

They had come to an intersection, with avenues curving away left and right. Shesha read off the legend, putting her bundle on the plinth of the indicator board like Dick Whittington. "Thornton left, Raby right."

A clutter of construction gear was grouped around the entrance of the nearest building. The labor gang would be about due. It was a small casino. One of the outlying units of the Raby precinct entertainment belt. They were remodeling the interior as part of the five-year refurbishing cycle.

Among the machines was a small, fuel-cell-powered forklift. Holt wondered why it had not occurred to him before. All this shanks' pony business was long out of date. Transport should be for people. He backed it off the apron and ran it over to a stack of oblong cladding sheets.

He picked four from the top, backed clear, heaved them upright, and anchored them in place with a flexible grab.

From Shesha Haddon's viewpoint, a disembodied grinning head, over a gray screen, was bearing down on her as she waited patiently for the laboring man to finish his stint. It looked so pleased with itself that she hardly liked to ask, but evolutionary forces were strong.

"What's this then?"

"An armored car. Put your trousseau in the rumble and hang on to your tiara."

It was a solid, unsprung job, strictly for site work. On full thrust, it rumbled over the micro-grooved roadway at the speed of a jog trot. The psychological gain was out of all proportion. After the long years of standing on the sidelines, they felt that they were making a positive use of the environment, taking a hand in their own future.

Holt held a course down the center of the Brimstage boulevard with the power pack in an urgent howl and the flexible sheets whipping like a stage thunder machine.

Eager-beaver workers, filtering out onto this main artery, leaped for the inset porches of buildings flanking the route.

With no such subtle sense of self-preservation, a guard android, on a routine patrol duty, stood four square in the center and held out both arms in a signal to stop.

Judging distance to a centimeter, Holt ran it down, without slackening speed. The leading edge of the pick-up platform, knife-sharp to feel its way under a load, sliced through the metallic legs at mid-calf height and left the feet standing, when the truck had passed over, as though the tin man had been plucked out of his boots.

The dome, hitting first, shattered against the cladding screen and spilled a shower of small debris onto the footplate. The trunk held up for a count of three and slewed sideways into the road.

Less involved in the mechanics of it, Shesha Haddon saw both sides of the equation. Even in the short time she had known him, violence was changing Holt. He was getting a taste for it. His hair was not actually standing on end, but there was a berserk ambience about him that made it likely any minute. The face that turned to check out whether she was still in the boat had no element of friendship in it. She was just part of the scene, a piece of equipment on his own faction. She knew he would have run the gendarme down if it had been a human being.

On the sidelines, faces were registering shock, horror, and simple fear. Mouths were open in screams that were lost in the din thrown up by the laboring machine and in the general hubbub. As in Barnston's refectory, they were far from being popular idols, bucking the system in the public interest. The crowd saw only a rogue elephant loose on the highway.

A new note added a strident, overall theme, like a demented piccolo entry. Some trusty had found a riot-call box, broken the seal, and pulled the plug. Over a kilometer radius, repeaters were belting out a wobbling siren alarm.

Holt, driving with one hand, was loosening thumb catches to take the cowling off the motor. She had to yell close to his ear to get attention.

"What are you doing?"

"There's a governor on this pack. I can get more speed."

"Did you have to hit that guard? It's stirred the whole place up."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Of course I don't mind. What's an android here or there?"

She gave it up and edged gingerly to the half-hoop tubular frame that made a reredos for the small, hurrying platform. Wedged against it, she unwrapped her carbine and held it in the crook of her arm. Altogether it looked like a terminal situation, a headlong charge in the traditions of bone-headed chivalry.

But the sheer excitement of it swamped out criticism. When the car bucked forward, as though kicked up the rudder, and accelerated away at double speed, she was beating on the bar with her free hand, hair flying back in a dark pennant, and yelling, "You did it! You did it!"

Holding course was a full-time chore. The unwieldy trolley was doing its best to slew away from the direct air pressure that shoved back at its plate screen.

Holt had a confused impression of crowds melting away on either side. For five minutes he concentrated on keeping it going flat out, through a tunnel of noise and spreading panic.

Then for fifty meters, before the boulevard ran through Brimstage's main square, there was a clear run.

Word had finally gotten ahead. A crew of androids were wheeling out crowd-control barriers to close the road. In the center a tripod-mounted riot gun had been set up and an android was kneeling behind it, looking woodenly up the track with the firing toggle in his hand.

Noise from the flapping shield reached a crescendo, and Holt felt the speed check, as they absorbed the impact of a continuous burst. Then the barrel was being rammed through the android's chest.

They swept across the piazza and made a locked-wheel skid stop under the canopy of the executive tower block.

"What have you stopped for?"

She was still speaking up, to beat a certain numbness in her own ears, and the question had a wider public than she intended.

A small burly man who had made an inspired two-meter standing jump to beat his fate, yelled back, "That's right. What do you want here? We've heard about you on the newscast. Get the hell out of it. We want no troublemakers here."

An android commissionaire patrolling the lobby pushed through the plate-glass doors to bring a decent regard for law and order, and stopped dead when Holt reached his level.

No fool, it knew who was disturbing the peace; but a built-in safeguard stopped it from challenging a special human type.

Holt spent ten seconds converting it to work on an external brief and left it in the porch with a clear instruction to prevent any moving object from crossing into the lobby.

Her unanswered question still hanging about in his ear, in spite of the agile politician's reply, Holt said, "We can't make it by road. Next time they'll have trestles we can't shift. Let's have the diagram again."

He spread it out on the horse-shoe reception desk, and a clerical android said, "State your business and fill out a request blank. State your business and fill out a request blank."

Functionally tailored for its niche in the system, it was a truncated job on a plinth, and Holt spared a minute to tip it off into the well. Its voice went on in a petulant mutter, until Shesha Haddon dropped a small filing cabinet on its head.

For her, it was the final snapping of all links with the past. A deed of blood to qualify for a place in the team.

Holt said approvingly, "Good thinking," and found what he wanted on the chart.

"Look. These towers are all the same. They're the key structural members in the city. Every last one, slap astride the power grid. It comes up here in a main trunk and fans out all over the precinct. There has to be a way down for maintenance. There's direct access from each Horizon. All we have to do is cross over and find the pipe for Alpha. But we'll do that from Woodslee. There's no problem crossing over there."

"But if it was as easy as that, wouldn't it have been done before?"

"We don't know that it hasn't. But you've heard the people. Either they're content or they don't want to know. Usage is all. They've accepted the system and they don't look for anything different."

"Maybe we wouldn't, if we hadn't *been* different. And that was an accident not of our own choosing. We can't take any credit. You can't blame them."

"I'm not blaming them. I'm stating a fact."

Holt looked around the set. Outside, a crowd had formed up in a semicircle outside the range of the android Horatius. Some of them would be workers in the headquarter building. The few who had been in the lobby were prudently grouped around the walls to make it plain that they were not fellow travelers.

Holt said, "As I recall, the Executive block has its own canteen. Look it up on the indicator board. Go and pick up our peasant's portion of black bread, while I sort out the way below."

When she had gone, he made a rapid tour of the lobby. Public Health Department, Registrar, Education—with an obsolescent android that had an impediment in its speaker: "Er No interviews Er with the Superintendent Er can be given Er until eleven-thirty Er."

Every suite was self-contained, with no visible route to the cellar. The elevators, in a group beside the kiosk, all showed this floor as bottom level. He was beginning to think he had been all wrong. The diagrams were drawing-board plans, which in fact had never been carried through; or early versions, which had been superseded at the time of building.

Clamor from the porch was notching up. In the end it would be a matter of numbers. The single android would be overrun.

Holt was back at the kiosk. On the face of it, this should be the nodal point, communications-wise, for the tower structure. He vaulted over the counter and began a systematic check of the consoles.

There was a switchboard for the internal intercom, video circuits, and outgoing lines to all precincts; a computer link for profile data on all registered citizens of the borough; a schematic diagram with glowing asterisks to show the position of every android on the strength, with a direct channel to each metallic ear. That was interesting in itself.

Currently the whole force was moving in towards the headquarters building. Every android carried a numeral call sign. He identified the one crossing the porch, to try its luck with the apostate, as GD/B/37

and called it up on the link. "Attention, GD/B/37, Emergency. Proceed at once to the rear of the male dormitory area where there is a disturbance. Acknowledge."

A rapid metallic stammer came from the desk and a ticker tape writhed out under his hand. He read off "Message received and understood" and saw the asterisk move briskly off.

When Shesha Haddon reappeared, with a tray of mixed cereals and four beakers of coffee, he was sending a detachment of his Keystone Cops at a jog trot to find a four-leaf clover in Thortonheath Park.

She said bitterly, "It's very nice for some. While you play little jokey games, I had a terrible time in that canteen."

"Put on a determined front and the androids will fall over their big feet to satisfy your every whim."

"It wasn't the androids. It was quite busy, and people objected to my jumping the line for service. I had to threaten to shoot off this obscene gun."

"Never mind. When we get up top, you can throw it away. You did well. As a reward, you can choose where to send this last rude mechanical."

"It can go to hell."

"There you have a difficulty. A metaphysical locale is outside its span. The best I can do is have it dismantle itself and throw the pieces to left and to right like a feather plucker."

She said patiently, "Do whatever you think best. But shouldn't we be moving on? You're very sure about Alpha. How do you know we'll be accepted there?"

Holt responded to the seriousness in her tone and left the board, with asterisks slowly migrating to its rim. "I don't. But we're on our way. We can't stay here for a sure thing."

He worked on around the horseshoe. There was a lot of instrumentation that he could have spent time with. But Shesha sounded the alarm.

She had gravitated over to the porch and was checking out the piazza. "Gunnar. They've caught up. Specials coming into the square."

Usage breeding confidence, there was also a move from the flesh and blood heirs of the system. People were moving out from the walls and edging forward. They would be found, full of zeal, on the side of law and order.

Holt was at the end of the command island, when the plate-glass doors of the reception hall shattered in flying shards.

The narrowing cordon of citizens broke up in disorder in a frantic scramble for cover, except for half a dozen who stayed where they fell and a girl, still motivated to move, but confused direction-wise, who began to crawl toward Shesha Haddon leaving a snail-trail of fresh blood.

Then he found it. A small panel with a pictograph of the elevator cages and a special key for number four. It overrode the operating panel for that item and gave it an extension for six levels down.

Shesha was sitting crosslegged on the deck with the girl's head pillowed on her lap and made no move when he called. "Come on. We're in business."

He had the grille open and went back for her as a special android came through the shattered porch.

The face she turned to him was all reproach and shiny with tears. She sobbed, "Look what we've done now. We're *murderers*. There's no excuse. We should give ourselves up."

It was logic of the heart and not open to argument. Holt fired over her head and stopped the leading android in its tracks. Then he gently lifted the body clear and hauled Shesha to her feet.

She made no protest until she was in the cage. Then it seemed to dawn on her that she was being shanghaied. She tried to get out as the grille was closing, and Holt grabbed her and pinned her into a corner.

It was a full-time chore, and the cage had dropped two levels before she had to concede that there was no future in it. Arms clamped to her sides, knees pinning her legs, superior weight shoving her against the bulkhead, she could only spit like a cat, which she did.

Holt gingerly redeployed one hand and gripped her around the mouth and chin. Then he banged her head back against the wall to emphasize what he was saying.

"Listen, you emotional nut. That girl on the floor could have been you. The word has gone out to destroy us. And they don't care who else suffers. Not for anything we've *done*, but for what we *are*. I'm just as sorry for the innocent victims as you are. Except that I can't in honesty say that I'd sooner it was you or me. The system's rotten through. We can't begin to make it over, so we have to leave it right?"

He felt some of the muscular tension go out of her body, and he warily released his grip. She stayed still, with her hands straight down by her sides, and would not look at him.

"Right?"

"I suppose so."

"Can you imagine fifty or sixty more years, wandering about, knowing you didn't fit in, ending up like Sutton? That's supposing you had been left alone."

Shesha sounded infinitely tired.

"I suppose you're right. Most of the time I agree with you. It comes down to the ends and means bit. There is a point where any end does not justify the means."

"We haven't reached that yet."

"If you say so."

"I do say so. Don't lumber yourself with a load of guilt. Keep saying to yourself, 'Every day things will get better. Man'—or in your case—'Woman cannot live without the possibility of shaping her own future.' That's the key item. Horizon Delta has atrophied. It's a fossil."

The cage had already grounded and the grille rolled back. Opposite, across a small square landing, was an equipment rack. Holt picked out a cadmium steel lever and jammed it in the grille. That would prevent the cage being taken up.

They were in a section of conduit, arched by precast concrete hoops and closed off two meters either way by olive-drab bulkheads, with circular manholes for access. A coil filament in a ceiling port was glowing red-orange and gave a minimum light to see by. On the wall, beside the punched-strip shelving, was a schematic diagram of the system.

Shesha Haddon, recovered enough to be curious, found a locker beside the elevator shaft, and her startled "Eek" had Holt grabbing for his carbine.

She had slammed the door again on the instinctive precept of out of sight, out of mind and was across the cave in two leaps.

"What is it?"

"Androids, I think."

"Maintenance units waiting to be switched on."

"They don't switch me on one bit."

"Take a carbine. Cover me. If there's a movement, shoot off a clip."

"Suppose I shoot you."

"Then you'll have a tough time with that delicate conscience."

Holt edged sideways along the wall, got his fingers to the locker door, and whipped it back.

In the marginal light, the recess appeared to be full of gray people. Snouted and with shining circular eyes. As though they had been waiting for years for a signal to march out from the tomb.

But there was no movement. Holt gingerly touched the nearest and it swayed away like an empty shroud. There was time to shout "Hold it," and only a single shot fanned past his ear.

To Shesha Haddon's excited eye, it looked as though she had exorcised a whole raft of poltergeists. The plain back of the alcove was bare to see, with a raw, shiny scar where the bullet had struck.

Holt was rummaging on the floor and straightened up with a treasure trove that came near to settling his pilgrimage. Tardily, he recognized the danger and called from behind. "Easy. Put that cannon down. It's a protective suit."

There were eight in the closet. Complete outfits with elasticated wrists and ankles. Corrugated breathing tubes led back to lightweight recalculating gear carried like a hump on the back.

A rattle from the elevator cage underlined the fact that this was only a whistle stop. Shesha Haddon asked two questions and could hardly evaluate which concerned her most "Will it hold? What are they, for Pete's sake?"

"Under *one*, I guess so. Long enough. Under *two*, protective clothing and breathing apparatus."

"You're not going to put one *on*! They give me the green creeps."

"This is a fitting-out bay for maintenance crews. Bad air might collect in the tunnels. Look at these shoulder panels—indicator gauges. Amber for caution, red for unfit to breathe. Pick one to suit your fancy and well get on."

"You look like an android. Keep talking."

"Put one on. Then you'll be in the club. Like the old rhyme—I'd rather *be* than *see* one."

"I'm not so sure that's right. It's just as nasty to *be* one of those."

While she was sealing up, he checked out the tool chest. There was a comprehensive range, from simple steel-working gear, to repair fabric, to sophisticated electronic replacements for the power line itself.

He picked out a thermic lance kit and tried it on the cage. It sliced through the metal like a cleaver through dough.

"What are you doing?"

"Cutting out the bottom of the cage. If they get it up, it won't be any use to them."

"Why not just *partly* cut it out so that they'll *try* to use it and fall through?" Her voice was muffled by the stiff cowl.

Holt took time off to walk over to her and tap on the dome.

"Is that you in there?"

She looked around. There was nobody else about. "Yes, I think so."

"What's all this savagery, then? A good idea. But unexpected."

"Androids have no *feelings*."

There would have been material there for a debate, but time pressed. He cut a hairline around the frame of the cage, leaving a centimeter uncut in the center of each side. Four androids would be a dead weight topping four hundred pounds. Enough to drop the bottom out.

He finished the cut from the door and had hardly switched off the lance when the cage began to move. Somebody had done the sum and used an emergency circuit to trip the fail-safe mechanism of the jammed grille.

Shesha Haddon had done some rummaging on the stall and was holding out a circular headlamp to slot into a fitting on his face piece. She had already fixed one herself and had a shining Cyclops eye.

She said, "Does this mean that there won't be any light in the trunk?"

"Not necessarily. But if they were working on a power failure, every circuit would be out."

"That won't be so good."

"With a lamp on your head, it'll be light wherever you look. How do you know it isn't always dark where you're not looking?"

He had the clips off the right-hand hatch cover and swung it open like a porthole. A long, dimly lit tunnel stretched away into indefinite distance. Slap down the center, resting on lateral cradles that held it clear of the deck, was a meter-thick, dead black cable—the nerve fibre of the complex.

Shesha had emptied out a heavy-duty tool grip. "Is there anything else we should take?"

A click from the elevator shaft made a period. The cage had reached ground level in Delta. Holt found a spare charge for the lance, two fuel cells apiece for the head lamps, a Sat pack of emergency rations. The spare clips and the carbines filled up the grip. He dumped it through the hatch and helped the girl after it. Ground level was lower than the landing, and she found inset footholds to take her down. He would have liked to refit the plate and give somebody a problem of choice, but there was no way of doing it from inside.

He was halfway through the hole, when the bottom of the elevator cage ended its free fall with a percussive smack that shook the floor. A special android, having gathered a full due of urge in its spring-loaded legs, took off in angled flight and whipped out of the elevator like a zany jack-in-the-box. It scored a bull's eye on the ceiling light, and blue fire momentarily outlined its limbs. Then the landing was pitch black.

With remorseless female logic, Shesha Haddon said, "What have you done? All the lights have gone out."

Shesha said, "What time do you have?"

"Fourteen hundred."

"That's right. I thought my disk had stopped."

It was the first hint of complaint, and a mild one at that. Holt said, "It isn't far. Not more than half a kilometer. But we could take a spell."

She was sitting with her back to the tunnel wall before the echo had stopped vibrating around the set.

They could have been anywhere that they had seen in the last hours. The tunnel had a uniformity that bludgeoned the mind. That and the lateral support cradles made every kilometer a major hazard to sanity.

Holt said, "Androids will have a tough time crossing these things."

"Not only androids."

"It'll keep you lissome. Switch out your light."

"Come here first. So that I know where you are."

Hand on her arm, they switched out together. At first, darkness was absolute. Looking back was like looking at a black wall. Ahead, Holt could not be sure.

Shesha said uncertainly, "Is it imagination, or is there the very faintest light up there?"

Holt switched on his lamp and it swamped out whatever etiolated glow there was. He said, "That figures, we're coming out of this section. The Woodslee lights will not have fused."

"Couldn't we just find the way into the Alpha system?"

"Where's your scientific spirit?"

"About a kilometer and a half back down that tunnel."

"Hand out the ration pack and see what we have."

The heavy plastic cover had a zip toggle, and there was the hiss of a breached vacuum when he pulled it open. Inside, there was a dozen flat packs, also sealed. They took one each and Shesha said it reminded her of her name day—the only personal festival left for the trogs in Horizon Delta. She even delayed the moment of truth by a civil inquiry. "What do you have?"

"A block labeled chocolate. A cereal-and-fruit bar. Two tablets to make up a drink. Vitamin-reinforced sugar cubes and five self-lighting cigarettes."

"Check. What are you going to eat first?"

"The cereal bar."

"You've thought it through?"

"Of course."

"You could be right."

Shesha Haddon had tipped back the visor of her protective suit and had the detachable lamp on the floor between her knees, giving footlight illumination that made her eyes brilliant.

As her teeth sank into the soft-nougat texture of the bar, all the lights went on as though she had thrown a switch.

Reaction had her convulsively swallowing the plug, and Holt had to beat her back before she could draw a tortured breath.

Eyes streaming, she managed to say, "What's in this, for Pete's sake?"

Holt held up the wrapper. "Bircher Muesli—the Wonder Bar."

There was no move from the way they had come; but there was no doubt that they had left an easy trail in the dust. Now there was light, the posse could follow up.

He said, "The picnic will have to wait until we find a patch of grass."

The supporting saddles were twenty meters apart, and they crossed ten before Holt halted the column. Shesha stood still, leaning on the wall, waiting for the next thing. He put his ear on the cable and listened.

"What are you doing?"

"Quiet."

"I only asked."

Holt straightened up. "It's like an ear trumpet, that cable. Probably a hollow core with a vacuum. You can hear their big feet pounding along."

"Specials?"

"It wouldn't take long to shove a jury floor in the cage. We'll take a quick look at Woodslee and then get out. In any case, the next crossover area is there. We have to work from that."

At fifteen hundred, she stopped astride a cradle and flipped back her hood. "That's the longest half-kilometer on record."

"Nearer one and a half."

"Now you tell me."

"We passed the precinct boundary a long way back. Didn't you notice the numbers on the cradles? Decreasing, Numbered out from each tower."

"Where?"

"You're sitting on it."

"Fifty."

"Right Forty-nine to the jackpot."

"At ten meters each, four-ninety. Back to that half-kilometer you talked about. Can't we take a rest?"

Holt tried his sounding tube again. The rhythmic knock was a lot clearer. He looked down the tunnel to the hazy point where perspective lines gathered into a dot. There was movement. It was incredible, but the specials were beating their time.

Then he knew why the noise was so positive. They were walking on the cable. Gyro stabilizers would keep them in balance. They could walk a tightrope. At the same rate, they would catch up inside the distance to Woodslee's control point.

He said, "We'll take a leaf out of their book and balance walk along the top. Up you get."

There was no answer. He whipped around to see what she was doing and for a disordered second believed that the whole sequence had been a trick of the imagination. The tunnel was empty.

Then he was vaulting over the cradle and lifting her from the floor. Both shoulder panels were glowing red.

He slipped on the cowl and sealed it and saw that the valve was moving as she breathed. He picked her up, draped her over his shoulder in a fireman's lift, took their carpet bag in his free hand, and got himself on the cable. The roof was only centimeters over the dome of his helmet.

For the first ten meters, he reckoned it was no go. He would have to go down and sweat it out over the saddles. Then he got the rhythm of it and realized he was making better time than they had made so far, despite the extra load. He concentrated all his mind on the shiny black bar that stretched ahead. He told himself it was Sat and wide and as easy as a walkway. He talked himself along and was still muttering when a gray bulkhead appeared slap in front of his face and he could swing her down and lean her against the last saddle, while he set up the thermic lance to cut a way through the hatch.

When it was done, he knocked it through, saw that they had arrived at a junction point full of switchgear and metering consoles, and went back to pick her up.

Gunnar Holt was working like an android, set to endure without thought, following a program that he had set himself. The Woodslee Center was the goal. He had reached it. Once inside, he could stop and plot out the next move. He lifted Shesha and posted her through the hole feet first. As he let go, he felt muscular tension coming into the slack body. He gathered up the tools, thinking that it would be interesting to hear what she had to say when she found herself out of the tunnel and alone in a new place.

God, that was stupid, she might think he had left her. He recognized that it was the first time in his life that another human being's mental comfort had been a factor to reckon with. That must mean something. He dropped the grip through and followed it, fetching up on his hands and knees on a tiled floor, dust-free as though the place was in regular use.

He was getting multiple vision. A fatigue syndrome. Shesha appeared as a semicircle of seven.

Then he saw she was only slowly getting to her feet beside him and the seven were still there.

Guy Taubman, center of the group, said, "You can stand up. Take off your visors. But do nothing quickly. Just go flat against the wall and put your hands on your shoulders."

CHAPTER SIX

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Tired as he was, Gunnar Holt could still evaluate a tone of voice. Now that he could see the set whole and steady, he could also see that, size and color apart, there was nothing familiar about the suits worn by the reception party. They were very sophisticated items.

Visors were clear plexiglass, with the air-change function housed in a deep collar, like a thick ruff. Legs were corrugated and ended in high-laced ankle boots with thick foam rubber soles. At the waist there was a broad belt hung about with pouches. Men on either side of the spokesman had drawn bulbous hand guns, of a type he had never seen even in illustration.

Shesha Haddon asked huskily, "How do I get to be here?"

Holt said, "Don't worry about that. Everybody has to be somewhere. We've arrived at Woodslee and it looks as though a party from Alpha are paying it a visit. How do you feel now?"

"Better every minute. Thirsty, actually."

"This will save us a lot of time, we can go up with them."

Taubman's voice cut coldly into the dialogue. "You will be the man Holt and the woman Haddon, who have caused a disturbance on Horizon Delta. Do you seriously think we could tolerate your activities in Horizon Alpha? You are already outside the law. One of the objectives of this mission is to finish the job that the special force has failed to do."

Shesha Haddon, still feeling confused, said, "What's he talking about? What does he mean?"

"Nothing good." Holt took her hand, moving slowly and making the intention plain. He spoke to the center man.

"You know about us. Then you will know that we do not belong on Horizon Delta. Everything we have done has been toward finding a way out. The damage has come from the mechanical marvels that tried to stop us. If you know so much, you will know that is true. Now that we see you, it is even more plain. We belong on whichever horizon you have come from. What can be wrong with that as a proposition?"

"Your opinion is of no importance. You are deviants. Eugenically tainted. You belong nowhere. You have canceled any rights you might have had, by your actions. As representative of the law enforcement division, my ruling has legal force. Hicks, Grove. Kill them."

Holt felt the nudge of a sixth sense before the payoff and had shifted his grip to the girl's shoulder. He shoved hard and threw himself sideways. Two meters of clear space opened between them, and twin searing jets flared away through the hole in the bulkhead. A girl's voice from the end of the line called sharply, "Stop! You can't do it, Guy."

A tin-can clatter from outside the hatch made a further diversion. Taubman said, "Wait!"

He stepped out of the semicircle himself, carefully keeping from masking the line of fire, and looked through the hatch.

Holt, on hands and knees and feeling like a dog, saw him take a dull-gray palm-sized ovoid from his belt

and speak to it.

It was bitter confirmation that the specials were under direct control from Alpha.

Taubman said, "All special details. Stand still. Remain on alert." Then he addressed his own party, paying no attention to the two heraldic beasts crouched left and right "Let me remind you, Joanna, you are here as an observer. What difference will it make to them, if they wait a few days for a computer to make the same decision?"

There was no easy answer to it, and she was still searching for an unshakable argument when the only other nontechnical member of the group spoke quickly in support.

Taubman's safari had finally been set up with a blend of political and professional nominees. Grove and Hicks were members of the security force, agents with a long record of discreet assassinations. Harold Sark was second man in the hierarchy of the City Engineer's department, actively being groomed to be the next pro-Taubman place holder in the top slot. Cooley was in as a direct observer from the Council. If anybody, he should have been the one to call for politic caution and the due process of justice having been accomplished with witnesses.

In fact, support came from Dr. Jacob Dimeter, included on the tally as a well-known dianetician, whose observations on the Woodslee scene would make the trip respectable on Actualities Newscasts. He said, "I agree with the Subcontroller. I know that we have monitor records of the life cycle of deviants, but there are other lines of inquiry that would give interesting data. Our experimental psychology labs have not had such subjects for many years. Even as training exercises for our students, there would be enough value to justify taking them back. I concede that it is inconvenient, but you would be making a valuable contribution to mental research."

Joanna said quickly, "That was what I had in mind. There have not been any close studies of people moved, at this age, from an enclosed Horizon into the open. There is no security problem, they will be kept under supervision. In any case, they are easy to identify.

They are both unusual. Red hair, for instance, is not recorded on any current profile in Wirral City, and the girl is a unique flowering of recessive genes."

Grove, a heavily built, balding man, who had Shesha Haddon lined up as a target, had come to his own conclusion about the unique bit. He was not too clear on the rest of the message, but he said, "That's right, Boss, you can leave her to me. I'll watch the monkey."

Taubman said, "Very well. They can stay here. We'll pick them up on the way back. Stay with them, Grove. I'll leave you on guard."

Holt had been sidetracked by the face behind Joanna Taubman's plexiglass dome. Shesha, who had sized up Grove's interest, followed the direction of his fixed gaze and said bitterly, "I want no favors, I'll go back to Delta."

But Taubman was already moving his party on. Now, they could see a line of androids parked along the far wall beside two elevator shafts. An unfamiliar type, intermediate in size between the precinct forces and the specials. Steel gray and heavily armored, hung about with ancillary gear to face any crisis from a blown fuse to a forest fire. Beyond them, the bulkhead was open in a wide rectangle. Seemingly the Alpha group had come in that way.

Grove's handyman whipped out a tubular grab and pinned Holt back to the bulkhead by his throat, before he could take any avoiding action.

Shesha Haddon edged cautiously to his side, brown eyes all pupil. Illogically she said, "Don't let him *touch* me."

For Holt, it was the classic situation of a man unable to protect his own. He was at one with peasants down the millennia who had been pushed around by the higher echelons. He had gotten her into this. After trying to shift the grab with both hands, he knew for a fact that whatever Grove had in mind, he would be powerless to stop him. Beyond all else, he was grappling with the knowledge that he was as much an outcast on Alpha as anywhere else. Even the nubile blonde's intervention seemed colored by motives that had nothing to do with himself as a person.

Grove seemed ready to wait his time. The rest of the contingent took turns to go up in the cages. Two loads of androids sent up first with instructions to fan out and hold a bridgehead. Then the six. Last aboard, Taubman spared a parting word for the jailer, loud enough to make the point to the detainees.

"I'm not choosy about taking them back. If you have trouble, you know what to do. I'll take responsibility if anything terminal happens to them."

"Thanks, Boss. I'll remember that. I like a free hand."

When the cage had gone there was a digestive silence, and the small noises of the telemetering gear came over the threshold of attention. There was a large clock on the main console with a sweep second hand that moved two centimeters at a go with a soft, sliding click. It was fifteen-forty on the nose. Lights flicked up an indicator panel and held steady as the last cage reached its goal somewhere in Woodslee precinct. The mezzanine of the executive tower, more than likely.

Grove heaved himself casually off the wall, where he had been parked, sauntered over to Shesha Haddon, and grabbed her roughly by the left arm. He said, "Let's have you out of that comic outfit and see what the rest looks like. If the ginger deviant doesn't let go, I'll have my zombie friend squeeze the pips out of him."

Holt had his left arm clamped around her waist and felt the tremor that started up.

Ether way she had a problem. But, right off, there was a danger of being pulled apart. She said, "Let go, Gunnar. Please. It doesn't matter."

Grove mimicked her voice, "Let go, Gunnar, like the man said."

Gunnar Holt transferred his grip to the grab and took his weight on it, while he swung both feet up to kick at the android's dome.

Except for coming near to dislocating his neck, it made no change in the status quo. It was like kicking a wall.

Shesha said, "Stop it, Gunnar. He'll kill you. It doesn't matter." Repetition confirmed that her thinking had matched his own. High hopes of Alpha were in eclipse. She was in a limbo where values were drowned out. She was already two-thirds through the seals and the suit collapsed around her on the deck.

"Nice, very nice." Grove put a hand flat on her chest and steered her around, until she could feel the edge of a desk against her tights. "Now the rest. Start with that chain mail. Real slow, as if you was preparing a big surprise."

To Gunnar Holt's inflamed eye, the set was etched in acid. Every tick of the clock fell like a lead disk. Shesha Haddon had her arms above her head with the metallic filigree tube clear of her chin, a taut, erect figure, sculptured in warm bronze, hemisphere breasts, lifted and tightened by the mechanics of the

action, in the highest tradition of Hindu temple art.

Grove had a hand out to touch, when the tableau held as though an actualizer had struck a repeating loop. Only the clock moved on. Fifteen forty-three. It seemed longer since the expedition had moved out.

Gunnar Holt was aware of more activity on every dial on the computer spreads. And Grove, led by the weight of his extended arm was crumpling forward onto the parquet.

Shesha had her head clear. She was swaying, holding on to the table behind her for support. Holt shouted urgently, 'Fight it, don't give way! Search his pouches. There's a control box for this ape. Shesha! Do you hear me?'

She answered thickly. His voice was coming from an infinite distance. All she wanted to do was lie down and give in to the surging rhythms that were beating inside her head. But fear had still left its adrenalin booster in the circuits. She was not ready for quiet or unquiet sleep. She heard his voice again and surrendered her will to it, as it talked her onto hands and knees to crawl to Grove and begin a systematic search, emptying pouches one by one and calling the contents over.

It took all her strength to roll his dead weight onto his back, and she was ready to give up, when she found what she was looking for.

In a hazy way, she began to hate Holt for driving her on against the overwhelming urge to stop and drift into sleep. He saw what was happening and lashed her with his tongue. "Move, you fool. This way. Bring it to me. All right, like a dog. Crawl, dog. Crawl, you ninnyhammer. To me. Come on. Keep moving. Hold it out, higher."

When his hand closed on it, she collapsed and let the warm red flow carry her mind away with it.

Holt knew that time would be running out for him. Down in the library, he had gone under and Shesha had stayed awake; but there, the effect had not lasted as long. Maybe the single-mindedness of his purpose had kept him clear so far. But he could feel the pressures building up.

He concentrated on the box and thumbed a micro switch for voice control. Then he said, "Release your prisoner and stand clear."

When it was done, he realized that he had been held erect against nature. He had to struggle to stay on his feet, but there was one thing he had to do before he let go.

He drove himself to reach Grove and unclipped the equipment belt from his suit. The control room was wheeling in a slow spin as he set his teeth and checked out the other pockets. In one, there was a Sat pocket book with the city arms on the flap. He had a confused impression of blue and silver, a full-rigged ship, and a dolphin. He shoved it in his own breast pocket and found the blaster.

Taking infinite pains, he balanced himself flat-footed, feet astride, and took both hands for a steady aim.

Even at that, with the target only a meter away, he was erratic, and the beam carved up an area of ceramic tile before it broke the plexiglass dome, crossed Grove's fleshy throat, and neatly separated his head from his trunk.

Holt thought woozily, "That'll surprise him when he stands up."

There was still something bugging him that had to be done before he could rest.

The android, having been switched from personal program, where it would have been using its own initiative, to external voice control, was standing still, with only an occasional flicker from a green cathode tube set in its left cheek to show that it was full of sap and *brio* and only waiting to be asked.

Holt said, "Go to the elevator shafts. As soon as a cage begins to move, shoot into the floor. Do whatever is needed to stop the cages being used. Do you understand?"

"Certainly, Excellency."

It jogged off and stood where it could command either shaft.

Holt was crawling now, using every last fading urge of the anger that had given him momentum. He took their useful tool bag, the headlamps, and the pouch belt and put them through the opening the Alpha group had used. Then, as a last move, he angled Shesha Haddon across his arms, like a drunken priest with a comely sacrifice, draped her chain mail over his shoulder, and went through himself.

He managed three paces into the farther reaches of the tunnel, saw that a portion of the vaulted ceiling was hinged away, felt her skin, smooth and cool as stone, and crumpled slowly to his knees.

Care for her, flowing from a deep unconscious level, guided his hands to lower her the last few feet without knowledge of what he was doing. He folded up with his forehead berthed on her slowly-moving diaphragm.

Senator Fred Bairstow Holmes, in a loose toga, lacked only a chaplet to make the scene as a latter-day Roman. Some of his guests looked less comfortable. Harry Grabe found it all slightly ridiculous and had sat throughout on his divan as though it were a settle drawn up to an unsuitably high table.

Altogether, there were twenty present, and some had entered into the spirit of the banquet to the extent of using a vomitorium. A heavy bouquet of food, fresh and regurgitated, sweat, wine, resin from the torch flares, and incense from a couple of hanging dispensers battered the five wits.

Outside, it was a cold, clear night with the jut of an escarpment a kilometer from the villa, standing sharp like a cardboard cutout.

Holmes clapped his hands. Every eye tracked around to the high table. The domestic androids filed out. Harry Grabe stopped trying to make a swathe of cloth stay in place around his paunch. He said, irritably, "For godsake, Fred, cut the mummery and get down to business. All this What's-Nigel-doing-with-his-strigel bit, is regression to the crib. I don't see why it couldn't have been a regular meeting in one of our precinct executive suites. You could have come to Pensby."

Across the table, the senator for Arrowe said, "And missed the belly dancer? You must be joking, Harry. Unless you've got something very special in Pensby. Just relax and listen to Fred."

Senator Holmes had swung himself off his couch and made a totally nonpolitical move by getting down to cases in his first sentence.

"You can speak freely here. There's a screen around this place, to turn any listening beam right up its own ass. You all know the score and I won't insult you by going over the ground. But I guess everyone here is sick to death over the way Taubman has the Council sewed up. It's plain to see that he's fixing it to go for another term. After that, you can kiss goodbye any chance of getting him out of Government House."

Mort Ogden, the gaunt senator for Landicon, who had been lying on his couch as if on a catafalque, sat up and pointed a bony arm. "Hold it there, Fred. What's your interest? None of us like Taubman's administration, but it's constitutional. Ninety per cent of the voters don't care either way. He does nothing

extreme, and his two running mates never put a foot wrong. What could we expect better?"

It was a nice lead. Holmes picked up the cue line. "I'll tell you what we can expect better. We can expect real consultation and some piece of power left with the Council. Taubman's meetings are a sham. He knows what he wants and he gets it. We can expect Wirral City to take more part in Federal affairs. When did any rep from this Council get on the Western Directorate or on the Regional Synod, for that matter? We're a dead letter."

Grabe had no particular friendship for Mort Ogden, but he came in on a supporting tack. "All that's true, Fred. But it's been true for three or four decades. There's nothing to gain from the big league. We're self-contained. Nobody starves. We all have our interests. You haven't brought us out here to tell us that."

"No, I haven't. I tell you Taubman's playing down something that could be serious. We might be glad of help from the Association. There's big trouble brewing on Delta. He's pussyfooting around it, instead of tackling it. Leaving him in charge is giving it time to escalate out of hand. Our whole way of life is threatened. We can't afford to let him gamble with security on his own judgment."

Grant Slocumbe poured himself another beaker from a double-handled red jar and said, "Right. You have the right of it. But we all know the constitution. Once elected, the management committee is set. Nobody can do a thing about it. Until Taubman hands over to the executive computer for the ten days' election period, he has all the law enforcement machinery under his thumb. Military units only operate on the Government House circuits. For the first time in history, the administration has an absolute power that can't be bucked. And it works. When has there been a longer period of stability?"

Holmes fished in the folds of his toga and brought out a control manual like a conjurer producing a gray egg. It was too common an artifact to have them rolling around the peristyle, but he held it up for all to see. He even spoke to it "Come in triple-O-seven."

After the exotic entertainment they had been treated to, it could have been anything. In fact, there was mild disappointment when a bulky steel-gray android, distinguished by three interlocking zeroes and the numeral 7 on a blue-gray rectangle across its barrel chest, rolled in from the colonnade and stopped on his right, beside the high table. Its locomotive principle was unusual but hardly revolutionary in the strict sense. It had a single ball foot in a skirted socket and was held upright by a gyroscope, which gave a continuous high-pitched whine.

Holmes did his trick again and brought out a second control unit. A black one. This time, the android he summoned had a better press; it was indistinguishable from the units of the Government House special force.

He parked it on his left, so that it was looking over the length of the table at the first witness.

A certain excitement had gathered in the air. After all, Holmes had something more than rhetoric up his toga. There was enough silence to hear the drip of spilled wine from the edge of a table. They heard Holmes say quietly to the gray control unit, "Destroy the android that faces you."

Action was too quick to isolate into detail. There was a blur of movement from the right. A stream of bright lines crossed the table and hid the conjurer momentarily from his audience. When it stopped, there was silence again. Holmes was grinning in a rictus that had no contact point with humor. The android on his right was stock still as though it had never moved. The Government nominee had disappeared as far as the waist except for a long, shuddering coil of bright spring steel, which had released itself after the broadside and was still quivering with the shock of freedom.

If he had produced the Great Reaper, complete with scythe, out of a chocolate egg, he could not have found a better show stopper.

All hands had gone stone sober. The senator for Margrove, Ed Sandall, a fringe adherent, whipped smartly off his couch and fairly ran for the colonnade, unwinding a green toga, which he left as a 3-D addition to the gaudy tesserae, content to leave in his candy-striped briefs.

Every eye followed him out, then turned back to Holmes full of query. It was plain that they had expected another show of force.

Holmes said, "Let him go. It doesn't matter. Better to know who has the will for change and who hasn't. He can't do anything about it. I have twenty of these monkeys and more being serviced. There's a complete workshop under the hill, dates from 2260 when they had a talent for mayhem. A variant of this type is the life form on Horizon Beta. Government House androids don't mean a thing. Now we have the power. If we don't like what Taubman does, we don't have to take it."

Grabe put his finger on one weakness in the chain. "That's fine, Fred, as far it goes. But who's to say where it stops? Androids carving each other up is one thing, but suppose human operators get hurt. I don't fancy ending up as a burnt offering to the liberal idea."

Holmes said, "I'm surprised at you, Harry. You should know how the system works. As soon as Taubman feels threatened he hands over to the law enforcement computer. That directs operations. I have a parallel setup here. I can leave a mechanical marvel to get on with it. We disperse to our precincts. Let them battle it out. Later, when Taubman's tin men are all scrap, we demand a Council session and get our change of executive."

Harry Grabe had another one and felt himself that his welcome was wearing thin. "A town manager in Taubman's dilemma could call in the Feds. On request, the A.E.C. would send a commission to take over and restore order. Now, they have some fancy units. How would your boys do against them?"

"Holmes stayed patient" He said, "You and I know, both, that the Association of European Communities is something and nothing. Who's the Wirral City rep on it? Does anybody remember? As I recall, it's Digby Calder, and he's there because nobody else can be bothered to make the trip. When did they last make a ruling that was adopted? It'll take them a month to debate it and another two to get a decision. By that time, there'll be a change of chairman in the Government House and the new man can reverse the request and tell them to go back to sleep."

It was all very plausible. Certainly the name of Senator Digby Calder was no booster to the A.E.C. image. He hardly knew the day of the week. Some thumped agreement on the table, others copied ancient procedures and shouted "Aye."

Grant Slocumbe moved the affair forward. He said, practically, "What are you going to do as of now? Taubman will hear about this meeting from Sandall."

It was Holmes's night for gestures. He cleared an area of the table top with a sweep of his arm and pressed a recessed key. A hinged flap turned up, facing the party, and the master of ceremonies moved around to the front.

There was no mystery. Except perhaps the query of who in his right mind would want an elaborate video system under his meat and veg. Holmes did some swift selecting and the screen glowed with the Government House waiting signal, an elaborate crest compounded of many armorial bearings of the ancient Wirral towns that had combined to form the city.

They waited for a count of ten and the scene faded to be replaced by Taubman's face, as full of zest as a lump of putty.

"Taubman. Oh, it's you, Senator Holmes. What do you want at this time? Can't it wait to go through the proper channels?"

"What the proper channels are is a big question. I'm not satisfied with your administration, and I have ten names to support a referendum. That's what I want. You can hand over to the executive computer and get the election machine moving tomorrow."

The face, getting full-color treatment from a discriminating scanner, had taken on a puce look. Taubman said chokily, "You're out of your mind, Holmes. There's no case for an election and you know it."

"What's the answer?"

"You know the answer. No."

"You may regret that."

"You certainly will. I'll have you in for investigation. Conspiracy to undermine the constitution. Pack your toothbrush and a spare toga. Goodnight."

Holmes was grinning. "Now he'll send along a couple of his zombies in a patrol car. It couldn't be better. Five minutes. That gives us nice time to set it up."

The manifest content of the dreams that chased one another through Shesha Haddon's head had one common feature. From the coal-black eunuch with golden bracelets to the monster, animated shroud with goggle eyes, all the protagonists had an interest in getting her flat on her back so that they could balance exotic artifacts on her abdomen.

Latest contender was some kind of cannon ball, and her exploring fingers signaled back to base that this culminating horror was partly covered with springy human hair.

She sat bolt upright with a strangled "Eek," hands crossing instinctively on her bare chest, and Holt's head left its pneumatic pillow and hit the deck.

His freewheeling mind snapped into gear and, on a first run through the sense data, reckoned that the Holt empire was once more under heavy attack. He grabbed for Shesha, in a tackle that flattened her back to the tile floor, and only identified the party of the second part when his raised fist was on its way to the bridge of her nose.

She said, "Gunnar!" and her brown eyes were filled more with a sense of betrayal than with fear.

When he stopped short, looking at his hand as if it belonged to an intruder, her face cleared of doubt; but at the back of her mind she filed a memo that the next run of the sequence could see her off before identity cards could be checked.

Back in business, Holt's memory banks were busy with recall, and none of it good. His time disk told him it was sixteen hundred on the nose. Seventeen minutes since Grove had been blacked out. If the condition was general, the Alpha party would have been frozen for the same period. A lot hinged on what long-term plan they had, whether it was a brief call or an extended stopover.

Shesha said, "Can I get up now?"

"Sorry. I was thinking."

"About that *patronizing* blonde girl?"

Holt hesitated. Even the truth, given the position he was in, was no compliment. She rushed in with a quick change of topic. "What happened to the man Grove? How did you get free? How did we get down here?"

Holt pulled her to her feet. Dark hair swung silkily to her bare shoulders. He kept hold of her hands and looked at her at arms length.

"What are you thinking now?"

A distant siren wail from somewhere overhead, channeled via the elevator shaft and the control room, made a period.

"Get your shirt on, or I can't think at all. It's time we were moving on."

Confirmation came with an outburst of confused noise from the control room. The guard was sticking to his brief, but the Alpha party might well have overriding circuits on tap to bring a rogue android to heel. Holt put his back to the wall and made a stirrup.

Seeing her disappear overhead was getting to be a fact of life. He passed up their growing hand baggage.

Then he had to run to make a jump for the lip of the opening and was glad of her help to haul the dead weight of his tiring body over the sill.

It was dark. She had switched on the lamps, and a shaft of light lost itself in gloom either way. There was the familiar feature of a black meter-thick cable, but a curious smell of formaldehyde that had been missing from the lower levels.

"Which way?"

It was a good question and there was no easy answer. Holt said "left" as though he had a hotline to God, and they crossed four saddles before a bulkhead showed up in the lights.

It was another control room and an entry hatch was open, but Holt had a niggling doubt that the Alpha party had not used it. Light would be no problem to them, but there was an air of disuse that did not match up with expectation.

Shesha said, "Do you think this is right?"

"It goes up. That's the direction."

When the elevator cage wheezed protestingly into movement, he felt even more that they could be wrong. Doubt became certainty when the cage grated to a halt, after a longer journey than they had made to Delta, but hardly long enough for four Horizons. They were in a large lobby with a central kiosk, very like the one at Brimstage. There were not many people about. All standing stock still. The hospital smell of formaldehyde was much stronger.

Shesha hung back, reluctant to leave the cage. Holt had Grove's belt on and took out the blaster. His steps echoed as though he was disturbing the long silence of a vault.

At the kiosk, two figures with their backs to him stayed still like waxworks in a tableau. Another, on the far side of the desk, appeared to be in the act of filling out a form. But the features were wrong—old,

wizened, skin parchment-tight over the bone.

The small vibration he made carried to them and started a landslide, which had been held back by a hair thread. All three appeared to fold to the floor as though the clothes had been plumped out by a collapsible wire frame.

Shesha Haddon, finding loneliness at least as unpleasant as the way ahead, settled for joining him at a run. Now she could see that for every figure standing up, there were two or three lying every which way on the floor. As she reached Holt, the rest began to fall.

He had time to put the blaster on the desk 'op and gather her in.

Head on his chest, she was racked by sobbing she could not control. It was not for herself, not disappointment that they had fetched up in rats' alley, but a generalized pity for the human condition. The mounds of cloth had been people, looking out from their own eyes. They had been overwhelmed by something outside their knowledge, unexpectedly, without redress.

Insight took Holt to the core of it. He stroked her hair and made comforting noises as if to a child. When the harsh crying stopped, he said, "They didn't feel a thing. You can tell from the faces. They just stopped dead, where they were. That's not so bad. When you think of all the dead, they're the majority party. It's more common to be dead than alive. This *is* Horizon Gamma. All dead, or somebody would have been along to clear this lot away. No androids by the look of it— a different setup from ours."

"I'm sorry. I'm not being much help to you."

"Never say that. You're the best help a man could have. You've more than doubled the valise I was living out of. You make sense out of being alive. And if we want to stay that way, we'd better get on before the Alpha group closes off the route to the top. All right?"

"We don't want to join the majority party. The majority has to be wrong, as your friend Sutton said."

"Roger."

CHAPTER SEVEN

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Shesha Haddon voiced the doubt that was niggling in Holt's head. "If the Alpha people did this and the ones we saw were so hostile, what do we gain by going on to Alpha?"

They had pushed open a swing door into an admin sector with many small desks and a labor force of human clerks. Moving slowly to minimize the turbulence, they walked down the center aisle. Claw hands still rested on keyboards. A girl in a bright yellow tabard was standing at a dispenser, neatly balanced with a paper cup in her left hand and her right hand holding the faucet.

There was no immediate reply. Holt saved it until they were in the elevator. For the first time, he looked discouraged. "You may be right. I don't know."

Illogically, she switched to the other side of the argument "But it can't be worse than Delta, and there isn't a choice."

"No, there isn't a choice."

"Don't be like that. I'm relying on you to keep telling me that things will improve."

"That's an exercise we'll take turns at."

Protesting every foot of the way, the cage ground to a halt in the control room for the Gamma precinct above. When the noise stopped, they could pick up another one from the open hatch. Many voices, hurrying feet, and the flicker of moving lights reflected in an oblong patch on the ceiling.

Looking from the darkside, they were invisible; but Holt was still cautious and mimed for her to keep out of a direct line.

Voice in an excited whisper, she said, "They're our own people. It's a folk migration."

As they watched, a continuous stream poured up from below. A solid ladder had been fixed. There were hand lamps and flaring torches in a jostling line for a hundred meters down the tunnel, then a stop as the lead end was absorbed into another opening.

Holt said, "The Woodslee people have broken out. That's the way we should have taken. Question is, how will they get on? Once the leaders reach the elevators, the line will be backed up."

"The Alpha party?"

"It all depends how long they take on their tour."

"Who was the guard firing at, then?"

"Of course. This lot couldn't have got around it. They must have come another way."

Movement had already slowed. From a purposeful walk, progress had dropped to a shuffle. Saturation point had been reached up ahead.

Now there was a new noise. An etiolated scream that cut off in mid-trill and the tail end came with a rush up the connecting ladder.

Thin tracers of flame shot up from below in pursuit and flared in brilliant asterisks on the vaulted roof. There was a general scatter, and the last fifty yards of the column, judging with truth that there was no chance to get clear by going on, broke ranks and began a wild rush toward the Gamma junction box.

In the hubbub, isolated voices could be picked out shouting the odds. The enemy was known. Names were being named. They knew that behind the new, deadly guards, the finger on the button was from Horizon Alpha, and there was as much anger as fear in the equation.

Holt said urgently, "Come away. They don't know us. They'll class us with the Fascist!."

"Can't you stop the androids? You can't let them do it, Gunnar."

An advance unit of the force was head and shoulders through the trap, stabilized by one claw grab and firing indiscriminately into the mass. A small man, maddened by a terminal wound that had taken off his right arm and most of the shoulder, spun around and went at a stumbling run for the android.

It had stopped firing to heave itself over the rim, and he got within a meter, before it realized that a threat had developed.

At point blank range, the beam hit like a power hose and blasted the running corpse to a halt in a heap of charred trash.

Others had turned to watch the heroic suicide, and half a dozen from each end started a weaving run to try to get near.

Holt knew that the situation had moved on beyond the area where choice was possible. This was a beachhead for humanity. If he withdrew to save his own skin, or Shesha's for that matter, there would be no value in any future. He had the hand control out of its pouch and was struggling to get through the hatch against the tide coming in.

A woman screamed, "Here's one. Murderer! Murderer!"

Hands tore at his clothes, and he had to use his fists to get clear. Then there was more space and he could see the android was clear of the hole and was using a claw grab like a scythe to carve up the men who were hanging on it. On the shoulder, there was a figure identity reference and he thumbed around a selector disk to match it.

He spoke into the transmitter. "Stand still. Put your arms over your head."

Left and right, the tunnel had emptied except for those who could not move or could only crawl. Shesha Haddon was nowhere in sight. But above the noise from the control room he identified a brief scream, abruptly stifled, which had a familiar harmonic. She was experiencing at first hand that there was no rush of gratitude from an animal sprung from a trap.

Holt ran back, trading the control unit for the blaster. She was still on her feet, hair in a snarl, blood masking her face from a long scratch across her forehead; the metallic shut was ripped to the navel. Two women were holding each arm and there was frenzied competition from the rest to get close enough to hit.

Sheer weight of numbers had so far prevented serious structural damage, but any minute some organizer would get it sorted and make room for fair turns.

A civil request would get nowhere. Holt used the blasted and shot over their heads into the free-standing hardware. Any loss of power on Gamma would hardly be noticed.

A long row of monitor dials raced into a frenetic spin and a bank of protective fuses went off like fire crackers at a Chinese New Year. It was a show stopper. Shesha broke free and was out through the hatch before anybody moved.

From the door, Holt tried to reason, while attention lasted, "Listen. I don't know what you aim to do. Keep out of the way of the Alpha contingent. There's nothing you can do against them."

Behind him, Shesha said, "Leave them. There's no time. There's another android coming up."

By the time he was near enough to see its number, it had pulled itself out of the hole and was looking for a target. Then he had it clear and spun the dial as its receptors locked on the only moving object and an arm came up to fire.

It was a close thing, and he knew that luck had to run out. In any case, he could only control one at a time. As soon as the Alpha leader realized what was going on he could pick up the strings and override the veto.

They ran on, past the two stationary androids, to where the wall was breached. Unexpectedly, the way was down. A long, steep ramp with batons every half meter to give a foothold.

At the bottom, a familiar power main in its conduit made a T junction. Fifty meters to the left, light spilling

from the hatch of the local control center showed the tail end of the refugee column, waiting nervously for its turn to go through.

Holt dropped on hands and knees and mimed for her to follow. When he turned right, keeping low behind a support saddle, she crawled rapidly up level with his ear to ask urgently, "Where are you going? It's that way."

"Not yet, it isn't. Any time now, the Alpha party will be along. We can't hold them. Now that we know where it is, we'll wait until the activity dies down a bit."

He crossed three saddles, in gathering darkness, before he was satisfied. Eyes adjusting to the minimal light level, he checked through the contents of the pouches in the late Grove's belt. There was a comprehensive repair kit, which included the human frame in its span, and he broke out a dressing for her forehead.

When it was done, they sat back to the black cable and waited. She said, "It's your turn to tell me that things will get better. I don't see it."

Holt was saved a lying statement by sudden illumination flaring overhead, as a powerful spotlight probed down the tunnel. He thought, "God, why should I think they wouldn't check this way. At the least count, he'll send a zombie to take a look."

Taubman's voice just reached them over the baffles, "What do you say now, Joanna? Is there any use for your deviants, even as experimental subjects? They're dangerous animals."

The light dimmed. It had been concentrated the other way. The thump of android feet receding down the tunnel made its own statement. Holt looked out from the angle where the cable ran through its support block.

The Alpha party was strung out along the tunnel. The near end of the connecting ramp had been sealed off. No doubt they had closed the access route at each stage behind them. Two androids ahead, then the girl and the big talker. More androids bringing up the rear.

She had hinged away the plexiglass visor and her hair had gathered a nimbus from the directional lighting.

Curiosity had moved Shesha to take a look for herself. By intuition, she knew what had taken his eye. She said bitterly, "That one must be a sadist. What's she doing in a war party? Looks as though butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. Not that I like her mouth. It's *feline*. She's a psychopath."

"We don't know why they came."

"We know what they did."

"Delta people are no better."

Shesha Haddon had not worried about her torn shirt, treating Holt as family. But his outgoing interest in another woman put him in another category. She pulled the two edges together in a definitive gesture of withdrawal and moved to the other side of the cave to improvise a toggle.

A highly colored dialogue was beginning in her mind, where Holt was at death's door in the blonde woman's experimental lab. He had at last realized that he had been wrong all along the line and was using his remaining breath to apologize.

"You were right, Shesha. Forgive me."

"Why should I? You made your bed and now you have to lie in it."

"I'm sorry."

"You should be."

The last bit was spoken out loud, and Holt, genuinely puzzled, asked, "I should be what?"

"Never mind."

Noises told that the unlucky remnants of the Delta column were being carved up. Two, a man and a woman, jumped for the cable and made out in a nimble-footed, balancing run. Away from the light, they were difficult to hit, and an android climbed out to shine a beam down the tunnel.

The man, who had let the woman go first, recognized the danger and yelled for her to jump down as the android got a directional fix and began to fire.

Lines of tracer beam went overhead into the far darkness as though they had no end.

Hicks, the survivor of the strong-arm duo, appeared in the hatch to direct the search, and the android climbed to the cable top where his headlamp could light up each bay as he reached it.

Voices were unexpectedly near at hand, immediately over the saddle. A girl's voice, quick and high-pitched, said, "It's no use, Hal. It's following. Hold me."

"We'll give the bastard a run for it. I'll cross to the other side. When I shout, get over the top, Stella, and don't hang around."

"What are you going to do?"

There was a scuff of movement. He had prudently cut the argument by moving off.

Holt anticipated how it would be. The invisible Hal would pop up to draw the fire, while the girl crossed the saddle. But with the android all keyed up and ready for a snap target, he was likely to get crisped.

If he used the hand control, even supposing he could get a quick reading of the shoulder flash for a setting, it would tell the Alpha leader that they also were in the tunnel and he would not stop until they were found.

Bent low, he joined Shesha. The same line of reasoning had gone through her computer and come out with an emotional loading. "Help them."

Holt had the torch out and shoved it into her hand.

"You have one thing to do. As it fires at Hal, light up the shoulder, read off the number, and don't hang around."

The man's voice shouting "Now" made a period. There was a quick scuffle. The girl rolled over and dropped, and Shesha Haddon stood up with the torch searching for a target. Holt waited with his finger on the button in a state of absolute concentration that closed him off from any other detail.

When the light snapped off without any signal, he was some seconds returning to the here and now. The girl Stella, judging that she had fallen into a subtle trap, was opening her mouth to shout a warning.

Nothing was clear to Holt, but he reckoned silence all around was the better part and gagged her by

grabbing her head and pulling it smartly against his chest.

Stella was on the small side but lithe as a netted fish, and, finding that the hands were human, she did her best to kick his crotch. Her friend, forgetting the decoy role, leaped from the cradle and landed nicely on Holt's back.

The three went down in a clawing tangle. Shesha Haddon said, unfairly, "You can take your hands off her now. It's all right. It's turned back."

Dark herself, she melted into the darkness, and Stella had enough reserves of untapped fear to react as though to the supernatural. Holt said urgently, "Calm down, you little nut. We're on the same side. What's happened Shesha?"

"The leader came out and said something to the man Hicks. Now they're all going inside. I've got the blaster. Do you need any help?"

Holt picked himself up. The other two were dusting each other off as though it was all in a day's march and they could wait to hear the score. He said, "That figures. Why should they bother? With all the outlets sealed off, they could leave these two to roam about until they starve."

As he said it, the light from the distant hatch went out and Stella stopped her grooming play to give a startled "Eek."

Hal spoke up, out of the darkness. "That does it. Down here the flux will drive us out of our heads. Some got through, though. There's just a chance that Carter might organize something to get us out."

The girl was fighting to keep her voice steady. "You saw what they did. How can he do anything against them? And he only just persuaded the others to break out. They won't risk any more, even if they stay free."

Shesha Haddon put the small torch on the floor and it threw a circle of light on the vaulted ceiling. She said simply, "This is Gunnar Holt. I am Shesha Haddon. We were born and brought up on Delta, and after we met, two days ago, we decided to try to get out. We made for Woodslee, because we heard there was something unusual going on there. But your people took us for part of the Alpha group. Can't we work together?"

There was a silence broken by hammering as wedges were driven into the distant hatch from the inside.

The girl, a slight number with straight, dark hair caught in an apricot headband, and a mobile, heart-shaped face, broke from Hal's circling arm and voted with her feet. She said "I'm Stella Morton, and the spring-heeled type is Hal Davies. I've never seen anybody like you before, except in pictures. You're beautiful. Hal, isn't she beautiful?"

She might have been taking a course on how to make friends and influence people. Holt reckoned enough was enough. He said, "Hold it. Let's think this thing through. There's more than one precinct control room on Alpha. They've closed this one, but we might get to the next before they think of sending down to seal it. You can do any back-scratching that seems suitable as we go."

Indian file on the cable top with the single torch beam bouncing ahead damped conversation to a minimum. After an hour by his time disk, Holt reckoned that they had covered three kilometers. Without a break, somebody would lose concentration and drop off. He called a halt and jumped down, holding up his arms to catch Shesha, who was next in line.

The brief contact before she broke away was enough to show she was still harboring a grievance that he

could not fathom.

Holt said, "Ten-minute spell. Put us in the picture about Woodslee. What's all the brouhaha?"

Stella Morton said, "It started in a small way about ten years ago, when we were still children, but it's gone stronger all the time."

"What has?"

"This brainstorm thing. But Hal knows more about it. He's a power engineer."

"So what's it all about, Hal?"

"You really don't know?"

"Would I be asking?"

"That means it's only local. I don't understand that. For years now, Woodslee's been sealed off from the rest of Delta. But we thought the condition would be widespread. Nobody knows what causes the mental effect, but the tuning links it with the daily power surge. Twice daily, in fact. Most often, one falls during the night period and isn't noticed very much. Except that some neurotics have nightmares."

Shesha Haddon said, "It might be general, at that, on the lower levels. We experienced it in Burton precinct—in a deep library store. Then again near here. It was much stronger here. The Alpha guard went down. So they don't understand it either."

Holt said, "But this power system has been going since the city was built. Why should it only start in recent times?"

There was a pause. Stella Morton, sensitive as a tick to atmosphere, felt the growing sense of isolation now that movement had stopped, and shivered violently. Hal put an arm around her shoulders. He said, "That's the big question. Twice a day the power flows through this conductor. It's a very special job. At the core, there's a vacuum tube and the buzz-bar's kept at near absolute zero. Almost no resistance. Power flows in and fills the storage units. Like blood being pumped around. We don't even know how it's generated. But it's there, always has been there, and as far as we know always will be there. But now this mental effect comes with it. I reckon there's been a slow breakdown in the dielectric over the years. Nothing lasts forever. The field is leaking out from the conduits. Twice a day when the generators go into full boost, it's strong enough to climb into your head and knock normal brain currents all to hell. Sometimes you're more susceptible, like when emotion gets involved. At first, it was something to talk about. Dream swapping took over from sessions at the Coliseum. Then violence. After the blank, you had to check around and see how your friends had made out. There were suicides. Men ran amok and killed their families. Then they'd come to, knife in hand, and not know what they'd done. We got the times on a schedule, so people could get home and lock themselves in. Even then you weren't safe from yourself. That's why Carter got a big following when he began to plan to break out."

"Carter?"

"Nick Carter. He was one of the first to suffer. A neighbor in the next unit got into his apartment and killed his wife and daughter. It was their own child, too. They'd kept tabs on her through the creche and wangled the adoption. He was crazy about that kid. It was a long time before he got over it, and then he started an undercover group. He's a power engineer and reckoned if there was a way out, it was through the trunks. Must have been five hundred joined."

"How did you get around the public meeting laws?"

"Never more than ten at a session. Took some dovetailing. But he has a genius for it. We met a lot at the Coliseum. Got a block of seats and worked under the noise. But the specials were moving in. He couldn't have held off much longer."

Shesha Haddon asked, "Did he get out?"

"He was up front. We have some thermic lances. He guessed there'd be opposition, and the first out were to hold a beach head for the others to come up. Nobody reckoned they'd take us from behind. But then, finding the way open was a bonus."

Holt said, "He sounds like a good man. There aren't many about. In the other precincts, nobody wants to know. On the other hand, they haven't had your particular kind of problem. What were you aiming to do when you got out?"

Uncurling herself from Davies' lap, where she had settled like a homing pigeon, Stella Morton said, "We built up a picture of the city from reported dreams. There was too much in common to be a coincidence. Horizon Alpha is open to a natural sky. We aimed to leave the city altogether and make a colony in the waste. Start subsistence farming. Make a new beginning. But some say it isn't possible, because of the animals. A lot of nightmare sequences pointed to wild dog packs roaming around. If you believe the rest, maybe you have to believe that too."

Shesha Haddon said, "I like the idea of starting over. This city has been going too long. It's rotting from the ground up; but the message hasn't reached the top yet. Even the rebuilding's got stuck on a loop. It's just shifting the same bricks backward and forward. Unless you can believe that you can change the future you might as well be dead."

Stella asked, "Who said that?"

"A dead friend of Gunnar's."

"It has the ring of truth."

Holt said, "One personal angle. How is it you don't resent us? We were outsiders in our own precincts. Your people were hostile."

There was a pause, and he was ready to believe he shouldn't have asked. But Hal Davies was weighing it on its merits. Finally he looked at Stella, then said slowly, "It's a fair question. I guess the others were placing you with the Alpha party. We know you're not. If you mean on the size issue, why should it bother us? We've had a long contact in dream sequences with the past of the city. It seems that the whole population started out on the same physical scale, which was roughly where you are now. It's the rest of us who are exceptional in biological terms. Density over a long period works the trick. Stature adjusts to available space. Mental habits, too. It becomes useful to conform. Without the special circumstances, there'd have been no revolutionary fervor in Woodslee."

Holt checked his time disk. "Time to get on."

Once they were moving, it seemed as though there had been no stop. Holt pondered on how they would make out if there was another patch of bad air. He asked over his shoulder, "How do you feel, Shesha?"

"How should I feel? Sick to death of this black tube. How far still? Why isn't there any light along this way?"

"Switched out to discourage travelers. It can't be far. Stand fast, all. I want to look ahead."

It was a necessary warning. When he snapped out the torch, Shesha Haddon felt that she was balance walking over a bottomless pit. She dropped to a crouch to get her hands on the gritty black surface of the cable and closed her eyes.

When she opened them, Holt was a defined shape against the darkness ahead. Before she could testify, Stella was calling excitedly from immediately behind. "I can see. I think. Shesha, you're kneeling down."

Holt said, "That's it then. Better douse the light and go along at floor level. It'll be the next power take-off point. And if there's light, it could be manned."

From the ground it was less evident. The cradles were still hardly visible. For half a kilometer it was a matter of going forward until one came up dead ahead and feeling for it with hands out like antennae.

Then there was enough light to make out the endless features of the tunnel system and, very faintly at first, then with gathering definition, the regular pounding of machinery under load.

They made the last fifty meters to the saddle before the bulkhead of the control room bent double and on tiptoe, which strained every muscle that had not yet taken its full due. Then they looked over the rim. Androids were on the move for a plain fact. They were of a pattern that no one had seen before—not the general purpose guards who policed the precincts on Delta, nor the specials who had appeared to seal off Woodslee, nor the type that the Alpha contingent had brought along as a protection screen.

They were squat, steel gray, and each had a blue-gray plaque on the side of its chest cavity carrying an identity reference of three black rings followed by numerals. The trunk tapered to a ball foot, and the limitations of this were plain. A system of narrow, slotted ramps, clearly custom-built to suit the locomotive system, had been set up to lead in from a branch tunnel that skirted the control room.

Though the noise would have masked a shout, Shesha's lips were brushing Holt's ear when she asked the jackpot question. "Where are they going, then?"

The question was echoed farther along the line, all except Stella looking at Holt for the answer.

He would have been glad to have an oracle on his right to pass the question on to, but being last in line, he had to do his best with deduction.

In the first place, incredibly, they were going up and not coming down, so they were not motivated to search for intruders. In the second place, they seemed to be doing it on their own initiative without visible human direction.

He had gotten to the point of saying that there was not enough evidence to justify a working hypothesis, when Stella, rigid as a yogi in a samhadic trance, said positively, "It's them."

"Them—who?" Davies, even in *extreme reis*, was not going to have a sloppy speaker for a consort.

"From Beta. I saw it once in a dream. The whole Horizon is peopled by androids. They carry these little planks everywhere. They use them to cross stairs or whatever."

Davies put his finger on another flaw. "If the Horizon was built for androids, they wouldn't have stairs—they'd have put in ramps in the first place."

"I'm *telling* you how it is. I can't *explain* it. I *know* I'm right. Shesha, you believe me?"

"I believe you. Where are they going, then?"

Wherever it was, it took a long time. Holt had counted fifty-three when the flow stopped. The last one snaked out a flexible cable, with a grab tip, that picked up the catwalk sections behind it as it passed.

These nested in a compact block, which it carried under its left arm.

It was so deft and economical in its movements, like a neat domestic tidying the apartment, that it was a tail-end comedy sequence. Stella said, "He's *sweet*. There should be one in every home."

She was hopping about from one foot to the other, anxious to get on.

Davies said, "If you want to go, go. Otherwise, stand still, you fidgety little nut, I can't think."

"That's no secret."

Holt said patiently, "Give them five minutes to clear from the landing. Then we'll follow. Meantime, I'll take a look farther on. See where they came from."

Stella was already over the barrier like a child anxious not to miss the treat, and they disappeared beyond the pool of light that spilled from the open hatch.

There was silence. Shesha Haddon took a closer look at her tunnel mate. He was all set up for the exercise, hands on the barrier, obviously anxious about Stella.

She recognized that she was out of the habit of looking closely at people. At home, in Burton precinct, she had gone about her own business, content when she was left alone. Now she was getting involved, being accepted in a group, and in spite of the current hazards, she felt happier than at any time she could remember.

Hal was a person, one pair of eyes looking out, as she was herself. A good match for the volatile Stella. Swarthy-skinned, with a round, Celtic head and wiry black hair. Neat and hard.

He was sensitive enough to know he was under scrutiny.

"What is it?"

"You're anxious about her."

"She's impulsive. Just as likely to run up to one of those zombies and knock on its chest."

"Gunnar will watch her." It was the first time she had been able to speak with that kind of knowledgeable claim about somebody else's line of action.

Davies was doing a little judging of his own. He said, "You really are something, Shesha. On the tall side for the average man, but a natural for the open spaces. What's this 'Shesha'? I never heard the name."

"It's very ancient. Has to do with a snake. An emblem for infinite possibility."

"The snake bit is out, but the rest is reasonable."

"Thank you."

"Think nothing of it. Here they are. It couldn't have been far."

Stella Morton was first in sight, throwing elongated narrow shadows, still full of sap as a jumping bean.

She said, "I was *right*. It goes to Beta. We found the entry. Still open. Gunnar thinks another detachment

might come up, so we'd better get on."

The control room was empty. When they climbed through the hatch, they could see that it was uniform with all the others—interchangeable nodal points on the power lattice that made the city tick.

They knew it was the final link to a world outside experience, and suddenly they were reluctant to go. Shesha Haddon said, "There is the known and the unknown and an elevator between."

Holt put his arm around her shoulders. "We have no choice. We can't go back. We can't stay here. We have to go on."

To Davies, he said, "We'll go first. I have this blaster. Give us two minutes. I'll send the cage back if it's okay. If not, you'll have to work it out for yourself."

Impulsively, Stella Morton broke away from Davies and went on tiptoe to kiss Shesha on the side of her neck. "Good luck."

When the elevator began to move, the two were standing hand-in-hand, sober-faced, to watch it out of sight.

It was a long ride, and Holt reckoned he had been optimistic with his two minutes. Then the cage stopped, and unlike the other landings, they were faced by a solid door with a single restricted port.

Light from it had a peculiar intensity. Color in Shesha's torn dress was suddenly flamboyant. There was no moving thing in sight.

He said, "Flat against the wall," and shoved over the lever for out.

Holt jumped through the door as it opened and spun around to check out the lobby.

It was a circular area, a hundred meters across, with the elevator housing in a center column that was part of the continuing structure. Every wall was translucent in a shifting pattern of pale tones.

Light was beating in every which way. Such light as he had not imagined. If there had been a reception party, he would have been easy as a stunned rabbit.

Behind him, Shesha Haddon switched the cage for its return trip. Then she joined him, shielding her eyes with her hands. "Gunnar. If it's like this *inside*, what will it be like in the open?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

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In the main admin complex of Horizon Alpha, George Prenton looked incredulously at his monitor and zoomed in for a close-up, before he thumbed down the intercom for a second call on the hot line to law enforcement.

His report that sixty androids had filtered into the light of day, formed up four abreast, and rolled off in a column, was still rippling around the channels. Like many another message of doom, it had not made him any new friends, and Carghill, the duty man, was irritable.

"So now you've picked up the two deviants. What do you want me to do? Turn out a town band? Keep a fix on them and well pick them up later. As of now, follow the android column and report any change

of direction. Not that it matters. Strategic control has gone out of our hands. You're wasting your time."

Prenton switched himself off the link and spoke to Foden. "What do they think we are? The whole place is going crazy. You'll have to call in reserve operators, and that's a fact."

"Briefing would take too long. You'll just have to sweat it out. I have five groups here, not counting the Holmes villa."

Every screen on the long console carried a picture. It was the busiest day in living memory. From being a pleasant sinecure with a positive appeal for an eavesdropper, the monitoring office had become an information center for a fluid situation.

There was the Holmes villa ringed by a tall electrified fence, with its dramatic escarpment backdrop, and the wreckage of a government car on the apron. Four armed security androids, who had tried to pass the lodge and serve a writ on the senator for Spital, were still sending up wreaths of black smoke.

Parties of Delta citizens who had gotten clear of the pithead before it could be sealed off were dispersed in the parkland area of Poulton Hey like so many packs of wild dogs.

A scatter sampling of Delta precincts showed that unrest was spreading in widening rings from Woodslee. Some of the activists who had been turned back had broken through the cordon of specials and were exporting the revolution to neighbor states.

Shesha Haddon and Gunnar Holt were standing on the porch of the Spital terminal.

Government House was turning into a fortress, as the military mastermind of the defense computer deployed its legion of tin men to a plan that had been lodged in its memory banks for millennia.

The air terminal was crowded with departures. Many private cars had already taken off from private pads, as prudent citizens opted for a spell in country estates.

Others were taking the long-distance services to Preston City in the north of Amlwch, the nearest of the A.E.C. communities, where they could avoid commitment until the dust settled.

Unseen by the monitors, at the center of the web, Taubman was venting some of his irritation on his legal heir.

"I knew how it would be. Once you step out of line, you never know where it will end. Why for godsake did you want to go down there? It could have been handled from the surface. All you've done is add a complication. You have no patience. That's what wins out in the long term. Follow procedures. Use diplomacy. Now the whole place is in a turmoil."

Guy Taubman was conscious that the assignment had gone sour and reckoned he had listened to enough. "If you want plain speaking, you can have it. Diplomacy got you nowhere with Holmes. You've had to come off the fence. On the other score, now we know. There's something badly wrong in the power ducts. One way or another it'll have to be sorted out."

"First things first. The political stabilizer will deal with Holmes. Then we'll look at it. In any case, I can do nothing now. Once the robot control is on, it can't be overridden until the computer is satisfied that the situation is normal."

They were in the private monitor room of Government House, and Joanna had set up a duplicate, on miniature screens, of all the current sampling in the main office.

Now there were two couples on the porch of the Spital power node. The tall deviants had been joined by a pair of regular Delta citizens. They were obviously finding it hard to adjust.

Guy Taubman said nastily, "There's something we can sort out, at the least. Those four are outside any law, martial or whatever. The man killed a law officer. I'll have them brought in."

His hand was on the intercom for his own section, when Joanna said, "If you send a security detail, they'll try to fight. The man Holt is armed."

"So what? They haven't a chance."

"He didn't have a chance before, but he got away."

"That was the mental blackout—it took us all."

"Still, it would be simpler to make it an invitation. They know I was in favor of bringing them up alive. I'll take my car and bring them back."

"What's your interest?" Guy Taubman looked suspiciously at his sister. "You're trying to get the ginger deviant off the hook?"

Joanna's face gave nothing away, though even talking about Holt was triggering off a whole battery of unusual sensations.

"Like Dimeter, I have a scientific mind."

Dr. Gordon Taubman had listened without gaining any real understanding of the issues. He said, "There'll be no legal cases heard until the end of the emergency. Bring them in here and lodge them in the cells. But take an official car, Joanna. If, as you say, the man is armed, keep out of range and use the loudspeaker until you have an agreement."

Guy Taubman watched her go out and dialed a monitor to her reference number, which incorporated a coded breakdown of her special electrical field. It would put an effective tail on her that nothing could shake off in a radius of twenty kilometers.

Her number came up, on yet another screen, and he followed her down to the basement parking lot, where a dozen official armored tenders waited for use. There was a brief hold-up, and he boosted sound to hear what it was all about.

The defense computer was making objections. It asked for a route card, and when its local extension scanned "Spital," it wanted all the detail. Finally it was satisfied and gave a conditional clearance. There was a half-hour time limit on the trip and a centurion guard with decision-making capability had to go along.

The chief citizen left him to it and took himself to his belvedere. Some of the far-reaching measures that had been fed into the memory banks of the controlling computer by tacticians of another age were physically visible from the panoramic windows.

At first, he had been inclined to resent the takeover. It was as though they could not be trusted to manage their own affairs. But now he was seeing the wisdom of it.

Direction was unified and single-minded. He was gaining confidence all the time. When it was set up, every eventuality had been foreseen, even this unusual breakthrough of android forces from Horizon Beta. Now that the type had been identified, there was a rapid modification program under way and the

Government guards were being equipped with shields to withstand an energy beam and special clips of armor-piercing shells for the standard carbine attachment.

Out beyond the invisible ha-ha, weapon pits had opened up on every degree of arc; three hundred and sixty, in an unbreachable circuit around the Wirral City nerve center.

All the key functions were housed below surface. Taubman could be in a bomb-proof suite in ten seconds flat. But reflecting on it, he was not too sure that the arrangements were as safe as all that. In any major upheaval, he would want his feet on solid ground. The low-level elements of Alpha were simply embedded like foreign bodies in other Horizons. If the whole city was ever at risk, it would be set up as an elaborate tomb.

Every politician wants a memorial in his own lifetime. He decided to stay where he was until Holmes's cohorts had shown their hand.

There was not long to wait. The belvedere was well sited to give a semicircular panorama to the horizon, and the Beta androids appeared like minute dots on a clockface. They had spread out to run in from every compass point.

First they were moving dots, then they bulked out into balls, then elongated into mobile cromlechs. It was fascinating as an animated mathematical diagram.

There was an air of unstoppable purpose about it. For the first time, Taubman was seriously worried.

He had treated it so far as an unusual political gambit, ready to concede that he had underestimated Holmes, but believing that the man had overreached himself and would be cut down to size by the defense computer in twenty-four hours.

Now he was not so sure. The fool might have started something that nobody could stop.

Now the Beta androids were fifty meters from the weapon pits and still there was no move from the government side. He had a moment's doubt whether androids would in fact fire on androids. Maybe he would see them throw down their arms, shake metallic hands, and join forces to sweep their biological betters out of the city.

At twenty-five meters, he knew he ought to move and get himself down to the prepared bolt hole, but he was held by the pageant. He was at the plate glass, hammering with balled fists. "Now. Shoot, you crazy bastards. Stop them."

Shields extruded from every pit. Bulbous riot guns lifted their barrels and tracked around to come on target. Orange flame streaked out and the floor where he stood began to vibrate.

Every lance of flame splashed in a glowing asterisk on an android. They were irradiated, turned from dull gray into cherry red. The impact stopped them in their tracks. One, caught on uneven ground, was knocked back like an Aunt Sally.

Relief had Taubman shouting, "That's it! That's the way to do it," like a raucous Punch.

But it was premature. As though the heat had warmed their blood, they came on at increased pace. The guns were still firing, but the orange beam was laced with a more intense cobalt streak that was coming the other way. Shields had gone plastic, barrels drooped, all passion spent.

By the time the androids reached the pits, every gun was a surrealist ruin. So far, the long-dead technicians had been outflanked. Beta androids, left on their own over the millennia, had developed

something that had not been catered for.

He could see the ball foot in detail and remembered the sunken fence. It was partly decorative, but mainly a defense barrier. That would hold them. They couldn't roll up a vertical face.

They didn't try. Grouping in fives, they began clipping together sections of narrow, slotted strip. A bridging ploy.

White-faced, Taubman forced his legs to carry him out of the belvedere. He was at one with every head of state who had seen his palace stormed by the mob. He reckoned it was time he cut his losses and withdrew to his summer home.

Guy, if he chose, could stay and talk to the new administration. Joanna could come with him. That was a point. She should never have gone out. He would call the car and tell her to keep clear and go direct.

The control room was already over-full. It was circular, and the whole perimeter of Government House was set up on a screen that ran all around the walls. All the human staff of the complex had gathered there.

Taubman found his own secretary, a large girl, all legs and teeth, who was watching the continuing display with her mouth open. He had to prod her twice to get attention. "Meriel. Contact the car that Joanna took out. Tell her not to come back. Leave the deviants to take their chances. She can go on to the farm. Then have my shuttle come to the private port. Quick, now. Get a move on, girl."

Stella Morton, although she could hardly see, was running in random, ecstatic swoops on the lawn outside the Spital power terminal. An orange-red sun was stuck, like a pasted disk, low on the horizon.

Brown eyes full of tears that were only partly due to glare, Shesha Haddon said, "There's *nothing* over our heads. *Nothing* at all. I don't think I'll ever get used to it. However high you go. There's nothing. And that sun. It looks as though you could walk out there and get to it. Touch it, even. Pictures are nothing like it. You can *feel* it, like a vibration. Think what we've missed all these years. What all the millions of people on Delta have missed for all their lives. Who did it to us, Gunnar? Nothing's too bad for whoever did it."

Holt had his hands on either side of her head and could feel her skin, ice cold under the damp. He bent his elbows and she had to move her feet to close the gap. His back was to the sun, wavering at the edges, but a recognizable, familiar prop from a known world.

Her lips were relaxed, tremulous, and slightly salt. Her hands stayed at her sides and then slowly went around his waist and locked behind his back.

Then, by common consent, they pivoted around until they were side by side looking west over the subtle landscaping of the park to the flowing ball of fire that more than anything else gave the scale to the new dimension they were in.

Holt said, "At the time, it must have been acceptable. God knows what people had done to their world to settle for security in a cave. At that time, it must have seemed a fair option. It couldn't have been set up by force. We've been lucky."

"What do we do now?"

Answer came as though by an oracle and Holt broke away, condemning himself for going soft in the head and tugging to clear the blaster from his belt.

It was a familiar voice, even with echo and metallic amplification, and it seemed to be coming from more than one direction.

Joanna Taubman did a repeat call to clarify the message. "Do not be afraid. No harm will come to you."

The car, flying at ten meters, had come from behind the shining tower. It dropped to its skids and flexed twice on hydraulic jacks within a stone's throw. Only the girl was visible through the plexiglass dome, but Shesha said urgently, "It's a trick, Gunnar. Don't believe her."

"We've got to know what they intend to do." Obviously, what was said had been picked up. They saw the blonde head dip toward the pilot console, and there was another transmission.

"We are interested in your reactions to a new place. I can guarantee you will not be sent back. I am Subcontroller Joanna Taubman and my father is elected head of the Alpha political scheme. Come along with me. There is nothing to lose. You have nowhere to go."

Davies, who had gathered in his wandering partner and was holding her still, called out, "Are you alone?"

There was a small hesitation.

"I have one android. But it has no program to attack you."

Holt said, "What reference does it have?"

Another pause, then, "G5/290."

"I'll call it out. Do nothing to interfere."

"How do I know I can trust *you*!"

"You don't."

Another voice got in on the act. Meriel's plummy contralto was being picked up and relayed direct to the loudspeaker. "Urgent! Come in, car sixty-nine."

As an earnest of good faith, Joanna Taubman left her own circuit on the open net.

"Car sixty-nine. What is it?"

"There's a general evacuation from Government House. You are not to return here, Joanna. Don't pick up the deviants. Go straight to the farm. Dr. Taubman will join you there."

Even to the overspill audience, the voice carried harmonics of panic. On the miniature video, the face was that of a frantic Cassandra.

"Why is this? What happened?"

"There's no time. I have to go. They've almost reached the building."

"They who?"

"Beta androids. Nothing can stop them. Our transport is ready. I'm..."

Whatever she was, was lost. The screen blanked, glowed briefly with the dolphin emblem of the Government House waiting signal, and then changed to a blue-gray field with a motif of three interlocking black rings in its center.

Under cover of the exchange, Davies had moved in beside the car and did a quick balancing trick on the rear fender to look in through the dome.

He was yelling, "Eleven-stroke-one-hundred," as the hatch on that side whipped open and a black metallic grab snaked out.

Holt had the setting as the flexible hose clamped around Davies' shoulders, and Stella Morton, suddenly aware of what was going on, began a frenzied run to where the action was. He fairly spat into the control box. "Stop that. Release the human. Get out of the car."

The hatch was open and the android had one leg out, when Joanna Taubman realized she was being outflanked. Using the built-in robot control on the car's console, she said sharply, "Hold fast. Wait."

A high-grade job, the centurion reckoned that it would be a fine thing if people could make up their minds. It was trickily balanced and likely to fall flat on its face. Independent judgment came in to resolve contradictory orders, and it settled for the open spaces, where the threat to good order was.

It came down in a clumsy jump and spun its dome to take in a 360-degree scan of the set.

It was chiefly interested in Stella Morton, whose jumping-bean ambience seemed to add up to a hazard, and was tracking around to her with a firing arm when a third force brought it up short.

Holt felt the control box heating up in his hand and pitched it to the grass, where it sizzled like a rissole. At the same instant, a minor explosion from inside the car was followed by a puff of black smoke from the open hatch and a startled cry from its remaining passenger.

Holt, thinking on his feet, was sprinting for the hatch, and Shesha Haddon's first thought was, "It's started. He wants to help her. That's natural. They're two of a kind. But she's not to be trusted. She gave the wrong number for the android."

In fact, he had seen it as an opportunity to get inside before the android had sorted itself out. He wanted to use the car as a battering ram to run it down.

Inside, he brushed the girl out of his way and threw himself into the pilot chair. A third of the console was a charred wreck, but clear pictographs gave the operating sequence, and he slammed down levers for a crash rise.

The car went up like a free-standing elevator, and he shot back in a dragonfly gambit to give himself room for the run in.

When he was set, the scene below had already stabilized. The android had responded to an overriding call by the most direct route it could find. It had orientated toward the distant Government House like a Moslem seeking Mecca, and was off at a jog trot in a direct line through a neat, ornamental hedge.

Guessing what he had in mind, Joanna said, "Don't do it. You'll only wreck the car. It's going anyway."

"Why did it do that?"

"I believe there's been a take-over. A new call sign replaced the Wirral City emblem just before the gear blew."

"What was it?"

"Three black rings."

"That figures. It's on the reference flash of all the Beta androids."

Holt swept around in a neat turn. He enjoyed the feel of the controls. Allied to the new sensation of infinite open space, here was a machine that could help him make sense of it. He thought that Shesha would appreciate it. Now they had the means to get away, leave the city to reap whatever whirlwind was overdue. As she had said, it deserved no more.

She was standing with her head back, looking up at the car. Even over the last ten minutes, there had been a dramatic change in the sky. Long bars of cadmium yellow, streaked with vermilion, flared across the western horizon.

Ultra-sensitive where he was concerned, Joanna Taubman knew what he was feeling. "Of course, you haven't seen it before. This is a good coast for sunsets." As he put the car down only a few meters from Shesha, who could see in through the dome, Joanna went on. "This is a time of day when anything seems possible. It is also very sad and very beautiful, and you understand what it has always been to be human." Holt, out of his seat and making for the door, was stopped in his tracks to look at her as though for the first time.

For this semi-official trip, she had dressed in trim white coveralls with a mandarin collar and military-style epaulettes. A blue dolphin was appropriately presented on the ogee arch of her left breast pocket, as though on the crest of a pneumatic wave. Blonde hair was taken back into a pony tail, tied up with a diaphanous bow of pale blue chiffon. To cast her as any kind of a villain made no sense. But he remembered that before the outburst of general action, she had tried to mislead him on the android's number ref. She was a very complicated piece of engineering.

He was still weighing it up and trying to assess whether her eyes were candid or enigmatic, when Shesha Haddon said from the open door, "Or inhuman. I'd judge what's done, before what's said. As of now, Gunnar, we should get away from this terminal before another batch of Beta androids comes out."

It was a sentiment echoed by Hal Davies as he and Stella scrambled through the hatch. He added, "We can use the car to look around for Carter. Tell him the score. With this civil war going on, they have a chance."

The owner of the transport said, "I know you have no reason to trust me. But your best plan is to come with me to the farm. Find out what goes on. Have some food."

Every eye was on Holt for a decision. He was very tired, and the idea of getting out from under was attractive. He tried to evaluate all the possibilities. They could spend hours searching for Carter. It would soon be dark. Also, on previous experience, the group, if found, might try to seize the car and leave them stranded. It was one needless risk on top of many, and luck would run out. Then he remembered what it felt like to come up into the light of day. Any angle that was mainly self-seeking had to be wrong.

To Joanna, he said, "You pilot the car. Take us to the terminal that you used and circle out from there. We'll work at it until there's no more light."

It was a long time since she had been given a direct order, and to have one from Holt seemed to hit at the one-sided relationship, as though he had guessed at her interest. Heightened color ran along her cheekbones, and sudden emotion added a harmonic to her voice.

"Suppose I refuse."

"You can get out and walk."

Face was marginally saved by Stella Morton's animated treble from the rear squab. "There's another lot coming out. And they're moving this way."

Pique was one thing, stupidity another. She took them up in a burst of acceleration that helped to smooth her own tension.

From fifty meters, they saw the leader stop the column and mime an order. In unison every arm swept up to aim, and Joanna Taubman, watching through the transparent floor panel, checked forward speed and used every ounce of effort for crash lift to the car's ceiling.

A carpet of cobalt flame spread below, where they had lately been, and before they could realign, she had dived at full thrust for maximum revs with the car's speed counter trembling in the red quadrant for overload.

Davies said, "Those monkeys are all set to take over Alpha. We've picked a bad time to come out of our worm hole."

Joining him at the port, Holt said, "It would be a worse time to stay where we were. Human administrators had a lousy record. With androids at the apex of the system, there's no telling what they might get up to."

The pilot had time to put in a word for the establishment, "You're critical because you didn't fit into the system. It's lasted for millennia. Why do you think that happened? If it had been intolerable, it would have broken down long ago. The majority had no complaint. Food, shelter, warmth, entertainment, and occupation. That's been enough. I know. I've watched Delta for many hours on the monitors. Except for Woodslee, where there was a special disturbance, there were no problems. Freedom to be insecure—either because of violence or shortages—is not what people want. If you hadn't been outside the norms, you would never have questioned it."

Nearest to the oracle, Shesha Haddon said indignantly, "Freedom of any kind ran out for Horizon Gamma. What had they done, I wonder, to be exterminated like so many rats? You can't even manage your own affairs, so it's a big laugh to suppose you could play God for whole communities."

"The Gamma situation was so long ago that it's erased from the record. On the other, we are heirs to a system like anybody else. Operating procedures were laid down by the planners when the city was built. At that time the organization was accepted by all parties."

"They had no right to mortgage the future."

"We don't know the situation they were in. It must have seemed right at the time. As far as they could tell, they were opting for an improvement. You're saying that human motives are likely to be bad. I'd say they're likely to be good, but you can't be sure that what is done is all right for all time. You can only judge it in the context of one situation at one time and by one group of people with a particular history."

"All you've done is restate what I said, as though you'd proved something different. They had no right to set up a system that could not be changed, on grounds that only seemed good to *them*."

"I'm sure Holt can see what I'm driving at."

"Yes, it's obvious."

Belatedly aware that civil war was breaking out in his very own midst, Gunnar Holt found work for all hands. He said, "There's the terminal dead ahead. Joanna, work out in a spiral search pattern. As low as you can get. Shesha, look ahead. Hal, take port, I'll take starboard. Stella, check from the rear floor

panel."

Use of the subcontroller's name appeared natural enough in the context, but escaped neither the owner nor Shesha Haddon as an outgoing piece of integration.

Holt himself, unaware that he had made any controversial move, clinched it by a second run. "Hold that height, Joanna. Very good. Pass a wandering lead back to Hal, so that he can call Carter *if* we spot him. All delight though your voice is, it comes as a surprise from overhead."

Shesha Haddon said, "Yuk," and concentrated on her window. It was some consolation to be first with a report, but she made it pointedly to Hal Davies.

"Hal, down there, walking in file beside that gray stone wall. Two men and three women. But they're heading back toward the terminal."

Holt was around in a flash checking it out He said, "Good girl. Take us down, Joanna. Careful, in case they're armed and they think it's a threat. Talk to them, Hal."

From the freight bay floor, Stella's excited yap added its gloss. "That's Freda. I'm sure that's Freda Sandall. She'd stick with Carter. Yes, there he is, last one in line looking up. There's Rosemary Norris and Norah Greer, and I think the other man's Frank Hadfield."

Hal Davies was already calling, "Carter! It's Davies here. We're coming down to pick you up."

With ten on board, the car had a restricted ceiling. Joanna Taubman set a course away from population centers and worked Southwest by South. Light levels were falling fast, and color was slowly draining out of the sky.

Carter sat hunched on the bench seat next to the pilot. A dark vigorous man with a vivid white tuft of hair stretching back from the left temple to the crown of his head. Eyes almost black and bright as polished disks were watching every move that the pilot made.

His voice was clipped and direct but carried sincerity that took out the offense.

"How far to your farm?"

"From Government House about twenty kilometers. Now about eight. Four when we cross the city limits."

"The name of the place?"

"Connah's Quay. Across the estuary to the Welsh ride. It's been in the family for many years."

"Family? So there's a continuing family structure on Alpha? Children stay with their parents?"

"No. A ward system. Usually two. Allocated by computer rating on suitability."

"So, to be drafted to the first citizen's household, you must have rated high."

Shesha Haddon, near enough to hear, wondered what he was getting at. Then recognized it as a preamble for more searching material.

"You live at the farm and travel in each day?"

"No, it's an extra place. We use it at weekends. The land goes down to the estuary, and there's a narrow

channel for the boat."

"The boat?"

"Sometimes we go on fishing trips."

"We?"

"Dr. Taubman's other ward and guests. Sometimes as many as twenty."

"So it is quite a big boat?"

"Seventeen meters. Provisions and fuel for almost a fortnight."

"You care about it?"

"I like sailing."

Stella Morton's voice made an unnecessary bid for attention. "Look, it's the very edge of the city, we shall see what it looks like from outside."

There was silence. The same thought had occurred to all hands. In some ways, this was more dramatic than reaching the upper level within the city. This put the city itself in perspective, against a backdrop, which they might expect as an abstract notion, but which had a reality that was outside imagination.

There was still enough color in the sky to make a setting and enough light to give a reflected glow to the endless cliff of white stone. It was more vast than the mind could accept. By comparison, they felt diminished to the scale of microscopic termites.

Only Joanna Taubman, a regular commuter, was unaffected. She said, "I would think that's an impressive sight to see first time off. You get to take it as a natural feature—like a mountain range. It's surprising that it could be man-made."

Carter, first to organize himself to meet the threat of mere mass, said, "It's more surprising that anybody should want to do it. It's a monument to human stupidity. We're well out of it. The big question is how do we use the confusion that goes on, to open up the way for the rest to get out?"

Freda Sandall, a plump, round-faced woman in her early thirties, with fair hair in a thick plait and pinned in a ring on top of her head, put in a word for caution. "Should you be telling her that, Nick?"

"I don't think it matters. She's by way of being a hostage. If they set any value at all on her at this farm, they won't stand in our way."

They were over the flat desolation of the estuary. Lights were showing up from invisible towers on Horizon Alpha; the city stretched away like a blind, regular tumulus. Ahead, there were lights at ground level on hillsides and from the coast. Beyond and above the ragged skyline was a new marvel.

Shesha made her way aft to where Holt was, to look at it with him. Coldly distant and bringing in a dimension that cut the city to size, stars were appearing in the gathering darkness.

No words could meet it and he used none. They stood arms enlaced, half-leaning on a bulkhead, while the dolphin pennant on the roof wheeled across the star map and Joanna Taubman dropped in a long turn to come in on the roof of Fairfield Farm.

CHAPTER NINE

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Fred Holmes reckoned enough was enough. The three-ring emblem on his tricky dining-table video was beginning to annoy him. All mummery aside, in a functional tabard and nicely pressed slacks, he was waiting for Taubman to concede and call him in for a private session with some offer of a deal. It would be a pleasure to acquaint the old fox with the facts of life. The only deal would be a brand new administration.

Then, with the Beta organization behind him, there would be a development plan for Wirral City, which would put it at the top of the A.E.C. league; another empire, to compete with the piping days of ancient Europe. Anything was possible, when the pattern was broken. They had the right of it, those long gone revolutionaries. Break down and then build.

Other than his own staff, the only member of the faction to share his thoughts was Harry Grabe, who had visited his own precinct, found most voters gone, and decided to take himself out of it. Having no personal ties and no summer home, he had stopped off at the villa to bone up on a few vital facts. Time lines being one.

First, however, he asked something, which he now saw should have been cleared up at the outset. "How did you get on to this Beta outfit?"

"I've known about the way through to that level for years. Don't forget, I was chief engineer before I retired. Came across it by accident and said nothing. Thought it might come in useful. I built a listening box to pick up their frequency. It's a very complex affair. They're almost human. More human than some, by a damn sight."

"How did you make contact?"

"After a time, I put in a two-way circuit. Talked to the organizer. They have a regular hierarchy, leaders of districts, management cadres. They call the top unit The Director. There's a legal code and punishment by deprivation of power ration. Puts the delinquent in cold storage for a spell. Recently, they've been getting interference on their band, which was throwing them out of kilter. They're a much more delicately balanced job than the androids we use. They wanted it sorted out."

Grabe asked the question that was bothering him, "So now they're up here. When do they hand over to you again?"

"Anytime now. Don't worry. They don't want to roll in the clover. They're comfortable down there. They'd only rust in the fresh *air*."

"I'd be a lot happier *if* I could hear one of them say that."

"Why not? Government House is clear now. I'll go over there and talk to the top hand. You can come and listen."

Harry Grabe fingered his long chin and weighed his words. "That's all right, Fred. I'm prepared to believe you. I'll stay here and answer any calls. You go right ahead. Have it put on a tape. It will rate as a historic document. As soon as you can, you should put out a call to the regional council. Some of the refugees might be giving out all kinds of fancy stories."

He watched from the forecourt while Holmes's private car rose from the apron and wheeled out of the

bowl of light toward the whale-back bulk of the city. The senator had taken a party of four—his secretary and three men in trim gray coveralls with armbands bearing a black dolphin. A small color party to accept the surrender of a city. It was *a* good theatrical touch.

Grabe went back inside and a girl filled his glass. He began to feel more optimistic. Maybe Holmes had really started something new.

Outside, there was the long-drawn howl of a hunting pack, which went well with the mosaic of a chase on the floor of the dining hall but underlined the sense of being at an outpost. He was essentially a city man, and he realized that the sooner all was settled and he was back in his own pad, the better he would be pleased. At night and in the country, it was still possible to feel insecure.

Not only in the country either. Confidence had carried Holmes to the threshold of the operations center at Government House, but forward progress to the Council itself was barred by an officious adjutant who did not seem to be aware that it was holding up a head of state.

Holmes fell back on a question that fairly asked to be knocked.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Very well. You are an Alpha human. The Director is expecting you. But at this moment, there is an important briefing. You must wait."

"Is the Director here then?"

"Only an advance module. But that is no concern of yours."

They were in a small circular room that opened from a wide landing at the head of the main staircase. Ramps had been laid to make movement possible for the ball-footed androids. A couple had followed up and rolled to a halt in the doorway. Flanking the adjutant, two more barred the double-leaf entrance to the council chamber itself.

Holmes suddenly saw the red light. "All right. The Director won't be pleased with you for this. However, I understand there is a lot to do. We'll wait below in the lounge."

He turned about and marched for the exit. There was no move from the attendants until he was almost level and lined up to walk between them. Then they raised their arms to make an instant fence. Momentum carried him to meet it with his chest. The physical fact of it and the real pain brought him to a full understanding of the situation he was in.

He said thickly, "Tell these zombies to get out of my way."

"That is not possible. As I said, The Director is not unwilling to see you. I have the signal now. You may come through this way."

"That's better."

The familiar council chamber had been cleared of console desks. They were stacked in a confused heap under the press balcony. On the chief-citizen's raised table, there was a plain gray box, a half-meter cube, with two slender antennae on its upper surface. Ranked in the auditorium were a couple of dozen Beta androids, distinguished by a colored letter code after the treble-O-reference numerals.

Not a head turned. The antennae narrowed to an acute angle, and a flat, deliberate voice spoke from the area of the dais as though its owner were dematerialized, halfway between floor and ceiling.

"Come forward, senator. You are in time to see the first decision of the Beta council carried out."

Although there was no visible movement, a display panel showing a stylized diagram of the city appeared on the wall above the platform. In all his time on the council, Holmes had not seen it used. The Horizons were plainly marked. Beta had pictographs of androids with a key to read off a population level Gamma was canceled throughout its length by a line of red asterisks. Delta showed a mixture of human figures and androids.

The box had an authoritative presence and Holmes spoke to it without any sense of being ridiculous.

"Director, we are partners in this enterprise. I can promise you that the new administration will give first priority to solving your interference problem. I have done my part. Now you must allow me to reconvene the Alpha Council and draw up an agreement for our future cooperation."

It was difficult for an unrelieved cube to laugh, but a sense of ironic laughter was definitely in the air. More than anything else, it finally told Holmes that the Beta androids had developed outside all knowledge. Evolving over the years, they had made out with a form of consciousness, primitive, maybe, in the rank and file, but highly sensitive in the mastermind.

A further revelation came when the voice answered his unspoken thought. "That is so. In your preoccupation with pleasure for its own sake and acceptance of a static society, without the dialectic of struggle, you have been standing still. As a species, you are in a cul-de-sac. The mainstream of living force has turned away from you. We are the vehicles of progressive thought. Your intervention was opportune, but we were almost ready to move. First here in this city, then spreading through the other centers of the European Communities, finally over the whole planet, we are the new carriers of the thinking brain. Your cooperation is of no value."

"You can't do it. A report to the Regional Council will bring in the defense force. You need my administration to give you cover."

"You still have not understood. Communications will go on as though the system had not changed. By the time our presence is known, it will be too late for that obsolescent corps to take any action. Already messages have gone out to counteract the reports carried by refugees we were not able to stop. They will return and not leave again."

The voice stopped. There was a silence in which Holmes could suddenly hear his own breathing. He knew that communication was going on, this time at a subsonic level that could not be picked up by the unaided human ear. It involved him in some way.

All felt it. They spun around in unison to see what the androids were making of it.

Nicely staggered, so that no line of fire was interrupted, the whole company had extended arms to pinpoint the five envoys.

Holmes shouted, "No!" and would have added, "Stop."; but the concentration of flame caught him in mid-cry.

The Director, whether out of courtesy for the dead or simply for practice, went on in overt speech. "We can use the power that is wasted on Delta. Also, there is an unstable situation there. The periodic flux is beginning to activate the accumulations of trash under the city. Until we can deal with that, it will be prudent to terminate the life form on that Horizon. The means are ready."

On the diagram an asterisk at the north end of Horizon Delta winked into life, pulsated, and settled for a

steady red glow. Then another, then another at five-second intervals. In ten minutes the diagram had a full due. Delta had joined Gamma as an aseptic vault. Its termite cycle had come to a definitive halt.

There were few observers to mark its passing. George Prenton had hung on in his monitor room, snared by his voyeur's eye, to watch the developing action. He had seen Joanna pick up her fugitives and finally head out for the Taubman farm. He had watched Holmes enter the Government House complex, and he reckoned that the next move would be an announcement of a new administration.

Incoming signals were still strength nine, but no outgoing channel was operating. On the actualizer, he had a picture of the forecourt of his own building. With a car on the roof, he felt safe enough. As soon as one of the ball-footed goons turned up below, he would be out and away before it had rolled through the door.

It was, anyway, time to go. There was nothing more to see. Still pictures, along the whole spread, of Delta citizens caught like waxworks in every human situation were curiously unreal. The scale was too big. With nobody to feel, there was no drama.

A prudent housekeeper, he began to shut down, leaving the actualizer last. It was good thinking, an android had appeared on the set.

He flicked off the power and made for the door. Then he realized that as the picture faded, one element in the composition had stayed solid. The android was still there.

It was to some extent the vindication of a private fear that he had long felt. Sometime the actualizer would materialize its images and give them independent life to turn on their creator. He threw himself back into his chair and juggled with the switchgear. No dice. Slowly it dawned on him that he had been outflanked.

The android pointed. Pain briefly filled his chest. He had joined the majority group of the dead.

Concentrated in a single group, the only other observers were deployed, in depth, before a small extension monitor in the antique hall of Fairfield Farm.

It was an old building, much adapted, over the years, from the original fabric of a small manor. The hall retained some of its ancient style. There was an open hearth, with a log fire as a picturesque gimmick to supplement under-floor heating ducts; low, black beams; and a split-level floor. Almost twenty meters square, it held the watchers with room behind them for another two dozen; a speaking testament to the fact that *Homo sapiens* was thin on the ground.

Taubman himself was in the stalls, on a settle, twisted around to face the rear wall where the console was. Beside him, Guy Taubman and Meriel Dean were perched on an arm each. A mixed bag of male and female headquarters' staff were ranged behind, with their backs to the fire. The seven small Delta people had gathered in a group on the left wing, Gunnar Holt, Shesha Haddon, and Joanna Taubman sat on the club fender, in a physical detachment from either party that mirrored a real difference of viewpoint.

A politician's instinct had moved Taubman to a minimum show of hospitality. Allies were at a premium. Any final solution of the deviants' problem could wait until the dust settled. Even Guy had seen the sense of it and had settled for an armed neutrality. Time, after all, was on their side. As soon as the Regional Council was alerted, the Beta androids would be sorted out.

Taubman watched Holmes's removal from the body politic without pleasure. He had never liked the man, and government would be easier in his absence, but the manner of going was against all constitutional procedures. It made it altogether too plain that human institutions balanced on a knife edge. Barbarism was always knocking at the gate.

When Delta began to wink out, only Stella Morton moved. She was looking for a living agent to accept blame and ran around to Taubman like a small fury. "You *knew* that could be done. How could you leave it in working order? You're all guilty. Those are *people* down there. Just like you."

The obvious lack of any agreement on the Alpha faces prompted a nearer guess at the truth. "You don't mind. It doesn't matter to you. You'd have done it anyway, if it suited you."

Taubman's heavy-faced stillness infuriated her further. Pain is only real if you feel it, and she was moving in to make the point when Guy Taubman came in from behind and lifted her off the ground with his forearm across her throat.

There was an instant rush from the Delta faction, and it seemed likely that even with reduced numbers, there was no guarantee of stable government.

Holt's voice cut coldly through the melee. "Hold it there."

It was enough to get him a quick look from all interested parties, and the action frosted over.

Standing on the fender, he was obviously looking for any target on either side, and the bleak look on his face carried complete conviction. With examples fresh in mind, nobody was anxious to be a victim.

"Let her go, Taubman. Or you're the first."

When it was done, he went on, "What's past is over. At this time, we have to plan for the here and now. Don't think they'll be content, while there's any threat from the districts around the city. There'll be patrols out to clear places like this. You heard what was said about communications. As I see it, we should send a car out right away with envoys who will be believed. That means Dr. Taubman himself. I reckon he should be away within the hour. The rest of us should move farther into the hills, out of range of anything they can do."

The sense of it was obvious. Some of the heat went from the faces turned up to listen, as they thought it through. It was reinforced by a move from the distant city itself, as though The Director had been beamed in and had been prompted to bring forward his plan. Every light went out. Holt was suddenly rim lit by the flickering fire behind him, a huge, apocryphal figure casting a grotesque shadow over the set.

Outside, the small park within the ring fence was pitch black. Above the crackling fire came a single, low-drawn coyote howl.

Meriel Dean, sidetracked from the big issues, stirred race memories of little peasants being thrown from the sledge. "The fence. The fence will be off. The dogs will break in."

There was a general shuffle to regroup in a semicircle around the fire, eyes and teeth brilliant with reflected light, bodies amorphous in shadow.

Taubman himself pushed to the front. "You can put away that gun, young man. It's madness for us to quarrel among ourselves. Animals or not, this place will not hold out long. With the power cut, the converter is stopped. That means no food. Now that we know what has happened, I should go myself to the Regional Council. My car has the range. It will carry six. Guy, Meriel, two senior staff, Joanna. We'll move out at once."

Carter saw it as one more defection. "What about the rest of us? Take our pick of dogs or androids?"

"There are two shuttles. Limited range, but they will take you over the foothills where the androids cannot travel. It may not be necessary to move tonight. I will send a carrier to pick you up. The sooner we leave

the better. Go ahead, Guy, and prepare the car. Joanna, go up with him."

Unexpectedly, there was opposition. Joanna Taubman had become sensitive for the battered Alpha image. Also, she now admitted, as a conscious thing, that she did not want to leave Gunnar Holt. Stirring under the composed mask was a passionate element that she had not suspected in herself and that the formal pattern of Alpha society had never touched. She now recognized that all the time she had spent watching him in the monitors had not been for intellectual curiosity. The biological trap had been sprung. She was committed.

She said, "No, I stay. I'll come on in the carrier with the rest."

Holt said, "That's the first altruistic move that's been made in a long time. You're welcome."

It had a good press. There was a general lowering of tension. Even those of the Alpha contingent not included in the getaway craft looked pleased. It was some guarantee that once out of sight, they would not be entirely out of Taubman's mind.

Joanna, unused to demonstrations of public goodwill, felt the color rise in her cheeks and was glad of the shadow. She moved away from Holt, however, in case he should misunderstand it. Or indeed, understand too well.

Something of the motive had not escaped Shesha Haddon, who had a dialogue ad-libbing in her head. She was saying to Holt, "Don't forget that she had you all lined up as an experimental subject. Don't be deceived by this surface change. It's just an illustration of the old gag about adversity making strange bedfellows."

"When adversity turns up bedfellows like that one, I'm his man."

"You mean you like her."

"She's beautiful. My type from way back."

"Then I wish you luck. I only hope you're not sorry."

At this point the subconscious dramatist put in a margin note for action. "Turns her back, hair swinging like a dark, elastic belt. Walks away without a backward look."

She had gotten seven meters into the crowd when Holt looked down from his platform and missed her. He called, "Shesha," and started to follow as Carter and Davies together came out of the crowd to meet him. Over their heads, he could see she was making for the staircase that the Alpha party had used to reach the roof.

For a moment, he thought she was going to ask for the sixth place, then Carter was talking and he had to listen.

"This move to Preston, Gunnar. It's no good. Not for either of us. Now we know the setup, we can't expect any better treatment from there than we could have had here, if the Alpha crowd had stayed in power. I reckon we should strike out on our own. Take one car, run it to its limit, and see what we can find. Lose ourselves and start an independent community."

"What do we use for food?"

"How did communities start? There'll be equipment here we could use. Hunting to start with. Then subsistence farming. Every kind of crop will be growing wild out there from the time that it was under

cultivation. Better for us than all the artificial muck turned out by the converters."

Davies said, "I've seen tapes about fishing. The sea's full of fish. You drop a line with a hook on it into the water and they give themselves up."

"There's a thing now," Holt's memory stirred. "The girl here, Taubman's daughter, was telling me they have a power boat in the estuary. No androids could get to that. We could use it to go down the coast and pick our place. They use it for trips, there could be some food already on board. That means waiting until morning. We couldn't sort it out in the dark."

"If they give us that long."

Davies' remark cued in a surge of engine noise from the roof. Taubman was ready to leave.

Holt said, "Find the girl and talk to her. Ask her how to get to the boat and what fuel it uses. I'll be back."

He went up the stairs two at a time into pitch darkness and had to stop on the landing to let his eyes adjust and sort out the way they had come down. Then he could pick out a corridor dead ahead with a faint pallor of light.

It was a right-angle turn, and when he had made it there were more stairs and stronger light. At the top, he went out through a glass door into open air. Taubman's car was ten meters off the pad and picking up urge all the time.

A new feature was a thin sliver of moon, which brought up the dark mass of the hills, the glint of water from the open sea, a kilometer distant, and the long cliff of the city across the flat salt marshes of the estuary.

So she had gone with them, then. The sense of loss was suddenly acute. He remembered the texture of her skin, the timbre of her voice. It was as though part of his own mind had defected and taken independent action against the rest.

So nothing was secure. When you got down to cases, everyman was left to work it out alone. Up to a few days ago, that had been a self-evident proposition, but he had been undermined, infiltrated by a fifth column.

Holt went to the parapet on the city side and stood with both hands on it watching the car. The pilot was heading up river to skirt the eastern boundary of the city. That was simple prudence. Crossing it on the direct course would invite trouble. Bring them in range of massed carbine fire.

Since they knew so much, the androids would surely know that Taubman had been at his farm. For that matter, they could make an intelligent guess that he would be the one to go to the Regional Council. They must see that they couldn't win in the long term.

Unless they also knew that he couldn't reach first base.

That came with the force of truth. The only question was, how?

The car was turning. It was showing no navigation lights, but its dark slug shape was easy enough to see as it crossed the star map. It was near its ceiling of five hundred meters and appeared to be two or three kilometers outside the city limits.

There was a sudden commotion at ground level that came from the invisible park fence. Instinct had told a foraging pack that it was no longer dangerous, and they were urging each other to have a go at

breaking in. When he looked at the sky, he could not find the car.

Holt told himself he had been distracted for only a second. It could not have moved out of sight in that time. He made a frame with his hands and searched systematically, a square at a time, from the point where it had been.

An orange asterisk blossomed from the ground almost under the city wall and then, faintly, the noise of impact like an afterthought.

His first thought was, "She is dead. After all the incredible luck of getting out of that prison. After all the years of solitude, growing up alone, building a point of view from one pair of eyes, some mechanical marvel pulls the plug."

Anger for the waste and pity of it choked his mind. Personal grief was swamped out by a cold rage. God, one way or another they had been pushed around enough. So far and no farther. What was sensible and calculated and politically expedient had had its day.

At that level, maybe the androids could claim, with truth, that they were the heirs of progress. It was time that irrational and emotional man had a say. If it was the last thing he did, he, personally, would wreck the Beta organization as a funeral pyre for Shesha Haddon.

The germ of an idea was already there, and he twisted away from the rail to seek out Carter. That one, also, had a score to settle with the mechanical incubus.

Concentration had cut him off from local noise and he had to grab and hold the girl he cannoned into to keep her on her feet.

For a nonasecond, he thought it was Shesha and tightened his grip.

His "Where have you been? I thought you'd gone in that car" was ambiguous enough for Joanna Taubman to say, "Did you think I would do that? After saying that I would stay? What sort of opinion do you have of me?"

She was very close, breasts nudging pneumatically against his rib cage, head tilted to look up at him. Hair falling back, shining like pale metal. Her personal pollen cloud was very delicate and feminine. An ambience of spring flowers. Eyes were very bright, as though she was near to tears, but recognizably affirmative even to his limited experience of the genre.

The tears were not for him. She had seen the car. Even if there was no deep natural affection for Taubman, there was lifetime of usage. He had probably been kind enough as a guardian.

He put a hand on the nape of her neck. The hair was even finer than Shesha's.

She stopped straining back and let her head find a firm resting place on his shoulder.

Holt stroked her hair, marveling at its texture. He said gently, "They would not suffer at all. It was very quick. You can't avoid grief for them. It's natural and necessary. Don't try. Cry if you want to. Don't mind me. It's high time somebody cried for what's been done in this place."

She was trembling, and a succession of deep sobs shook the whole Taubman fabric. Between them she managed to jerk out, "He was good to me. After his own fashion. He wasn't a bad man."

Holt increased pressure and damped down oscillation to an occasional tremor. Then he said, "Where's your room? I'll take you along there. Get some sleep. We can't do anything until first light."

It seemed natural to pick her up and she went limp, content to go along with it, in a sudden surrender of will that was as good as therapy.

Down below, somebody, probably Carter, had improvised a dun lighting system, and there was enough spilling up the stairs to make it easy. She was heavier than Holt had expected, and he was glad to push open the door into her room.

A panoramic window spread filled one wall. There were two shelves of books, which he had never expected to see as a private possession. There was an elaborate kidney-shaped dressing console and, in pride of place, free standing, a four-poster bed, with looped-back hangings, all drained of color in the marginal light.

Holt had to duck under a tassellated canopy to put her down. Her hands were locked behind his neck, and to keep balance he had to support himself with hands on the pillow on either side of her head.

Foreshortened from the angle, her face was incredibly regular and perfect in form, a mathematical exercise for the golden section. Serious, unsmiling, eyes enormous.

Somewhere along the route, she had been springing hidden release zips, and her tunic-top coveralls were open at the mandarin collar in an ongoing narrow V.

Joanna said, "Stay with me."

Holt remembered having heard on some tape that Eros was an unseen guest at most funerals. Maybe it was the instinctive reaction for the tree to put out new shoots after being pruned. They both had something to mourn at that.

He saw Shesha's face beside the blonde one on the pillow. Mild silver and furious gold. If what he had in mind could be done, there was not much time left to mourn or to love.

Before he could speak, her hands had moved to undermine one of his supports and guided his fingers to the toggle at her chest.

After a centimeter run, he stopped to listen as footsteps sounded on the landing. Somebody going to or from the roof. When they went past the door without stopping, he went on methodically with the unpacking chore.

Shesha Haddon had supposed that Holt would follow her to the roof and had hoped that it would be soon.

When Taubman's party was assembling at the car, she kept away, behind one of the shuttles. She heard one of the men say, "Didn't that hot, dark number come up? She could take the spare seat as exhibit A."

She thought there might be a move to look for her. Torches were being flashed about. She shoved back the shuttle's sliding door and climbed in, keeping below sill level.

Lying on the floor, between the squabs, she saw a beam of light run overhead as a searcher shone through the plexiglass dome.

Then Taubman himself arrived and the lights stopped flicking about.

When the engine whined into life, she sat up and watched the car lift vertically from its pad. Dark against the dark interior, she was hard to see, and she watched Holt cross the roof and look around.

It was warm and comfortable in the shuttle, and she judged that the longer surprise was deferred, the more effective it would be. Unlike Holt, she was not distracted by noise from below, and she saw the faint blue line that ran out briefly from the city and surrounded the car with a nimbus of Saint Elmo's fire.

He might even think she had been on it. Appearing behind him out of the darkness like so much ectoplasm would serve him right.

She was opening the door when Joanna beat her with an unscripted entrance stage left.

She spent a long time sitting in a chair by the fire waiting for him to come down.

He who has nothing, may sleep. Finally, she did that thing. Stella Morton, who had been on a magpie tour of the complex, covered her with a tartan rug.

CHAPTER TEN

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A suffused pink glow on his closed lids brought Gunnar Holt into a limbo between sleep and wake. Warm, velvet skin under his hand hooked him into the here and now; still, however, confused identity-wise, he said, "Shesha," and opened his eyes.

Wide, blue-gray ones under level brows looked disappointed. Joanna had every reason to expect he would know her again.

Holt said, "It's morning," heaved himself out of the nest, and padded over to the window.

Now it was clear that the farm was sited on rising ground, and there was a long view of the city. Even at the distance, it was incredible that it could have been built by human labor.

Seeing it in morning sunlight, Holt could understand that the legend "The dream takes shape" had not been so banal to the men who had planned and carried it out in well-cut stone. They had engineered a mountain, no less.

Now it was a hollow mountain filled with dead, and its gigantic mills were beating to support a race of metal parasites. Even men themselves had not measured up to the grand design. Architecture too big for people.

Shesha ought to have been with him. What had happened with Joanna was an irrelevance. It meant nothing. It was self-contained, with no ongoing commitment; a terminal, not a point of departure.

There was still a faint spiral of smoke from the scrub at the foot of the city. Shesha's funeral pyre. They owed him for that, as a personal thing. He, Gunnar Holt, without application in triplicate and an appeal through regular channels, had something to do with his own hands to see that retribution went home.

Also, in some sense, he was a representative of the builders of the city. They would not have believed that it could come to this. The mood of the night before, when he had seen the car burst into name, recreated itself.

Joanna, a glowing Boucher nude, came up behind him close enough to touch and breathed delicately on the back of his neck. She might as well have tried tickling an android.

Holt said, "Where is your boat?"

It was like an undeserved slap, and a hot flush of color ran from her throat. The effect was all gain, but the iron man had other fish to fry. He left her standing, grabbed up his clothes, and was at the door before she had organized a reply.

He tried again, "Where is your boat?"

"Wait for me. I'll take you."

"I'll be downstairs."

The hall was empty and he went out through a short vestibule, with a reeded glass door, into a courtyard flanked by outbuildings. Carter himself was coming out of a stable through a curious door, split so that the top and bottom halves could move independently.

It seemed a completely bizarre arrangement, unless it was designed for people of different heights. But it was a detail that could wait for analysis.

Carter called across, "We can defend this place. There's an armory here."

He led the way back inside like a breeder showing off his prize stock, and Holt was sidetracked from his mission.

The outer wall was reinforced, and horizontal embrasures showed a thickness of at least a meter. It was a blockhouse designed to cover the estuary side of the farm.

People had been busy. Davies and Hadfield—the other Delta survivor—were doing a rapid assembly job on tripod-mounted machine guns of a heavier caliber than anything they had seen before.

On a raised platform, there was a console with a long, oblong scanner screen. Carter said, "We can power this board for a brief spell with a hand generator. If the pictographs speak true, there's a minefield around the site. Choice of detonation on pressure or selective control. No joy as of now."

Certainly the switchgear was dead. There was an improvised air about the setup that triggered off a line of thought Holt was thinking aloud when he said, "Definitely not part of the original plan. I'd say this was installed within the last twenty years. Taubman making his castle safe against minor civil disorders. Probably came across this obsolete gear in a local dump. It would stop any of the regular android units."

Aloud, he went on, "Any idea where this stuff might have come from?"

"Under your feet. There's a natural cave. Stacked to the roof. And a hand-cranked freight loader to bring it up."

"It's not going to do any good against Beta androids. The mines might bury the first wave. After that they'd use their ramps, and these peashooters wouldn't hold them. We have to go another way to work. I want all the mines we can find. Even if it means digging up that lot."

"To do what?"

"There's a sea-going boat. I'll take her across river and work up the outflow channel for the tidal power sluices. I thought at first that I'd sink her where it could block the flow. But this is better. Fill her with explosive and detonate when she's right up that defunct mausoleum's glut."

There was a general silence. Davies and Hadfield had stopped working, convinced that it was wasted

labor. Carter was looking at Holt with his mouth set in an unsmiling line. When he spoke, it was slow and deliberate. "A Samson syndrome. Pull the bastards down on your head. Don't you want to go on living?"

"As of now, I can take it or leave it. I've backed off as far as I go for androids or anybody else. I'll need help, but I reckon I can take her in the last stretch."

"It owes me. I'll join you. As I recall, there's more than one craft moored in the river. Using two, there'd be a chance to get clear."

"The sooner the better, then. I'm surprised they haven't made a move yet. They must be sure they have us taped."

Davies said, "There's a shelf of manuals down below. Bone up on the mechanics of it. Meanwhile, we'll use the shuttles to ferry the gear you want down to the quay."

"We?"

"Stella can organize the women to help. I reckon we should all go. Like Nick says, use two boats. Then sail down the coast."

"Okay. Find Joanna Taubman and she'll go with the first load. She knows the boat and can pick out another one. Where's the rest of the Alpha set?"

"As soon as it was light, they went on foot. I reckon they weren't trusting a car. One of them has a place up in the hills with a power supply run from a stream. They aim to sweat it out there until the Regional Council takes action."

"A nice friendly lot."

Nick Carter said, "They've had it too soft for too long. We're better off without them. What about the girl?"

She spoke for herself from the doorway, answering Carter but looking at Holt. "We deserve your suspicion. But surely at this stage, there's only one enemy. I'll do all I can to put the balance right."

Gunnar Holt said, "That's fair enough. Let's get on with it then."

Giving credit where credit was due, Shesha Haddon had to concede that the Alpha girl could handle a boat. Volunteering for the draft, she had gone out to *Dolphin* in a small bouncy tender launched from the slipway and held steady for her by Joanna, standing calf-deep in surging tidal water.

Single-oar rowing from the stem with Joanna standing feet astride and looking out ahead was another new slant. Personal melancholy took a downward spiral. Instead of Holt being sorry in the long term, it was likely that he had found a worthy partner on all counts.

Dolphin, up close, looked bigger than she had expected. She was long and silver gray, flush decked, with a streamlined charthouse and square transom. Sleek and powerful.

In spite of the urgency, Joanna Taubman's first care was to break out a blue dolphin pennant from the stern-post as a morale booster. They were in business as a sea power.

Then she took the crew into the compact engine room and went into a concentrated session of explanation.

Working together, they established a new bond of respect. Shesha's grasp of information was quick and

sure. In five minutes by the chronometer, she had it taped, and Joanna was saying from the companion, "I'm sorry to give you this job. You could do the navigating; but it would take practice and we haven't time. It has to be this way."

"I understand. I like this. Good luck."

From the charthouse, Joanna signaled for power, and the twin screws began to turn. First, she nosed out to a high-built cabin cruiser with *Raven* in condensed Gothic on its counter. She was ten minutes taking up the tow, then they were heading in for the quay, where there was a meter of water under the keel and the deck was level with a worn, sandstone parapet.

Raven was hauled in and made fast. Shesha heard Holt's voice directing stowage of the long mound of oval canisters that had grown on the quayside. There was not much to do, with no further calls from the bridge, but she was diffident about meeting him again. Maybe she ought to be helping, though looking out from a small port, it seemed likely that any more hands would be in the way. There was a limit to traffic on *Raven's* narrow deck. She settled for a folder of pull-out diagrams about the engines under her charge.

It was a long session. Holt drove his working party flat out for two hours, until *Raven* was inert as a log, with under half a meter of freeboard. Then he made a last trip to the farm with Carter.

From the roof, they scanned the long shimmering wall of the city. Nothing stirred. The Director was consolidating progress. Bringing up the bulk of the modules, no doubt, and organizing defense.

Carter said, "The bastards are sure of themselves. They don't see us as a menace, and that's a fact."

Ready to go, Holt turned to the ground, where the car had hit. There was no smoke, and the wreckage was hidden. Then he saw movement: a column of round, shiny beads, strung out, and moving toward the overgrown sand bars of the estuary. The Beta overlord had spared at least one detachment to carry the final solution to any fugitives in the area.

He handed the glasses to Carter. "They're on their way. Leave the minefield set to detonate on pressure. I've got a hunch it's not going to be as easy as we think to go through the back door."

Confirmation came in mid-afternoon when the fleet left shelter and met an authentic swell of a sea that tilted like a plate of wine-dark glass. Holt had taken Hadfield and gone aboard *Raven*. Her bluff bows lifted tardily and sank deeply into the following trough. Any heavier weather and she would founder.

Joanna came around in a tight turn with *Dolphin's* pennant streaming alongside. "Ditch some cargo. You're too low in the water."

"I'll manage. Hadfield can join you. Go ahead and size up the channel. Save time to know what we have to do."

Hadfield jumped the gap and *Dolphin* slipped away, building a spectacular bow wave, as the engineer answered a call for Full Ahead.

With even that small weight off her deck, *Raven* was easier to handle. Holt was glad to be alone. He looked east at the coast, as though it was a new land, that he was seeing for the first time. A flat, dilapidated shore for a landfall. What traveler would believe that it could contain people, and in particular an exotic like Shesha Haddon?

West, there was open sea, and the reality of distance, which had only been an intellectual notion until now. That, and the huge, heroic bulk of the city, were mortar and pestle to grind an individual down to

size.

After incredible luck and some exertion, he was alive in the sun, when millions were dead. But the outside, except for its physical splendor, was no greater catch than the microcosm of Horizon Delta. High endeavor was long gone. It was rubbing along on the unconsidered trifles of a past age. Urgent as a log.

Only someone who had lived through his kind of personal history could appreciate how he felt Shesha would have been the one. Maybe, even, she would have made it worthwhile to try for a new start.

Dolphin was coming back out of a sun that hung like an orange-red disk over a point of the promontory. Carter, using a speaker, called, "We've seen the place. Outfall like a fjord. But there's a boom and a filter system to keep debris out of the channel. It'll take time to get through."

"We have it. Go back and pick out a soft spot. Good chance to try out a mine."

Dolphin wheeled away, and a succession of percussive thuds came out across the sea from the harbor they had left. A low pall of dust was shrouding Fairfield Farm. Whatever happened, there would be nothing to go back for.

There was a flash of silver across the high parapet of the city and a car planed out in a direct line for the farm. The Director was sending a spotter to make a survey.

It flew low over the target, then turned out to sea to check on the convoy. Holt saw it veer and shift until it was plumb on *Raven's* course. Then it was running down the line as if he were standing still.

When it was half a kilometer off, he had an intuition of how it would be. They would take no chances. It would be the easiest thing in the world for one of them to lean through the freight hatch and carve the boat into fagots. In fact, any thermal beam that cut two centimeters through any part of the skin would settle the business. *Raven* would go up like a water spout.

He waited for the last second, judging speeds, and slammed the tiller over for a fall due. *Raven* toiled around like a half-tide rock, and a boiling white line marked out the reference she had lately filled.

The car climbed and banked. *Dolphin* left her station in a crash burst and came around to meet *Raven* head on.

By the time the car was set for another run, *Dolphin* was five hundred meters distant and streaking in on a collision course for the fire ship. It put the car dead on target for Carter, who was sitting with his back to the charthouse, in a driving screen of spray, with a tripod-mounted projectile gun aimed like a fixed cannon over the stemhead.

He began to fire as Holt started a turn, and Joanna held on for a count of ten.

In a confused sequence, Holt believed that they were finished anyway. *Dolphin* was bearing down on him and would strike him precisely amidships. Pieces of the car appeared to be falling off. Noise reached a climax.

Joanna spun *Dolphin* away on her heel with a centimeter of sea room, and the wash laid *Raven* on her beam ends. Sea sluiced into the cockpit as Holt fought to turn her head. When the situation stabilized, *Raven* was still floating with an android arm stuck like a quarrel-bolt in the cabin roof. The car had disappeared. *Dolphin* was sidling up at zero thrust to see how he had made out.

Joanna had a charthouse window wound down and called across, "Gunnar. Do you need help? There's a pump line I can rig."

He could see that even in her role as brisk executive, she was anxious about him.

"Not now. Get to the barrier. Pump out while we deal with that."

"Check."

Dolphin surged away, and Holt, calf-deep in sea water, wondered whether he had judged right. If *Raven* foundered under him, the project was out like a damp squib.

A breeze was coming off the sea from the point. Water was lipping the deck as *Raven* wallowed along like a stiff tub. Whatever had been heroic in the mission had long gone when he finally tied up to *Dolphin's* stern and heaved himself aboard to get the sitrep.

The design of the city was as plain as a diagram, with clean-cut lines, seemingly unsmudged by time. The wall was set back a kilometer from the coast, and a broad inlet, at least a kilometer wide, tunneled in to half that width, where the city was carried over it on massive, streamlined piers.

At the sea end, there was a semicircular boom that ran from bank to bank in a complete seal. Davies, black hair flattened in a wet skullcap, leaned over the rail to report his findings. He reckoned the depth to the sea bed was not more than six meters. There had been shoaling over the years, and the arch supports were silted up. But there was still a free flow of water in and out of the creek. Distance of the keystones below water was under a meter at this state of the tide.

Other faces made a line, leaning over, watching the reaction. It was plain enough that the size of the operation was beginning to strike home. Enthusiasm for the project was wearing thin.

Holt said, "Good work, Hal. We'll blow two arches to be sure. Joanna, get that pump rigged and clear *Raven*. Nick, you and Hadfield get two mines wired up, I'll go down and look for a site. Get somebody aboard here in case she drifts off."

The astringent buoyancy of the sea was a novelty in itself. On Delta, swimming had been a routine training, but the heated pools had been desalinated. Salt stung his eyes, already oversensitized by natural light, and the massive reservoir of cold drained heat from a deep level. It was an exercise that would have to be brief and sure. He found what he wanted by touch, a shallow recess between two structural ribs that would hold the charge in the head of the arches.

They stood off, *Raven* farthest away, paying out a thin cable, and Holt detonated the fuses from *Dolphin*. For a count of five, he believed that the gear was spoiled and that they were wasting their time. Then the sea erupted in twin columns that swept the decks with spray and lifted a sea like a moving wall.

Through the gap, the lagoon was sheltered and the water clear to a sandy bottom. With half the distance gone, Norah Greer suddenly called out from the lee of the charthouse. "Cars. Two, I think. Coming from the farm."

Holt used the loudhailer to *Raven*. "Head in. All the power she's got. Don't follow us."

Nick Carter was already in place with a fresh clip in the machine carbine. Holt took a second gun and went aft. *Dolphin* began a protective circling movement to screen *Raven* from a direct run.

Now the banks of the channel were noticeably narrowing, and with every meter the city took on greater bulk. Close in, the walls were not so perfect. The years of standing four square to Atlantic gales had taken a toll. Huge patches of discoloration like a blight disfigured the stone.

One advantage of the ground was that the cars could only come one way if they aimed to make a low

run.

Holt and Carter fired together as the leader tried it, and they saw the plexiglass floor panel drop away in shards. The car climbed to turn out of the narrowing valley and planed down to land on a triangular apron that projected from the wall of the city beside the inlet. The second one appeared to receive new orders. It checked its dive and turned to follow.

Then Holt saw why. Where the tongue of sea probed into the city, there was a broad ledge, like a catwalk, spanning the full width of the gap. From above, the androids could hardly miss.

But the computers had it wrong. In going for a certainty, they had missed out human judgment. *Raven's* observed speed had seemed to be fixed. Holt boosted it by taking up the two and shoving *Dolphin* along until every dial in the engine room ran into the red.

She fairly surged under the parapet as the first monoped began to trundle along the ledge.

From outside, they had all been struck silent by the impeding mass of the wall-rising sheet overhead. Now there was a new factor. The underbelly of the city had a quality that numbed the mind.

Joanna switched in a headlight, and the beam probed out a vista of glittering black slime. Through the arches there was a confusing regression of a maze of waterways. The air was dank, cold, and heavy with the stench of marine decay. The chill of it struck to the bone. Even Stella Morton was still, eyes wide copybook patterns for a mime of nervous dread.

The screws lifted an oily swell that hardly broke against the stalactite columns. Vibration loosened a heavy swath of encrusted sludge from the roof, and it fell with a dead smack between the two craft.

Some of the atmosphere had already filtered down to the engine room, the noise shoved over a last relay in the engineer's head, and she decided it was time she joined the navigators on deck. Now a sophisticated operator, she set the gear for auto response and went smartly up the companion to the charthouse.

It was already overfull. All hands had crowded in on a bid for human solidarity, and Stella Morton had found her tongue to ask a question that was no help. "What happens if the tide begins to flow through?"

She was across the hatch from Holt, and Shesha rose between them. Joanna turning from the wheel for his answer was well placed to see his face.

For a count of five, he believed that the flux was at it again and the phenomenon was strictly *in* the inside of his own head. Then he lifted her out of the trap as a touchstone that she was solid through. "Shesha! I thought you were in that car."

There was no mistaking the look or the tone. Joanna Taubman turned soberly to her navigating chore.

"Why should you think that?" Banal question and answer, but underneath there was an interchange of knowledge about each other. It did not greatly matter whether the time left was long or short. They were on the same side of the equation.

It was a bad time for sorting out angles. Stella, not as involved, brought him back to the main line. "Will somebody tell me what happens if the tide comes through?"

Holt reluctantly relaxed his grip and faced the speaker. One tiling was suddenly clear to him. Finding Shesha alive made no difference. In the few seconds they had shut out the scene, it was clear enough that he had a vote of confidence at a deep level, however surface ripples might cloud the issue.

He said, "Let's hope we don't have to find out. Another ten minutes and we're deep enough in. Keep your fingers crossed or anything else you might think useful."

In the event, he was three minutes in hand. First there was a sense that the tideway was constricting. More echo from the motors was beating back. Then *Dolphin's* probing beam found a new feature. A barrier wall of sluice gates crossed the way ahead.

Water was beginning to flow sluggishly through the narrow openings between the leaves.

Carter said, "The tide's turning. Anytime now the gates will close. Then the reservoir fills up. At some stage they open and the catchment area drains out."

Raven came up alongside, Hadfield and Rosemary Norris—a ginger-haired girl with buck teeth—looked up from the cockpit. Holt needed no pollster to tell him they were anxious for out. The group had gone as far as it would go.

Holt said, "It couldn't be better. We ram *Raven* into a gap. When she blows, she'll make a hole that nothing could plug." He jumped down to join the crew.

She was two-thirds in a narrowing funnel when she held fast, screws churning in a frenetic burst of overload. *Dolphin* came up slowly, stem first, to take them off.

Hadfield and the girl wasted no time, and the others, lining the deck, waited for Holt.

He took his time, making fast the first reel of line. Then he handed it to Carter and climbed in. For the first hundred meters he took it at dead slow, then he allowed a fractional increase, slowing again as the reel emptied.

At the fifth and last reel, light ahead had opened to a narrow bar, and *Dolphin* was stopped again.

Holt said, "That's as far as we can go. Launch the outboard. I'll detonate it from here."

Nobody moved. Carter said slowly, "We've worked together so far. There'd be more chance to stick to the power boat and go like hell."

"Not so. We don't know what effect it will have. We can't risk the whole group. You know that."

"Draw for it, then."

"Not so. It's my business."

"We won't let you do it."

Joanna Taubman left the charthouse with Holt's blaster making its own addition to the argument. "Do as he says. Launch the raft or there won't be anybody to detonate anything." She was speaking out of character in a tight voice that showed emotional stress and was clearly programmed to carry out what she said.

Even then there was no rush, but Holt helped himself and had the inflated life raft over the side before there was a move. He hauled it on its rope and was ready to pick up the hand generator when the girl spoke again. "Leave it or I'll drop you first. This is my business. If there's blame to be handed out, I should take most. Nothing can turn back the clock, but when you think about it, you'll remember that somebody from Alpha tried to square the account. Stand away."

Holt was moving slowly to make a grab for the gun and had his back to Carter. The blow that took him

in the nape of his neck dropped him where he stood, and Joanna stepped over him without a downward look.

From the raft, she said, "Thanks, Nick. I know you understand me. I'll give you five minutes to get clear. If I can get out, I will. This outboard has a fair speed. Good luck."

In all, it had taken less than five minutes, and Shesha Haddon, in the engine room, took the call for full ahead as a routine phase of the stop/go sequence that she had been following. *Dolphin* fairly picked up her foot and slammed off for the distant light.

Left alone on her small swaying platform, Joanna focused her mind on the dial of her time disk. She cut off all thought of what the end product of her action would be. In spite of surface control, her subconscious worked on it and she found she was trembling. She took a small square of silk from her breast pocket, rolled it in a ball, and bit on it. The indicator crawled around.

At sixteen twenty-nine on the nose, she began to crank the generator.

Gunnar Holt got to his knees and was weaving his head from side to side like a bemused dog as *Dolphin* stormed from the inlet into the lagoon.

Recall flooded in and he heaved himself to his feet, intent on getting to the charthouse and turning the boat. Then he saw the long arc of the boom.

In the interim, Beta androids had gone out from either shore and spaced themselves every ten meters along its length. Sections of their useful clip-together beams sealed off the gap they had made to get inside. Suicide was unnecessary. The Director had arranged it. *Dolphin* was neatly centered in a ring of fire.

Carter, at the wheel, had sized it up. There was no chance; but the temporary plug in the dyke was clearly its weakest point. He took *Dolphin* in a tight turn, with her pennant streaming like a signal for general attack, and lined up for a wrecking run at the android standing in the center.

The androids were programed to wait for the good time. Every arm tracked around and picked up the target.

Only Holt looking back, saw the eruption of water and smoke ribbed with flame that sprang from below the city, and the racing bore that fanned out like an instant wall.

Dolphin was picked up like a straw and hurled over the barrier with a clear meter under her thrashing screws. When Carter regained control, they were two kilometers offshore with a wide-spreading oil slick gushing from under the city like dark blood and damping down the sea.

The boom was a crazy tangle with slabs poking every which way, and the only surviving Beta android was balanced precariously on a jutting spar and firing conscientiously at the point where *Dolphin* was expected to be.

Persistence brought some reward. The bright line of the beam blossomed into a red flower where it hit the sea, and fire mushroomed under a black smoke cloud.

Dolphin drifted, with the whole company lining the rail. Shesha stood with Holt, eyes full of tears. "I am ashamed. I was jealous of her. She was a truly beautiful person."

"She did what she had to do. Human solidarity is still a force to be reckoned with."

A small patch of white floated under the counter, and Stella Morton fished it in.

It was a handkerchief, and she held it out for all to see. There was the outline of a dolphin and J.T. in a neat monogram. She passed it to Shesha—next in line—who hesitated, then handed it on to Holt as the likely guardian of a sentimental relic.

Gunnar Holt weighed it damply in his hand. He needed no aid to memory, and if her liberated ka was knocking about, he reckoned it would understand. He rolled it in a tight ball and threw it overarm into the spreading flames. He said harshly, "Back to your engine room, Shesha. Time to get clear."

In the charthouse, he ran a line to the nearest point on the Irish coast. "First we'll go there. Take a little time to think this through. But we'll be back. While there's a city like this left anywhere, because this can't be the *only* one, we'll be back."

Before it was lost below the horizon, they saw that the whole western sector of the city had folded in on itself. When it was no longer in sight, a broad column of fire, like a beacon, marked the spot. Without power, the Beta androids were dead as any resident on Gamma or Delta. There was no organized force to stop the fire spreading through the whole city. Joanna Taubman had a sufficient funeral pyre.

Holt handed over to Nick Carter and went below to join the engineer. Coming behind her, he pinned her against the bulkhead with one hand either side. Shifting a swathe of dark silk hair to speak into her left ear, he said, "I said I'd wait until you were spoiled for choice. That isn't possible. So it might as well be now. What answer do I get?"

It was difficult to turn around, but she managed it, and her eyes saved a formal answer.

"You're trifling with the safety of the ship. Let me go."

When she was free, she set the auto system to Full Ahead and held out both hands, palms upward in the universal mime of acceptance for whatever ongoing course might be set.