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PROLOGUE

Androids had been Dr. Erik Roarchik's obsession. He had been a noted biochemist, an expert on DNA and RNA manipulation, and the inventor of the Roarchik android. He had also been Roarchik the heretic, Roarchik the revolutionary, and Roarchik the fool.

The major disappointment of his life was that he had not been the inventor of the first android, but he compensated by creating the best androids available and devoting his life to the improvement of his product. His Matrix-One was a marvel of creative, independent thought, capable of reasoning beyond the grasp of all but the brightest of men. The Matrix-Two was a bureaucratic model capable of long hours of uncomplaining, mindless paperwork. The Matrices -Three and -Four were workers—strong backs, willing and unquestioning minds. They would die from overwork; freeze or fry, and go on working until collapse.

The Confederation was the best customer for Roarchik cargo workers, construction personnel and high-risk models. Almost every piece of paperwork passed through the hands of a Roarchik android. Most of the dull administrative jobs could be, and were, done by androids. The Confederation, being as large as it was, had a chronic shortage of people, and the Roarchik android more than adequately filled vacancies in almost any position. There had been charges of monopoly by the other android manufacturers, but Roarchik had proved his product superior; all his rivals could do was gnash their teeth and try to get a few steps ahead of him by bribing his assistants, or begging them to leave Roarchik's and work for the competition at better salaries. It hadn't worked. Roarchik was still the best, in product quality as well as in the minds of his tech crew.

The best androids, the strongest androids and the most efficient androids—there was nothing else in Dr. Roarchik's life. He had little time for other activities—including the raising of his son, Andros.

As a child, Andros saw his father only infrequently. His life was filled with android nursemaids, android servants and even android tutors. Year by year there were less and less humans working at Roarchik's. Even the secretaries were androids, and rumors about Dr. Roarchik's frequent affairs with the loveliest of these creatures were a source of shame to the young boy. He tried to have as little to do with his father's office staff as possible, blushing furiously and ducking his head when he was forced to speak to one of the beautiful anthromorphs. When Andros was in his teens, his father sent one of the females to Andros' bed to teach him about sex. He had been filled with such disgust that he was thoroughly impotent and violently ill, vomiting across the android's perfect breasts.

The only humans Andros ever saw were some of his father's tech crew and his group of Medcorpsmen. The corpsmen came quite frequently to weigh, measure and test young Andros. They gave him I.Q. tests, watched him play, and made stacks of notes. As he grew older they came less frequently. He heard they had been replaced by androids, but he did not see any of the new corpsdroids.

There'd been no other children for him to play with; only adult androids joined him in his games and childish pleasures. The androids had been soothing, comforting, coddling and, above all, respectful. Andros had lived in a world of attentive care, and everything had been done to insure his happiness. He was even allowed to leave Roarchik's to attend the Space Academy when he was seventeen, something he had thought his father would never allow. His father had taken even less interest in him as he grew older, even though there was the unspoken possibility that Andros would inherit Roarchik's. But his father had made no push to interest him in the firm, nor had he arranged that Andros be taught anything about the processes of creating the Roarchik android. Without such guidance, Andros had little interest in androids.

Andros spent six years at the Academy studying astrogation, and was close to graduating in the upper third of his class. His life had been an easy one. He would become an astrogator and the only androids he would meet were the ones working for StarFleet Command.

Then one short notation in his father's files brought Andros' world

crashing down around him. His father's obsession with androids became an albatross tied around Andros' neck...

CHAPTER ONE

The wide plaza in front of the Academy sports arena was deserted in the glare of the moonlight. The shadows of the surrounding buildings barely touched the edges of the bleak expanse. There was no cover, no place to hide. That exposed, Andros knew he would have no chance against the howling mob behind him. His only hope was to outrun them and reach the protection of the darkened buildings on the other side of the plaza.

He moved with the grace of a trained athlete, his body straining for the safety of some covering darkness.

"Vat!"

"Lousy, stinkin' Vat!"

"Prongin' android!"

Vat, Vat, Vat. His heart was beating in rhythm with their taunts. *You'd think if my father were going to build an android for a son he'd have done a better job.* Andros tried to laugh but found he had no breath to spare. *Bigger lungs, stronger legs and a heck of a lot more smarts would have been nice, too. Any decent android would have left those clowns in the dust.*

A rock whizzed by his head as he tried for more speed. Another one caught him in the small of the back; he stumbled, caught his balance and kept running. *Please let me make it to the buildings!* He would have a better chance there; in the dark he could perhaps take out a few of his assailants before they could catch him. The tangle of classrooms, lab buildings and offices might provide a good ambush or a way out.

"Kill the bloody Vat!"

"We'll fix you dead good, android!"

"VAT!"

The buildings seemed no closer. His boots thudded on the concrete, their rhythm more ragged now. He had a stitch in his side and breathing was becoming a problem. Why had he been so stupid as to go out at night, leaving the relative safety of his barracks? *Thinking with your gonads again, idiot.* Had Cyn set up this chase? He'd been almost sure he'd heard her icy laughter echoing across the commons. She had refused to see him or talk to him since his father's death, and then a note came, asking him to meet her at the commons garden. A gang of toughs had met him first. *And I walked right into it. Cynthia whistled, and like a slobbering dog I came running—fool!*

The buildings were closer, their bulk dark and concealing. The massive dome of the Crew Assignment Center rose behind them like a second golden moon. The Center was another reason for trying to save his skin. *Ships hire no dead astrogators, and I intend to be a live one.*

He ran into the shadows of the chemistry lab, burrowing into the bushes at the base of the building. Branches tore his dark blue uniform, but he ignored that. As he caught his breath he tried to formulate a plan of attack. There was a scraping sound on the steps above him. Startled, Andros dove deeper into the shrubbery. There was a guard at the top of the stairs standing in the open doorway of the lab; his flasher bobbed across the steps and onto the plaza.

"Help, help me!" Andros struggled out of the underbrush and took the steps two at a time. "Help me," he repeated, grabbing for the old man's sleeve. The guard would be armed with a stunner. That would save him.

"Vat!"

"Kill the Vat!"

The cadets were almost across the plaza. Another couple of minutes and they would catch up to him. "You must help me, they'll kill me!"

The guard flashed his light across Andros' face. Recognizing him, the old man hesitated, glanced at the running cadets on the plaza, then yanked his arm out of Andros' grip and ducked into the open doorway, slamming the door behind him. Andros lunged for the door handle. The lock clicked into place. He shook the door, pounded on it.

"They're going to kill me, you idiot! Don't you understand, they mean

it." There was no answer from inside the lab building.

"We've got him!" The cadets were coming up the stairs at a dead run. Andros took a flying leap over the side of the porch, his hands and face scraped by bushes as he hit the ground floor below. Crouching, he pushed his way through the plants and out by the side of the building. He ran across the dining patio next to the lab, dodging the tables and jumping over the brickwork benches. The crunch of leaves underfoot seemed to call out his whereabouts as he ducked into the protection of a narrow corridor between two of the buildings.

"We'll get you yet, coward!"

"Reject!"

"VAT!"

He could hear his pursuers beating the bushes for him. They had no intention of giving up their chase. *Maybe I am a coward—but if bravery means getting my brains bashed out, I can't say I care for it.*

Andros flattened himself against the back wall of the lab building as a jagged rock slashed by his cheek. He could feel the rough wall digging into the back of his torn uniform as he tried to make himself as small a target as possible.

"Kill the android!" The cadets were nearer; he could hear their boots scraping the leaves on the patio. He risked a quick look around the corner of the building and found that his pursuers were much closer than he'd hoped.

"There he is, Trev. Get around that building, quick!"

Andros was trapped in a narrow corridor between two buildings, and he was positive the group following him was smaller than it had been a few minutes before. He didn't think any of the cadets might have used good sense and given up. More likely they were circling the chemistry lab to come up on him from the other side. He scanned the area for some means of escape, or at least some method of making his capture more difficult.

The chemistry lab was quiet. It was too late at night for classes and the

guard was not going to be of any help. Moving down the corridor, Andros checked the rear doors to the building. They were all locked, as were the windows. Bending low, he ran for the other side of the corridor. This building held primarily ground floor offices, with instructors' quarters on the upper levels. The office doors were also locked.

He could hear the cadets coming up the stairs from the other side of the building. He had only a short time to find a hiding place. The same low shrubs that had decorated the front of the lab were at the base of the offices, but that would be the first place they'd look for him. Overhead was a row of low balconies, just out of reach. Estimating their height, he jumped for the ledge of one of them, scraping his ringers on the raw concrete as he missed and fell back. He jumped again; his bleeding fingers caught on the lip of the balcony this time. Elbowing his way upwards he strained his shoulders, praying for enough leverage. His legs trembled as he tried to swing them sideways. As they fell back he arched his back and kicked off the bottom edge of the balcony in a pendulum-like pivot. One boot heel caught on the lip of the balcony. Lifting the leg higher, he hooked his knee over the edge and, pulling with all the power in his back muscles, fell over the ledge to land with a thump face first in a bed of *crotta* lilies.

Raising his head cautiously he looked over the edge for any sign of his pursuers. If they came down the corridor they would check out the bushes and then be just as likely to look up. Something must be done to distract them from finding out where he was. Searching quickly among the smashed plants, his fingers tightened around a small flowerpot. Taking careful aim he sent it sailing through a window of the chemistry lab.

The noise brought the cadets running. He ducked face-first into the lilies. Andros tried hard not to sneeze from the dirt in his nose—better a little muck in his lungs than what those bloodthirsty cadets had in mind for him.

He could hear them running back and forth below the balcony, beating the bushes and shouting obscenities.

Damn you, father, why did you have to do this to me? Andros shook his dark hair out of his face. The action was not wise—fine dust spurted up into his eyes. He wondered how long it would take those stupid louts below to find the broken window or look up at the balconies.

"Look, he's gone into the labs," he heard one of the cadets shout. "We've got him trapped now."

"One of you give me a lift through this window—we'll get that prongin' Vat!"

"Head out front—guard the door. We'll massacre him."

Andros could hear their boots clattering away from his hiding place, and the smashing of glass as someone went through the window he had broken. Then there was silence.

"Do you like my *crottas*, Roarchik? They are very rare, you must know," a calm voice said as the lights went on in the office behind him. Scrambling to his feet, Andros arranged his posture into approved Academy position. Facing the Dean, he saluted, his bloody hand leaving a smear on his dirt-encrusted forehead.

"Yes, sir. Indeed, sir. Good evening, sir!" Andros wondered how much of the action the Dean had seen. Destruction of school property brought instant dismissal at best, and he wasn't quite sure what the penalty might be for tearing up the Dean's flower beds—something dreadful, he had no doubt.

Dr. Trigolone looked down at the cadet from his imposing height of two and a half meters. His pale gold Arterian face showed no emotion—his bone structure allowed little in the way of motion beyond eye movements and the action of a sharp, thin-lipped jaw. "Your uniform is torn and dirty, and you are bleeding," he said flatly. "However, I will not report this to your barracks sergeant."

"Thank you, sir. I am sorry for my improper attire, sir." Andros' chin was tucked so firmly into his collar that speaking was difficult. He knew the Dean was a fair man, but hard. He had not asked for Andros' removal from the Academy when the medical corps had first raised the issue of Andros' parentage. It had not been proven that Andros was indeed an android; therefore, said the Dean, until we know otherwise the cadet stays. But whether his calm judgment would be the same after the destruction of his flowers remained in doubt.

"I assume you can identify your attackers?" The light from the Dean's office shone straight in Andros' eyes, almost blinding him. Even if Dr.

Trigolone had been capable of expression, Andros would have had no clue as to what the Dean wanted him to say. He had only that cool, flat voice to go by, and that wasn't much help.

"No, sir," he lied. "It was too dark, sir." Telling the truth, he knew, would only get him in worse trouble with his fellow cadets. He couldn't identify all of them for sure, and any he missed would be after his hide with a vengeance. Snitching was not approved of at the Academy, and punishment for breaking the code of honor was swift and painful. "I would not care to guess at any names, sir. A possible mis-identification of the innocent would be far worse than allowing the guilty to go free, sir."

"You lie very well, Roarchik. I suppose that should be considered a virtue." The Dean paused, glancing down at his flowers. "Ah well, they can be replaced. I don't wish to pry into your affairs, but could you possibly reveal why you left your quarters at such a late hour?"

"But..."

"I am quite aware it is not yet curfew, but still you must have known the dangers." The Dean bent to straighten the stem of a broken lily, then let it drop. Dusting his fingers, he looked at Andros. "Well, can you answer that?"

"Sir, a friend asked me to meet... to come to the commons, so I felt it might be important..." His voice faded into a mumble. Even if Cynthia had set him up, honor forbade his revealing any such suspicion. It might not have been her fault—that might not have been her laugh he heard.

"Ah, a 'friend.' This *friend* did not meet you?"

"No, sir."

The Dean sighed. Or Andros thought it might be a sigh. It could just as well have been a hiss. "Well, it is of no matter. You are bleeding and it is too late to wake a medcorpsman. Also, he would ask too many questions. Come, I have a med kit in my office. We will try to patch you up for your return to your barracks. I am afraid, however, that there is little to be done for your uniform."

"Thank you, sir. I'll dump it in the shredder as soon as I get back to my room." Andros followed Dr. Trigolone into his massive office. All the

furnishings had been designed for the taller Arterian, and Andros felt like a very small, very naughty boy as he was told to go wash his face and then come sit down to have medication applied to his scraped skin.

"Do you think you will be safe returning to your quarters?" Kneeling in front of Andros, Dr. Trigolone moved a can of disinfectant back and forth. The cooling spray sealed the cuts.

"I think I can make it back. They may have given up by now—but if they haven't I still think I can out-run and out-think them."

"Particularly if you leave by the front of the building rather than by the balcony. Your trick of breaking the window was quite clever. Misdirection is the mark of a good military leader. You have handled the situation well."

"Thank you, sir. Ah, I won't get in trouble, will I? For the window, I mean."

Still kneeling, the Arterian leaned back on his heels, his face almost on a level with the cadet's. "I will assign no demerits to you." He paused, as if deciding what might be done with Andros. "Can you last out the time until you graduate? It will not be an easy thing for you. Those men may indeed manage to kill you."

"I can make it. It's only a few weeks, and I'm in no real hurry to get myself messed up; if they get me, they'll be messed, too."

"And if you are killed we will see that the guilty are punished. But that, I am afraid, will be small comfort to your dead self." The Dean stood up to his full height. "You are a very brave man, Andros."

"Thank you, sir!" It was the first time the Arterian had used his first name, and he felt oddly pleased by it.

"I have, however, never been sure if bravery was a virtue or perhaps some form of stupidity."

"I thought about that, too. But I want to be an astrogator. I want that badly." It felt good to have someone to talk to, someone who seemed to care about him. Andros had never had this sort of rapport with the Dean before, and he was regretting how little time he had left to get to know the

alien better.

"I was like you once—young, sure of what I wanted. There were many who did not wish me to continue in the Academy and yet here I am; the school is mine. I will be interested in your future, Andros, but I do not think it will be in astrogation."

"But I'm a good astrogator..."

"Indeed; and I wanted to be a ship's Captain when I, too, was twenty-three Confederation years old. How oddly our lives can change. You will find your place in life just as I did, and it may prove to be a surprise. Take it, though; take hold of life, Andros, whatever it becomes for you, and enjoy it." He sighed, thinking perhaps of his own youthful dreams.

"Ah well," the Dean continued. "Leave by the front door and try to be more careful, for your future's sake. It is the only one you will have in this universe." The Arterian led Andros to the door, his arm placed in a blessing around the young man's shoulders.

Andros slipped quietly back to his barracks by a roundabout route. Keeping well to the shadowed sides of the buildings, he listened for any sound of pursuit. The leaves crunching under his boots caused him to dodge into doorways, sure he was being followed. He watched for every change in the shape of a shadow, staring intently at the waving of a branch in the wind, and looked for an enemy behind each tree.

Until his father's death, paranoia had never been a part of his personality. Such a short time ago Andros had been well-liked by his fellow cadets. He was a captain of one of the space war teams, and had been twoving with Cynthia. His only worries had been passing his finals and getting a berth on a good ship. His father's files had changed all that. Now there was no girlfriend; he had been asked to leave the war team; he had been hunted down like an animal; and it was obvious the other cadets did not want him at the Academy.

Andros wished he had never heard of androids. The Academy had been a haven from them; there were no soft voices here saying, "Master Andros, I think that should be checked with your father," or "Master Andros, do you not feel your father would find that activity too dangerous for you?" Even with the strict rules of the Academy, the freedom from android

coddling had been like a blast of weed on the brain, a euphoric burst of new-found liberty. The rules and regulations were nothing compared to life at Roarchik's. Naturally he had joined in with the nightly griping in the barracks, but he would never be able to explain to anyone how it felt not to see only androids around him.

He had discovered, once the initial strangeness wore off, that he liked real people very much—particularly a person named Cadet Cynthia Ti'chi. They had made plans about a mutual future. They would own a fleet of trading ships and see the universe together. He would sell his shares in Roarchik's Androids, Inc. as soon as he left the Academy—or better yet, have the old man declared incapable of handling his position. Android equality had become the new obsession of the older Roarchik, and Cynthia was sure that this was a sign of incipient insanity. Andros, having no particular love for his father, had agreed with her.

Dr. Roarchik had gotten stranger in his old age. He had dismissed almost all humans from Roarchik's, used only android help in his lab work and had come to think that the androids were as human as anything born of womb or Jug.

He had harangued the Confederation's Central Council, demanding equal rights for his creations. He saw himself as a patriarch to a new race, a god or a Moses. "*They are my children and they must be free!*" he had thundered. When this argument got nowhere, he then revealed his unmarked Super-Matrix android, capable of doing everything a human could—including natural reproduction. These, he said, would serve as the start of a new race. It was as if, knowing his own guilt in creating slaves for the Confederation, he had to free them to blot out his own sins.

The Council found the idea of an android race ridiculous, and the concept of androids that could breed foolishness. They would tolerate Roarchik's blathering as long as he supplied them with androids. If he could prove this Super-Matrix to be an improvement on the old Matrix-One, well and good; the Confederation would be interested in buying a better android. But as for independence for androids, the Council would never approve it.

Dr. Roarchik had led the fight for android independence and would accept nothing less from the Council. He even wanted freedom for androids made by companies other than, his own—a thought which made his competitors squeal with rage. But the androids—*all* androids—followed

Roarchik. When the Council had refused to listen to any more of his speeches, he had fostered a rebellion in the city of Bleydeaux on Mhalkeri, the home planet of the Roarchik plant, leading the androids into a useless but violent riot that destroyed Confederation property. The Provost of Bleydeaux had called out his riot nabs and Roarchik had gone down in the flames of his own folly, leaving only the ashes of a dream as his legacy to the androids—that and Andros.

The rights of androids meant nothing to Andros. "My father is an inconsistent fool," he'd said in bull sessions about android equality. "First he makes androids and sells them, then laments that they are property and have no rights. He proved that Vatting was the most efficient method for creating an android, then he turned around and made some that can breed kids which take twenty years to be of any use. He *is* crazy!" Andros had felt little or nothing when told of his father's death. He approved the Confederation's take-over of the android plant until calm could be restored, and turned down any offers to run the factory himself.

"I'm not going to chase any windmills for the old boy. Let Roarchik's go back to being exactly what it was, a factory for making androids."

But his father's death had let loose all the hells of a chemical Pandora's box, and made the subject of androids a very serious one for Andros. Dr. Roarchik's hitherto secret notebooks had contained an entry for the day of Andros' birth:

"Today marks the beginning of 'Project Stork.' I have produced the first and most important part of my experiment—a viable man-child. He will be called 'Andros,' and will be the prototype for the natural reproducing android. He will be the model from which I will work. He will be my guide."

Andros had known he was not a legal term child, and that there was no listing of his mother's name in his birth records. But being outborn was no shame. Very few children were termborn. The law required that procreative term marriages last for twenty-one years to insure protection of the child. But not many people wanted to remain married that long; a childless term marriage lasted two years, quite enough for most couples. An outborn child could be raised by either or both of its natural parents or be sent to a Confederation creche, it didn't matter which. The Confederation, with dozens of colony planets to fill, could always use more people.

But now Andros was not even outborn. He was possibly less than a "Jug," having none of the special qualities of those children who were gene-manipulated and bottle-grown. They were considered human, no matter how strange some of their manipulations had been. But Andros was suspected of being an android, and an android was the lowest of the low—a thing.

"I'm no different than I was before," Andros reasoned. "I'm still the same person, still a good games captain. I have exactly the same skills I've always had. I'm me—me, Andros. I can't be what they think I am, I can't be—androids aren't people. They're not humans, and I *am* human."

The Medical Corps had gone over every centimeter of his body, giving him every test they could think of—blood counts, sperm tests, bone marrow examinations—and the results had been negative: no proof that he was an android. But unfortunately, no proof that he wasn't, either. So he became *Andy the Android*, a thing to be feared and hated.

Andros scuttled into the doorway of his own barracks. "Two more weeks until graduation, that's all you've got. Two more weeks of me, you pukka rats! And I'm going to live through it, no matter what you do—can you hear me, slime worms?" Andros yelled his challenge to the surrounding barracks as he slammed the door.

Mocking laughter echoed over the deserted commons and bounced off the walls.

* * *

THE Confederation Crew Assignment Center for the Academy stood on the outskirts of the school complex, a smug reminder of what each cadet dreamed of—a Confederation post on a starship. The golden mushroom dome on the roof could be seen from any point on the campus, a watchtower over good conduct, high grades and a perfecting of skills. Andros had first seen it when he was seventeen, and had been awestruck by its immense size. That first day of plebe orientation had been confusing, but he had quickly learned to find any building on the school grounds by its relation to the Assignment Center. The thought of finally entering its huge bronze doors as an ensign had filled his dreams for six long years.

The long, shallow steps leading up to the doors could have held an army

of eager cadets—and they had, the first few days after graduation. Four weeks later, very few cadets climbed the path to the building. Andros felt almost alone in the rotunda of the Center. He had been moved into ensign's quarters directly after graduation; his personal effects had been packaged and taken to the Center's storage unit. At the moment of his acceptance, his possessions would be loaded onto that ship, and he would find himself fitted neatly into the astrogation slot open to him. But it had not been quite that simple.

The rotunda was a wide oval lined with viewing screens listing the incoming ships and their requirements in the way of ensign-trainees. Andros had, as per the rules, gone each day with his infotab ready to be fed into the computer that would determine his placement. Almost every cadet in his graduation class had found a position. Cynthia was an astrogator-trainee on a Class Five starship... but then, she had stood at the top of the class.

Andros had not made any of the top starships. He had been just barely in the upper third of his class, and had not expected anything higher than maybe a Class One or Two ship. He had not been picked by any of the Battle Cruisers. The Confederation was not at war and had little need of a large standing navy. Even the trading vessels had proved a disappointment. He remembered how he and Cyn had talked of the adventure of meeting new races and bringing them the products of the Confederation.

His mind ran in circles, over and over. *My grades were good. I did well on the finals and my conduct listing was high.* Round and round the same mental race track, hurdling swiftly over the one reason that might be the real one—he was Roarchik's son/android.

* * *

ANDROS slowly made his way past the giant banks of crew requirements posted on the six-meter-high walls.

THE ANDROMEDA: Class Two Battle Cruiser. Captain Mark Hadji. Needed: four nutritional personnel—six engineering assistants—ten Medcorpsmen—one alienologist. Report to Gate Seven.

Andros noted the changes in the *Andromeda's* list. Yesterday they had needed two gunnery experts and a chemist as well. Three lucky ensigns

were now getting indoctrination training for their jobs on the *Andromeda*. Andros envied them, even though he had no wish to be either a gunner or a chemist.

He walked past the Cruiser listings and glanced briefly at the Freighters—no openings. The Trading vessel section showed more promise:

THE NE'CHING: Dealers in agricultural products for second generation colonies. Captain Vas Frekinz. Needed: six plant managers—five hydroponics engineers—three yeast culturers—one astrogator ensign. Report to Gate Twelve.

Andros quickly made his way to the GEM shuttle banks. "Gate Twelve," he requested of the kilt-clad android attendant. The shuttle android was a Roarchik, a Matrix-Three judging by the tattoo under his left eye. The right cheekbone displayed the chop-mark of the Confederation. Andros rubbed at his own cheek, wiping away an imaginary stain.

The shuttlecart whipped him through several blank white corridors and up a tunnel leading to a pen-like enclosure on the roof labeled "Gate Twelve." He got out of the shuttle, massaging the back of his neck to relieve the slight pain of the cart's acceleration. He watched the wheelless bubble zip away down the corridor back to the rotunda. There would be another available when he needed it. The Assignment Center was so large that only a fleet of such high-speed shuttles could have accomplished the rapid transportation of men and materials needed by the great ships the Center served. They were useful, but they had not been designed for comfort.

The enclosure standing in the shadow of the dome contained a bank of computers and a V-winger resting on a launch pad. An accepted candidate would be flown up to the ship coded to Gate Twelve by drone control, and the crewmen's luggage would also be sent to his proper quarters on board the vessel.

Wiping the sweat from his palms and from the infotab, Andros approached the computer bank. He passed through a detection beam and the computer whirred to life. "State your name, rank and position desired," the tinny voice demanded. "Place your tab in the slot marked 'A' and wait for processing."

"Andros Roarchik, Ensign 377-45-60. Requesting astrogator-trainee position." Andros slid the flat yellow rectangle into the designated slot. The machine hummed to itself, clinking and sighing over the information conveyed by the electromagnetic coding of the tab. There was a sound almost like a cough, and the voice activated again.

"Candidate rejected. It is not possible to give you that position. I am sorry." The computer spat his tab out into a bin in front of Andros. He picked it up, running his fingers over the slick surface. What did those circuits say about him? What didn't they say? Might it... his mind hurdled the obstacle again, getting over it by refusing to stop and ponder its possible existence.

He moved back to the shuttle banks, pushing the indicator for a return shuttle. He could try again with one of the other trading vessels or wait until tomorrow. The result, he was sure, would be the same. No one in the Confederation wanted to give him a job.

When the shuttle deposited him back at the rotunda he walked slowly along the walls, watching for an astrogator opening—any astrogator opening.

It took Andros three days to cover every astrogator position in the Trader class. None were open to him. He was beginning to develop an active dislike for the shuttle-carts, and the ache in his neck was very much like a fullblown case of whiplash.

He could start again at the top of the ranks with the Class Five starships; new ships were coming in every day, and one of them might need an astrogator. There were the Trader ships to try again, or any of the other classes. He could even apply for Scavenger ship duty. Andros shuddered. Scavenger ships were the vultures of the universe, picking away at old wrecks, collecting small meteors for their metal content and cleaning up after accidents With the snakes in the jump holes. These ships were the lowest pit, the scum of shipping—nothing more than legal pirates.

* * *

THE Scavenger ships did not want Andros, either. He had come to the very end of the listings; there were no more ships to check out on the wide, flat screens of the rotunda. Andros rested his head against the cool marble

wail at the end of the Scavenger ships' listings. *They don't want me. What does my record say? But the medical report... I am a good astrogator!* "I am!" he muttered into the walls. They did not listen or care.

The rough edge of some sort of plaque cut into his cheek. He turned his head, more out of irritation than any wish to read the plaque. Flaking gold letters swam unfocused in front of his eyes and one word—"Ships"—caught his attention. Moving away from the wall brought the rest of the message into view:

UNLISTED SHIPS' REQUIREMENTS: GO TO SECTION J-765

"Section J-765," Andros requested of the android at the shuttle banks. Was there a brief flash of pity on the android's face? No—Matrix-Threes were not conditioned to feel pity, Andros assured himself.

To Andros' surprise, the enclosure was an office somewhere in the building rather than on the roof. There was no way a V-winger, even if it could be gotten into so small a room, could have shot up to a waiting ship. There were no banks of computers, either.

At a desk heaped with graying papers, an unshaven man in a grubby jumpsuit was absorbed in trying to get a cockroach to eat out of his hand.

"Excuse me, is this J-765?" The man jumped, and the roach scuttled away under a dusty mini-computer terminal on the desk.

"Oh blast! You scared him off. Now it'll take me a week to coax him out again." The man brushed the crumbs he had been feeding the bug off his hands. "Yah, this is the 'J,' what do you want?" The man looked Andros up and down, taking in his new gray and red ensign's uniform. "You sure you got the right place, sonny?"

"I'd like a job, and the board downstairs said you handled unlisted ships' openings." From the looks of the enclosure there were very few ships that listed with J-765.

"Yah, we got some jobs. Mostly little fish, old ships, some independents—all legal, though; I promise you that."

"I'm trained as an astrogator. Do you have anything for me?"

"Astrogator!" The man stared wide-eyed at Andros. "You gotta be kidding. There's half a dozen good jobs posted out there—what in Chaos are you doing here?"

"None of those ships would take me—not even the Scavengers." That last admission was painful and, Andros realized, unwise. The man was now staring at him with open hostility.

"Not even a Scavenger—what'd you do, pop up an admiral's daughter or somethin'? Do you drink hard or hype? What's the matter with you, sonny?"

"No, I'm not in any trouble—are you going to take my tab, or should I leave now?" Andros was getting angry. If this clown had a job for him, fine; but he was not going to stand around wasting time with someone who could do nothing for him. *Let this slob go back to his bug training—I'll find something without his help.*

"Yah, hand it over, might as well take a skim at it." Andros dropped the tab on the littered desk. Physical contact with this ruffian was more than he could stomach.

The man grunted and shoved the tab roughly into the mini-comp. It buzzed as though it had a loose connection, chewing the tab like some devouring animal. Finally it burped and spat out the now-tattered infotab like some indigestible glob of vomit. The man watched the readout on the small comp screen, turned off the machine and picked up the tab, tossing it back at Andros.

"Nah, nothing for you, sonny. You shouldna even been such a sleam-squat as to think anyone would want you." The man began peering under the mini-comp, searching, no doubt, for his cockroach.

"But I'm a trained astrogator..."

"And an android." He shoved several greasy crumbs Under the mini-comp, whistling softly.

It couldn't be avoided any more. The one thing Andros had been afraid to face, the one thing that would end his dream of being an astrogator. Android—Roarchik's android. Someone at the Academy had dared...

The world turned to hazy red, blood seemed to explode in his brain. He lashed out across the desk, grabbing the man by his dirty collar. "Where does it say I'm an android? Who dared to tell that lie about me?"

"Easy, sonny, just take it easy." Greasy blobs of sweat dotted the man's face. He blinked rapidly, fear darting weasel-like through his eyes.

Andros let go of the man. The redness was fading from his brain. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that." He turned to leave.

"Don't you want your tab?" The man was relieved that he still had a whole skin, and was prepared to be conciliatory.

"All right, but tell me what it says about my being an android."

"Sure. It says right here in the Medcorps reports." The man flicked on the mini-comp's playback channel. "Here it is: *suspected of being an android, possible reproductive model—Roarchik Super-Matrix. No positive identification made as yet but case is pending.* No ship is going to take on a crewman with a tab like that."

"But it wasn't proved. I *am not* an android!" The man watched him nervously, apprehensive at the anger in Andros' voice. Running his hand around his rumpled collar, he watched for any sign of more violence from the ensign.

"That don't mean much. 'Case is pending' is the thing that counts. No captain is going to take you on. There are no Vats in ComFleet and, sonny, there ain't gonna be none, either; not now, not ever."

Andros' shoulders sagged. The Dean had been right. He had no future as an astrogator. "What can I do now?" he asked bitterly. "Run a cyborg ship? At least my brain's good, even though ConFleet doesn't want my body."

"Same problem." The cockroach was sniffing its way slowly out from under the mini-comp. The man watched it in eager anticipation. "You got an android head too, kid. Why don't you get a job here in the Assignment Center? They always need androids—maybe they'd let you astrogate a shuttlecart." He laughed, still watching his pet. Andros picked up the infotab slowly. The cockroach was now out from under the mini-comp, in full view. Bringing down the tab, Andros smashed the roach.

* * *

THE Assignment Center stairs were deserted as Andros walked back to his quarters. What to do now was the problem. Until he could prove he was human there would be no job with ComFleet open to him—ergo, he must prove he was human.

Mhalkeri, the planet that housed his father's android factories—and the planet where Andros had been born—seemed to be the best place to start. He had just enough credits for the jump, and a lot of time. *Even more time, if what they say is true—Father made his androids to last!*

CHAPTER TWO

Both of Mhalkeri's moons were up. The light distorted the shadows of the bushes on the hillside, making it difficult to tell where the bush began and the shadow left off. Below him, the factories were brilliantly lit, with the main tower sporting letters seven meters high which blinked on and off. A village and some scattered farms dotted the hillsides, and several kilometers away the city of Bleydeaux gleamed in the moonlight.

Andros knelt hip deep behind a clump of the puli grass that covered the hillside as he scanned the landscape through infraglasses, planning a clandestine visit to the Roarchik Complex. He saw nothing moving in the vast area below him—no shuttlecarts carrying shipping crates, no sign of any activity at all. When he was a boy, Roarchik's had worked around the clock, shipping out orders as fast as they could be filled. Now the place seemed dead. *As dead as my father . . . what a fitting tomb for him.* But the lights were on and he could see the laser scanner rotating on the central tower, covering the Complex. There were more than the four guard towers he remembered on the perimeter; Andros wondered whether his father or the Confederation had installed the new additions. They, too, looked armed with laser equipment. The factory had been turned into a fortress.

Andros shifted his weight, and a stinging pain in his thigh reminded him just how sharp puli grass could be. He pulled away from the blades digging into his dark trimslax, and cut his arm on another clump of the grass. Andros was beginning to feel like a fool.

It had all seemed so simple. He had been born in that Complex, knew

his father's plant layout (well, almost knew it), and it would be so very simple to use his Academy training to infiltrate the factory, get to his father's offices and search the records pertaining to his birth. But what had seemed so easy on the long flight out from Aldoria, where the Academy was located, to Mhalikeri was now just so much childish dream-stuff. The Confederation had already been through all the files with a fine-tooth cube reader and had found nothing to prove him human or android—just those cryptic notes damning him to a life of being nothing at all.

The Confederation had confiscated the Complex until Andros' origins were determined. He'd received no reports, had not even had a say in picking the man who now ran Roarchik's. *Nothing's changed, except my father's not there any more—that and all the androids are marked...* Andros brushed absentmindedly at his own cheek.

There was the factory and here he was, sitting on a damp hillside, getting his clothes cut to rags and finding reality even colder than the night air around him. He had been stupid enough to believe he could break into a Complex he had not seen for several years, find something the Confederation might have overlooked, and get out, all without being caught. *You blind little sleam cub! Even when you had the chance you didn't care which building was which. Always wanting to play the hero, solve things the easy way—Roarchik, you are a real piece of sleam slime!*

Hopelessly, he studied the layout of the Complex. There were the central offices close to the main gate; behind them were the chemical labs, then the V.A.T. buildings—no, those were the assistant trainee quarters, only there were no more assistant trainees, were there? Somewhere back in the middle of the Complex were the android teaching facilities for the new Vats. His father's office had been in that building—maybe. Andros got slowly to his feet, avoiding as much of the puli as possible. He couldn't even be sure the offices were in the same place now.

The large glowing letters on the central tower which spelled out his father's name as they blinked on and off seemed to be winking at him. Mockingly the word "Roarchik, Roarchik" danced in front of his eyes. *You, Roarchik, this is your birthright and you can't even claim it!*

Andros slapped his thigh in exasperation at his own folly. It stung—he'd hit the cuts made by the puli. The pain was one more indication of his own stupidity. The Confederation had not *yet* proved he was an android.

Therefore, he was the rightful owner of all he could see below him. The Confederation could, by law, only hold Roarchik's in trust until Andros' legal status was established. *But he was Roarchik!* His father's will named him as only heir, so all he would have to do was walk up to those massive gates and say, "I am Andros Roarchik!" and they would open for him. Or, if they did not, then it was back to the puli grass and acting like a fool.

Andros laughed and walked down the hillside, swinging his infraglasses by their strap. Androids could own nothing, but his father had made a will naming him owner of Roarchik's. Didn't that prove he was human? Tonight he could rest in the room he'd rented in the visitor's center at the Space Port, and he would sleep well. Tomorrow would be time enough to challenge the Gates of Roarchik.

* * *

THE Roarchik Complex was even more impressive from the gate's of the shuttle station than it had been from the hills the night before. The sun beat down on the unshielded platform as Andros climbed out of the high-speed bubble that had brought him out from the port. The familiar ache in his neck reminded him how important it was that his mission here prove successful. He turned and glared at the GEM shuttlecart. Whoever designed those pitiful excuses for transportation didn't have humans in mind at the time. The shuttles ran on a cushion of air and could reach speeds of three hundred and fifty kilometers an hour—if the person inside could stand the buffeting he'd receive at that speed. *Give me a starship any day, I'm no groundhog!* All the padding and comforts possible would not have made the shuttles acceptable to Andros. They were too much a symbol of his failure at the Crew Assignment Center. He turned his back on the shuttlecart as he stepped off the platform and walked toward the guardbox beside the gates of the android Complex.

Those gates loomed ten meters over Andros' head dwarfing him as he walked up to the guard station. Overhead, past the gates, he could see the central tower inscribed with the magic charm, the name ROARCHIK.

"I am Roarchik, I am Roarchik." Andros muttered the name over and over, hoping its magic would work for him.

The guardbox was a dull black cube with a viewscreen set at face level on one side. A panel below the screen instructed him to voice-activate the station by requesting the presence of a guard while pressing both hands

against the bottom of the screen for fingerprint identification. "I wish to speak to a Roarchik guard," Andros said, following instructions carefully.

The screen activated and the face of a Matrix-Three android appeared. His facial tattoo proclaimed him the property of Roarchik's, Inc. "You have an appointment?" he asked Andros, his voice coming from a loudspeaker at the top of the cube.

"No. I don't need one. I'm Roarchik," Andros answered in as firm a voice as he could muster. The sight of the facial tattoos was disturbing. He wondered how soon he, too, would be forced to wear the double helix of Roarchik on his face.

"No, not Roarchik. Roarchik dead. Do you have appointment?"

"I'm Andros Roarchik, and I want to see whoever is in charge here." He rummaged through his mind trying to remember the name of the man he'd been told would be managing the company while it was in trust. *Was it Fitzroy? Fitzgerald? No, Fitzsimmons!* "I want to speak to Master Fitzsimmons. Tell him Andros Roarchik is here."

The android blinked, unsure of the proper procedures for transmitting such a request. "Appointment" or "no appointment" were the only two things he'd been taught to respond to. These alone governed the coming and going of anyone through these gates. But the name "Roarchik" was a powerful one and must be obeyed. "I will ask for instructions. You will wait." The android switched off the viewscreen.

Andros waited for five minutes, the hot sun beating unpleasantly down on his heavy black tunic and trimslax. *I'm still a fool... looks like it's back to the puli...*

"You will enter, please." The viewscreen had been activated and the android was nodding benevolently at him. "You are to please come in. Master Fitzsimmons welcomes you, Master Roarchik."

The gates slid noiselessly open, and as Andros walked through them he could see a brightly painted shuttlecart floating toward him from one of the buildings.

Much to Andros' surprise, the driver of the shuttle was not an android, but a young man of about his own age, dressed in a tan Roarchik uniform

with the double helix over his heart. "I'm Tav Fressli, Master Fitzsimmons' secretary, Master Roarchik. We're so glad you decided to come out to the Complex."

Fressli had a quick, sharp smile which, along with his rust brown hair, reminded Andros of a sand-fox. His face was sharp and clever, his teeth a bit too white, and there was a cold glitter to his "greenish eyes. Andros was not at all sure he liked him.

"We've been hoping you'd turn up," continued Fressli. "Master Fitzsimmons is only in temporary control, you know, until your own ownership is properly accredited." Something in Fressli's voice made Andros doubt just how deeply this man wanted him to be proved the real owner of Roarchik's.

"I'll be glad to go along with any of Master Fitzsimmons' decisions while he's in charge." Andros leaned back in the padded shuttle seat. Fressli drove the vehicle at what was to Andros a reasonable speed—slowly. "Frankly, I don't know too much about android production, and I assume, since the Confederation put Master Fitzsimmons in charge, he must be fairly knowledgeable in the field."

"One of the best," Fressli beamed. "Not that he worked under your father, you understand. Master Fitzsimmons was in control of android processing at one of the Confederation reprogramming schools, but he does know androids. I think the Confederation did try to find someone from Roarchik's, but your father had allowed only androids to assist him in his last few years. Except for a doctor or two there is no one who can tell us much about his methods for producing his Super-Matrix androids. We were hoping you might be of some help..."

"I'm sorry, I was too busy studying to become an astrogator to pay much attention to Father's work." Andros realized how stupid he must sound to the secretary, so he quickly added, "My father didn't seem too eager to share information with anyone, so my not knowing much about androids isn't *entirely* my fault."

"Yes, we've found him to have been quite secretive, and most of the androids who were helping him at the last are dead. Ah, here we are. I hope you won't mind; Master Fitzsimmons has taken over the use of your father's main offices—he is still trying to uncover more information from the doctor's files."

"Has he found anything new about me?" Andros asked eagerly.

The secretary paused, as though unsure how to answer the question. "I think," he said slowly, "we had better leave that matter up to Master Fitzsimmons to explain." The shuttlecart had come to a halt outside a building Andros recognized from his observations of the night before. Fressli had taken him along a very circuitous route from the gates to the offices. Andros wondered why. How much of their talk had been beamed into the main offices?

"Would you care to follow me?" Fressli said, smoothly opening Andros' door for him with a slightly mocking bow—or was that only Andros' imagination? He felt very uneasy about his meeting with Master Fitzsimmons.

Fitzsimmons kept his offices considerably tidier than Andros could remember his father doing. There were no heaps of infocubes stacked in odd corners, no beakers of smelly fluids standing on top of any available surface, and the massive burlwood desk was clear of papers, with nothing but a built-in viewscreen set into the surface and a combination incom unit and cube scanner sitting on one corner.

The man in the custom-fitted uniform behind the desk was also unlike Dr. Roarchik. As Andros was introduced to him by Fressli, he was reminded of nothing so much as a sleain. Fitzsimmons had the same bearlike face, snoutish nose, dark beard and bulky, furred body of a marauding carnivore. He was very much a contrast to the tall and slender Dr. Roarchik Andros remembered.

"Welcome, welcome, Master Roarchik!" boomed Fitzsimmons, shaking Andros' hand with a ponderous grip and leading him to a chair. "We've been waiting for you ever since we heard you'd finished school."

Andros stiffened. Was this man insinuating he had known Andros would not get an astrogator's position? Or was he thinking he should have shown more interest in the factories? Andros' tinge of paranoia, picked up during his last weeks of school, was becoming a full-grown habit.

"When I heard the Confederation had appointed a trustee for Roarchik's, I was confident their decision would be for the best, but I was surprised to find out just now that you hadn't worked for my father. Couldn't they find any of his old staff?" Fitzsimmons scowled, and Andros

saw he had committed a *faux pas*.

"Too much of that *staff* turned out to be unmarked androids. A lot of them were killed in the uprising, and," Fitzsimmons paused to stare fixedly at Andros' cheeks, "we're still looking for the rest of his unmarked hell-spawn."

"I meant no criticism of you, Master Fitzsimmons, but I had remembered some of the staff members I had known as a child, and I thought...."

"Ha!" Fitzsimmons glared at the young man. "And did you know how many of them were really androids? Of course you didn't. Your father systematically filled this place with pseudo-humans to such an extent that no one who ever worked for him could be acceptable to the Confederation. *You* know how hard it is to tell a Super-Matrix from a human—or you should by now."

"Yes sir. I know so little about the field that I'm in no position to question your competence." Fitzsimmons was making Andros very edgy. His bluff welcome barely hid the cold antagonism this man had for him. Andros knew he would have to move a little more carefully with this man if he was to find out anything about his own birth that would be helpful to him, rather than to Fitzsimmons.

"Did you find anything about the Super-Matrices in my father's records to help you? I know a little about his filing procedures..."

"Do you know his codes?" Fitzsimmons leaped on Andros' remark. He rose halfway out of his seat, gripping the edge of the desk with his large, hairy hands.

"Codes? I'm not sure what you mean. He kept his DNA and RNA records in a very straightforward manner, I thought."

"No, not his genetic codes." Fitzsimmons returned to his seat. "Dr. Roarchik kept the last few years of his work in a code form. He left no indication of its meaning with anyone—that is, anyone we could find."

"Oh, I'll take a look at it if you like." Andros snatched at a small hope. His father had told him nothing about his work, but if he saw the code he might be able to recognize it. "I remember," he said aloud, "when I was a

child, the corpsmen used to play games with me involving codes; they were tests my father devised, I was told."

"That might be of help. I'll have you shown..."

The office door dilated, and two technicians in pale green lab coats rushed into the room carrying stacks of multicolored infocubes. One of them got his coat caught in the closing door and dropped a part of his stack of cubes. Andros watched the little man with some amusement, while the other tech ran to Fitzsimmons' desk, spilling cubes all over the pristine surface.

"The test runs on the last batch of Threes were fantastic!" The man at the desk looked around for his companion, and motioned him over to the desk. "This will please you no end—we can up the I.Q. without changing the basic passivity in the least."

"Fine, fine, Lyle. I'll talk to you in just a minute." Fitzsimmons nodded in the direction of Andros, and the technician, realizing there was a stranger in the room, shut up as abruptly as a clockwork toy.

"Fressli," Fitzsimmons turned to the secretary, "why don't you find a guide for young Roarchik? Someone to show him around the factory and give him some idea of what *we* do here." He paused a moment, his sleam eyes narrowing. "Get Miranda for me, she knows the place better than any of us. And," he said, smiling at Andros, "she's young, pretty and willing. You should enjoy yourself while you're here."

Fressli scooted out of the room in a hurry; Andros wondered why he couldn't simply call for this Miranda over the intercom system.

"But about those files..." They were possibly more important than a factory tour. He might find something in the code about himself that the Confederation had missed.

"Don't worry about it for now, there's plenty of time for you to see them. Look the plant over, refamiliarize yourself, have fun with Miranda, and then we can get to the files." Fitzsimmons' broad grin was anything but consoling. Andros didn't trust this man as far as a jetless shuttle could fly.

Why had Fitzsimmons changed his mind so abruptly about his looking

at the files? What was it the tech had said? Something about changing the Threes? They were perfect for their jobs as they were, why change them? Andros began to wish he'd spent more time with his father and learned a great deal more about androids.

Fitzsimmons opened a desk drawer. "I have a few of our new brochures here, you might like to glance at them. There's some copy on how we are still carrying on your father's work of improving the android product." He looked hard at the technicians standing at his desk, daring either of them to say anything, then he stood up and came over to Andros.

Andros started to rise from his chair; military training was still fresh enough for him to stand at the approach of an older man.

"No, stay comfortable," Fitzsimmons laughed, slapping him on the shoulder with a bit more force than seemed necessary. "I'm not one of your ComFleet brasshats. You might as well rest until Fressli and Miranda get here. You'll have more than enough to do with that girl around! She'll want to show you everything—regular guidebook on the subject of androids, she is."

Andros nodded, sinking back into the posture-curved chair which snuggled around him in a friendly hug. His shoulder still stung from the weight of Fitzsimmons' hand.

"Oh, I should have introduced you to Dr. Lyle Malic and Dr. Ian Tegriss." He motioned the two techmen over to Andros' chair. "Both of these gentlemen are trying to keep up your father's fine work. Gentlemen, this is Andros Roarchik." Andros shook hands with the two men, both of whom seemed distinctly upset about meeting him.

"I think we'd better be getting back to the labs," Malic said quickly. "There's so much to do, you know, so very much." He slipped crabwise toward the door, watching Fitzsimmons' face for clues on how to act in front of Andros.

"Oh yes," added Tegriss. "I don't know how your father handled so much of it himself. It's just work, work, work, all the time." Malic took his assistant by one arm and almost propelled him out of the room. Tegriss' coat caught again as he went out the door.

"Fine fellows, both of them!" boomed Fitzsimmons, loudly enough for

the departing scientists to have heard him. "They do all the real work around here. I'm just an administrator, really."

"Oh? Fressli said you were one of the best men in the android field, so I thought you would be in on the technical details...."

"Fressli! Hero worship, you know. He worked with me before and I brought him along thinking he would be useful. It's nice to have at least one familiar face in a new office, don't you think?"

"But your work for the Confederation has surely been more than just administration." Andros was not about to let go of this particular bone. "Roarchik's needed someone who understood all aspects of the android field."

"There you go, worrying about my qualifications again." Fitzsimmons waved a beefy finger at him playfully. "I admit I have done a bit of research, but not a microtab compared to your father—I don't fly my own flag, Roarchik. I let my work speak for me. And the records will show that there has been improvement all down the line here at the Complex. We are getting things done."

Fressli's return saved Andros the trouble of an answer. The girl with him was indeed a beauty—tall, red-haired, and with skin like the Milky Way for splendor. Andros would have found her very desirable except for one thing: under her green malachite eyes were the unmistakable marks of a Matrix-One android and the double helix proving she was owned by Roarchik's. She stood at the doorway watching him, her hands stuffed into the pockets of her pale green lab coat.

"Oh yes, Miranda. This is young Roarchik. We'd been hoping he'd come to see us. Now we want to give him a tour of the plant and answer any questions he may have," Fitzsimmons said as she advanced toward his desk. She stopped in front of Andros' chair and faced him.

Andros stared up at the female in bewilderment. He had not been expecting an android as a guide, and Fitzsimmons had been giving her instructions as though she were a Three or a Four instead of the Matrix-One her tattoos indicated. He nodded at her, got up from his seat and started for the door, assuming that, like any well-trained android, she would follow him.

"I am sure I can give you a very comprehensive tour of the Complex, Master Roarchik. And since there will be so much you will not be able to understand, I will make my explanations as simple as possible."

Andros wheeled around in shock. Never in his life had a Roarchik android spoken to him in so disrespectful a manner. "I am a Roarchik, Matrix-One," he said coldly. "There is very little that you need to simplify for me!"

"Now, now." Fitzsimmons patted Miranda's well-curved bottom. "There's no need to get touchy, Roarchik. I'm afraid you'll find the androids have changed quite a bit since your father tried to liberate them. We have been working on reprogramming, though." He again patted Miranda, this time with a bit more power behind it. "Don't let Miranda upset you; I'm sure you'll be able to teach her better manners quite quickly." He looked at the android, who shrugged and walked across the room to join Andros.

"Oh, and Miranda, my dear, be a bit nicer to young Roarchik. Remember, if he proves he's human, he might be your next boss."

As soon as the door closed behind Andros and Miranda, Fitzsimmons turned on Fressli. "I thought I made it clear I wanted her to be nice to him. Malic about blew the whole rig by barging in here, and I wanted that young fool distracted and out of my hair. What did you say to Miranda to get her back-fur up?"

"Nothing, sir. I told her that Roarchik was here, and that you wanted her to give him the grand tour, ending, of course, in her room. She's done it before for snoops from the Confederation so I can't see what difference Roarchik makes."

"Did she say anything? Give any reason for this?"

"No. I don't know what's gotten into her lately. She's not nearly so cooperative with the factory work and," he added in an aggrieved tone, "not nearly so much fun in other ways, either."

"I know." Fitzsimmons stalked across the office, slamming one meaty paw into another. "I think our little Miranda is about ready for the scrap pile. She has too much information on how this place is being run to suit me."

"But she's the best of old Roarchik's androids we've got. She wasn't too happy about having to be branded as a One, but she's still doing a good job sorting out the files."

"And giving everything she finds to Mathler! I don't trust her. I've never trusted the Super-Matrices. I suspect she's into a lot more than we think. Malic saw her having lunch with One-Drina in Bleydeaux yesterday."

"Then she *may* lead us to more of the Supers..."

"She can pass on everything she knows, and if the Confederation gets downwind of us—well, it wouldn't be too great for anyone working for Roarchik's. I'll give her a few days more and watch her with young Roarchik. If she takes him to meet any Supers, we have the whole netful." Fitzsimmons leaned against his desk, a sleam-smile fanging his mouth. "Yes, she might be useful. I put a short-range bleeper on the kid when I slapped him on the shoulder. It's sitting there under his skin waiting to show us just where Miranda may lead him. All we have to do is follow the beeps and hope they lead us where we want to go."

"Are you sure she'll take him to the Super-Matrices? She's been watched before and been clean as a new Vat." Fressli glanced at the door. "She sure didn't seem to like him very much when they left."

"Oh, she'll take him to them, all right. His name's Roarchik, isn't it?"

CHAPTER THREE

The android followed Andros out into the hall. "Look," he said, turning to face her, "my father demanded, and got, a certain amount of respect from an android, and I expect the same from you, is that clear?"

"Yes, Master Roarchik." The android lifted one perfectly curved eyebrow. "But your father did relax regulations for those of us who were his assistants."

"You are an android, I am a human—well, at least until the Confederation proves otherwise. So I expect you to treat me properly as a human."

"Yes, sir! Now, shall we begin the tour with the research labs? I think

you will find some of the work done there interesting—and," she added with a shade too much blandness, "there are several human technicians. You will feel much more at ease with them."

Miranda was annoyed at herself for- showing her irritation back in Fitzsimmons' office. The man had talked to her like a stupid Three, and Fressli's treatment had also irked her. The secretary had rushed into her office at a dead run, gabbling out some story about Dr. Roarchik's son being at the Complex and Fitzsimmons' wanting him V.I.P.ed around the plant.

Miranda had been working on the Roarchik files at the time and felt she was close to a breakthrough on one part of the code. Fitzsimmons' casual use of her as a guide-girl was wearing thin, especially when Fressli made it clear how little of the plant and how much of herself she was expected to show young Roarchik. She hated that part of her job, but did it for the Cause. There was always the chance a visitor might remember the charming android he had spent a night with when it came time to vote on any bill for easing abuses in android conditions. She had hoped her usefulness with the files would end such treatment, yet here was one more assault on her dignity as a person. Still, this was Roarchik's son. He might be able to do more for the androids than anyone else if he would. *If he's anything like his father, we can do something...*

He was not his father. His attitude while being shown around the lab proved that. He was frankly bored, even stifling a yawn at some of the more technical descriptions. She gave him the standard rundown on synthetic proteins, beginning with Urey's work on artificial amino acids built around ammonia molecules. She explained how clusters of organic molecules were formed spontaneously in the lab by mixing different synthetic proteins together, and how the resulting mass was formed into chromosome-bearing cells. Two such batches of cells were necessary. One batch had Y and X chromosomes, the other exclusively X. Each batch carried twenty-three chromosome pairs per cell. After forced meiosis the cells formed gametes and were then cloned to produce any desired number of parent cells. The cells were united as in human fertilization, with the resulting billions of possible genetic link-ups producing each time a unique individual.

"Each group of Threes, you see, is related to every other group of Threes by the use of the same basic gene pool. It's as if they all have the same

parents, with the same sort of resemblance possible in a normal nuclear family. The only difference is that we control the percentage of males and females per group, depending on demand, by adjusting the ratio of X to Y chromosomes. We could have made them all exactly alike, but it would be too confusing, both for the new owners and for the androids themselves. Dr. Roarchik felt that individual identity was an important factor in the superiority of his product. Are you getting any of this?" Miranda asked.

Andros' eyes were glazed, and he really didn't seem to care about any of it.

Dr. Malic was upset by their continued presence in his lab. He and Tegriss were both scurrying around the room trying to cover up some of the research work. In Miranda's opinion they were wasting their time. Young Roarchik couldn't have cared less about the changes Malic and Tegriss were making in the standard android formulas. She led the way out of the lab and into the hallway leading to the chemical storage warehouses.

"I know you will not be able to get this quickly, but after you've been here awhile it will be easier to find your way around. And," she added pointedly, "you will not need a guide. This is the building coding system." She tapped a large plastic sheet on the wall. "As you can see, the hallways are marked with colored lines which lead to the various areas. The charts are coded to those colors and can direct you wherever you wish to go. Once you get the color codes memorized, it's really quite simple—sir." If a little meekness would get Roarchik's son to help the androids, well then, meekness he would get.

"I don't think I'll have to worry about that." Andros barely glanced at the chart. "I don't intend to stay here very long. I'm going to let Master Fitzsimmons continue running the Complex. He's not exactly the sort of person I would have picked, but I'm sure the Confederation knew what it was doing when it put him in charge. After all, he knows more about androids than I ever will."

"Or ever want to!" Miranda flared, all meekness forgotten. "Do you seriously intend to let someone other than a Roarchik run the Complex?"

"I don't want anything to do with it. I'm a trained astrogator, and I don't want to waste that training. Anyone," he said, looking down at the colored stripes on the floor, "who wishes can follow in my sainted father's

footsteps—even to his death if that's what they want. But don't expect that of me."

You stupid fool! Miranda wanted to scream at him, but that would not help. Only by showing him what Roarchik's was now—and might be in the future unless someone cared—could she hope to interest him in saving his father's cause. Something in all this must be made to matter to Roarchik's son, and Miranda did not know what that might be.

"Well, like it or not, bored or not," she said, "I have been instructed to give you a complete tour of the Complex. And a Roarchik android obeys all orders, sir!" She turned smartly on her heels and marched down the hallway, listening for the sound of Andros following her.

He said very little as Miranda continued their tour in the Chemical Storage Warehouse. The CSW contained the tanks holding the raw materials for the synthetic DNA proteins and the equipment for their manufacture. The various rooms were so overpowering in size that Miranda's voice was as lost as the squeak of a mouse among the huge tanks. Burnished durasteel domes rose ten meters over their heads; rows of thick, transparent pipeline filtered the light coming from the skyways. The chemicals in the pipes cast brilliantly colored rainbows across the room and gave an unnatural glow to Miranda's face as she explained the construction of the DNA chains, polypeptides, the complexities of creating synthetic proteins, and how the nutrient fluids were made. She wondered why she was bothering; Andros was paying more attention to the construction of the valves on the tanks than to anything she said.

The main room hummed with the sound of pumping machinery. Fluids sloshed in their tanks and were sucked up into the rows of pipes which led to other rooms, other processes. The room smelled of acid and machine oil.

"This looks like a winery," said Andros at last. "Only from what I hear, what comes out the other end is a lot more explosive than champagne."

"Are you referring to our famous android insurrection? Soda pop would be a closer analogy. It didn't even deserve the title 'revolution.' It took place in one small sector of an unimportant city on an insignificant planet, and was over in one day. And yet the Confederation acts as if a major war were fought here." Miranda leaned against a railing and faced him. This was the first time she had really taken a close look at the man who was

now Roarchik. *Bron will hate him*, was her first thought. But finding a close resemblance in him to someone she knew made her warm a little to him. Perhaps the poor thing really was an android; what a blow for him, she realized.

Dr. Roarchik had said very little about his son to her, and none of that had been complimentary. He'd been deeply hurt by Andros' lack of interest in the androids, and would never have understood that it was his own attitudes and neglect of Andros that had led to the lack of interest.

Miranda had, like most of Dr. Roarchik's assistants, thought of Andros as some sort of space-happy clown. She was beginning to understand that he, too, had his obsessions, and that they must be changed. And *she* had to do it.

Andros was watching the fluids in the pipes bubble and churn as they traveled across the room. She wondered what he was thinking. Probably how soon the tour would be over.

Poor boy, she thought. But this was no boy across from her. True, he was lanky and seemed all elbows and knees—but so had Dr. Roarchik. There was a thoroughbred sort of gangle to these Roarchiks; all muscle, nerve and power. He could be as impressive as his father if he chose. His dark eyes were intense, keen and intelligent. Fitzsimmons would be in for a big surprise if this man could be made to care about the androids as much as Dr. Roarchik had.

"Your father loved his work," she said to break the silence between them. "He loved the androids very much. It was so important to him that they be free; they were his children."

Andros recoiled, and Miranda remembered, too late, his disputed birth.

"Father spent all his time here with these tanks and chemicals. I don't think he knew anything about people and how they feel about androids. In the rest of the Confederation androids are things, not people. There was no chance the Confederation would grant freedom to something that was not even recognized as self-responsible. Besides, freedom for androids would have deprived the Confederation of a cheap labor source."

"But android labor is slavery!"

"And advantageous. Rights mean very little when credits are involved. If Father had paid more attention to economics he would have known the Confederation wouldn't pay for android freedom. The price was too high."

"The price your father paid was high, too!"

"Stupidity has always been expensive, even when there's so much of it."

"Well, your precious Confederation can relax a bit. There will be no more problems with Roarchik androids, not while Fitzsimmons is running this place."

"Good. That's why the Confederation put him in charge."

Miranda was breathing hard. Why was she wasting so much time and energy on this self-centered prig? He wasn't going to help her or any other android; Fitzsimmons had gotten to him first. "You can't expect much in the way of fighting from Threes and Fours—but then you don't expect much of any android, do you?"

"Matrix-One, you have forgotten that unless I can prove I am a human, I'm in the same mold as you are. And with my luck they're likely to brand me a Four."

"Oh, not a Four," she said sweetly. "With a little training you might make a passable Three. You should fit in nicely with all the other Threes that are now the exclusive product of Roarchik's."

"I'm so glad you were programmed with a sense of humor." Andros paused, letting the rest of her comment sink in. "Making only Threes? But our superiority in the android market is based on the excellence of the Matrix-One and -Two...."

"Fitzsimmons doesn't want superiority, just seniority." Miranda looked at the tanks around her. "Such a waste, all this going for the making of high-class morons, while you astrogate your life away. I bet your father would really be proud of you, and of Roarchik's."

"Enough about the astrogating. Why was my father the only Roarchik allowed to dream? If Father had left things in any kind of order I wouldn't have to be here on this useless tour. You haven't been all that helpful, you know."

"But things are in order, O Darling of Space. Fitzsimmons is running this plant in perfect order and turning out nothing but Threes and a group or two of Fours."

"Why? Stop beating the subject to death and tell , my why."

"Class Three Matrices don't ask for freedom. They do what they are told to do, nothing more. Which is why they're all Fitzsimmons is making. And since you seem to be playing right along with him, I think Roarchik's days as a first-class android factory are limited."

"*I'm* working for Fitzsimmons? What about all the fanny patting you two were doing in his office? Are you trying to tell me you don't play it the company way? Fitzsimmons made it quite clear what you are." Andros glared at her, and she felt as though he were stripping her in public and wasn't too interested in buying what he saw. "Is Fitzsimmons' brand on your body, or did Fressli get there first?" The cold contempt in his voice hit hard. She hated what had been necessary for her to do to stay alive.

Miranda turned her back on him, gripping the railing until her knuckles turned white. "I am one of the few Super-Matrices left. The rest have been killed or are in hiding. I wanted to live—I saw my friends die, and a laser bolt isn't a pleasant way to go." She turned to face him. "I've done many things I'm ashamed of, but I could do nothing for my people if I were dead. And as for you—you fake! You'll be lucky if Fitzsimmons lets you out of here alive." She almost hoped Fitzsimmons would kill him—that would put an end to his smug superiority.

"He'll find I'm not that easy to kill. It's been tried before and didn't work. Now, if you're through playing 'confession,' you can give me the situation straight. Why should I believe you're a Super? Your face says Matrix-One."

"It was one of the conditions for staying alive. Fitzsimmons could have made me a Four, but since I do a lot of his office work it would have caused some confusion. I am a Super. You'll have to accept that. There isn't any easy way to prove it."

"You could start by telling me the truth about Roarchik's. I'm not some dumb kid Fitzsimmons can pat on the head and tell to run along and enjoy himself. I'm tired of being treated like a fool by him or anyone else. And that particularly includes you. I don't care why you don't like me, or what

your gripe is, but if you think I'm going to take any more lip from a plastic doll who thinks she's a Super, you'd better think again. Now, are you going to answer my questions, or do I go looking for some of those Supers you say are in hiding around here?"

"You wouldn't be able to find them in a millennium. Fitzsimmons couldn't; why do you think you're any different?"

"Because I'm Roarchik, and you've made it very clear how important that name is. I think if I went to Bleydeaux and let it be known I was looking for Father's Supers, I'd get results."

Miranda nodded her head reluctantly. The idea was a sound one. It could bring out the Sons of Vat or the Racers, too, but it might net him a Super. "Your game," she conceded. "What do you want to know?"

"Why is Fitzsimmons making only Threes and Fours? They're hardly more than robots."

"Correction: they're cheaper to make than a 'bot. Toss in the right chemicals, wait awhile, and presto, a Three just waiting to do your every command. Come on, we've covered all there is to see here. Let's try the baby racks, and I can explain as we go along."

Some of the pipes from the main room led into a room filled with rows of shelves. Smaller tubes led down from the main pipes and connected to racks on the shelves containing sac-like membranes, each one holding one liter of dark, murky fluid. There were at least two hundred sacs to a set of the ceiling-high shelves, and more rows of shelves than Andros could quickly count.

"Embryo chambers," explained Miranda. "This is where our DNA soup is tickled with chemicals and a drop of radiation to start the process of cell change and growth that begins an android. These sacs are like wombs, the pipes are a form of placenta. Any questions yet?"

"Yes, the radiation can be a problem—doesn't it change the basic gene pattern and give mutations?"

"Yes and no." Miranda was pleased he was beginning to show some interest. "Some mutation is useful and very natural. The human female is bombarded daily by low grade radiation from the sun alone, and some of

it does affect her unborn child. We watch for any true abnormalities, and the radiation is carefully controlled. Its primary purpose is to speed up the growth process. Remember, we turn out a fully-finished android in six months instead of twenty years like humans do."

"But a Roarchik android takes from one to two years..."

"Ah ha! But that's when you're turning out Matrices-One or -Two."

"But even a good quality Three..."

"Fitzsimmons is making more androids, and in less time, than your father ever dreamed of. Unfortunately, they are not quite as good a product as your father dreamed of, either."

"But that's not Roarchik's way of doing business. Other companies are turning out Ones and Twos, aren't they?"

"Yes, but they're being very careful about the indoctrination they're getting. 'Thou shalt not revolt' sort of garbage. Selfrige has even come up with a 'Three Laws of Androids' sort of thing about not harming any human. It may work on 'bots, but I wouldn't put too much trust in it with an angry android. There's also a rumor going the rounds that a few of the other companies are using Jugs as fake Ones and Twos. Nasty, if they get caught at it. Jugs have rights as humans, we don't."

"Would Fitzsimmons risk that?"

"No. His method is more likely to put Roarchik's into bankruptcy long before he could be sent to a correction colony." Miranda laughed bitterly. "I almost wish he was a little less careful..."

She walked down one row of the shelves, stopping at a womb sac. "Well, let me give you a rundown on embryo development. That's what we're here for, remember?"

Andros looked at the womb and drew back in surprise. It was filled with a clear red liquid and, floating in it, was an embryo with a definite body and arms and legs. The one next to it was even beginning to show signs of fingers and toes.

"After a month here, the embryos are transferred to the holding V.A.T.s

for full growth. They spend most of their development time there—Vats, you know." Miranda tried for a feeble joke. The sight of the developing infants was upsetting to her; it brought back too many unpleasant memories of things that happened when Fitzsimmons first came to Roarchik's. She looked at Andros and found that he, too, seemed upset by the rows of twitching wombs.

"The embryos are causing that motion," she said. "They're starting to kick just as if they were inside a real womb."

Andros was staring at the babies, studying their enlarged heads, oddly curved backs and tiny webbed hands and feet. "Do they always look like that?" He touched the side of a womb and pulled his hand back quickly. "It's warm!" he exclaimed.

"Naturally. Thirty-seven Celsius to be exact, the same temperature as in a mother's womb. I wish we did have some Jugs here, then I could prove how similar an android is to a human. Haven't you ever seen a foetus before?"

"No; biology wasn't one of my majors, and I never came here as a child. I knew that babies—real babies—looked like this, but I had always thought of androids as being bigger, somehow."

"Oh, they are. Wait until the next part of the tour—you'll see how we make ones like this turn into Vats. Large ones, some of them, particularly the construction models."

"Father never brought me here at all when I was a child, and then later when I could have come by myself—would you think I was crazy if I told you I was jealous of these bits of flesh? I was. I hated them for taking Father away from me." Andros stroked the side of a womb. The baby inside reacted by kicking out at him. He laughed and moved his hand to another side of the sac. The baby kicked again.

"That's why I wanted to get away." He was speaking more to the foetus than to Miranda, moving his hand across the womb in some sort of communication with the creature inside. "I never wanted to see another android—yet, here I am. It's so odd."

"Well, you're going to see an awful lot of them in the next few hours, so you'd better prepare yourself." His comments had stung and Miranda

retaliated by lashing out at him. She felt badly about it almost as soon as it was out of her mouth.

Andros stuffed his hands in his pockets and glumly followed her into the main vatting room.

The floor of the room was covered with coffin-like containers two hundred and ninety centimeters long by ninety wide, and ninety centimeters deep. These were the Viable Android Tanks, or V.A.T.s. The growing android spent the greatest part of his early "life" in these tanks, hence the name *Vat* for an android.

"Now we take those membranes you saw in the embryo racks and fit them into their V.A.T.S. You can see the slots for the placental tubes here at the top of the tank," Miranda continued. "Then the tank is flooded with a special saline solution that dissolves the membranes; we hook up an intravenous feeding line and connect the wiring for the cortex programming. How long they're programmed depends on their final matrices, and also on what they're being programmed for. No use of teaching a Three appreciation of Bach. Then," she said, pointing to a tangle of pipes and wires at the foot of the V.A.T., "we give them cancer."

"Cancer!" Andros jumped. "But why? No one's had cancer for hundreds of years."

"Simple—it makes them grow. That and some thyroxin, mild radiation treatment and a lot of other technical messing about. It's controlled cancer. We're very careful about the quality of the cells produced. Don't look so shocked, it makes cells multiply like mad and, controlled, will bring an android to full size in about two months. Then we cure them."

"Or kill them. How can you control runaway cell growth like that? The risks are enormous."

"Cancer in the liver, lots of liver cells; cancer in the lungs, lots of lung cells. You must understand I'm making this sound a lot simpler than it really is. Each part of the body must grow at the same rate, or we'd be turning out some terrible monsters. But this is where your father's genius was at its peak. He worked all of this out while other companies were floundering on the fringes of practical android production. This and his use of the cloned DNA and RNA made him a leader in the field. His work on the trained RNA was nothing short of miraculous."

"Wait a minute, what trained RNA? I've never heard of that."

"Are you familiar with the flatworm work? Feeding trained flatworms to untrained ones and finding out the untrained worms knew the same things the other worms had known just from eating their RNA? You should know it, it's very old. A kindergarten trick for any geneticist."

"Yes, that was developed back in the dark ages. But what does it have to do with training RNA?"

Miranda was stooping beside one of the V.A.T.s, reading the coding on the progress tapes. "A Doctor Hyden first discovered that the RNA count was higher in a trained mouse than an untrained one. He also found that the chemical composition of the RNA was changed by the training. RNA is the locking mechanism for memory storage in the cerebral cortex, so if you can synthesize the RNA with preset training patterns you cut down on a lot of post-V.A.T. learning time. It speeds up the retention of ideas and improves retrieval processes in the brain. As a result, Ones can think faster than a normal human."

"And the Supers?"

"I wish your father had never thought of calling us that. He was so pleased at producing something so much like a human that he got carried away with his nomenclature. It give people exactly the wrong idea about what a Super is. We're no smarter than a One—in some cases not as smart. What we are is the closest thing possible to a real human. Most of the improvements in android efficiency weren't even applied to us—like the changes in the RNA. We have to learn things the old way, just like a real child."

"That's silly. The time waste alone is considerable. If I were in charge of Roarchik's I wouldn't be messing around with Supers—sorry!" he added quickly, watching the storm clouds gather in Miranda's eyes. "Look," he said, changing the subject quickly, "why can't we clone a whole android rather than only the basic gene matter? I've heard that ComDroid is turning out clones as a standard procedure; no need for the individual identity problem, and it's quicker and less expensive, too."

"And what you get is mass-produced *things!* Then, too, there's the temptation to start with human tissue as your clone basis. Ty'chm of Nudroids is spending the rest of his life in a reconditioning center for

selling quote, humans, unquote. The Confederation hates fights about who's human and who isn't. That's why your father got their back-fur up so much by his 'Freedom for Androids' movement."

Andros looked down at the transparent-lidded tank at his feet. The figure inside was a nude male about full sized. There were no fingernails, no hair or eyebrows. Just a sad blankness to its face.

"Not very pretty, is it?" Miranda said. "Give that another day or so and it will be taken out of the V.A.T. and look quite presentable." She stared down at the floating body, watching it bob in its nest of wires and tubes. Androids didn't look very human at this point, she conceded. But wait until Roarchik got a look at what was coming next.

The Nursery was as much of a shock to Andros as Miranda had expected. The room was bright and airy. Cheerful murals decorated the walls, bright toys were scattered around the floor. And there were the androids, fresh from their V.A.T.s. Full-sized androids, naked except for diapers, crawling, creeping across the floor like monster infants.

Some were closer to a toddler stage, walking a few steps then falling down with the same infantlike stare of surprise that one would expect of a child. But these were not children. They averaged a hundred and eighty centimeters in height—or length, since most of them had not yet gained enough motor control to stand up.

"How long does this go on?" Andros whispered, his face gray.

"Only a day or so. They learn very quickly. The RNA and the V.A.T. programming take care of that. These Threes came out of the tanks this morning. See how red their cheeks are on the Matrix side? The tattoo hasn't had time to heal or the colors firm up yet."

"When do they get the other cheek done?" Andros bent and picked up a ball, then dropped it abruptly. It had been drooled on and was unpleasantly wet to the touch.

"When they're sold. Just before crating, in fact." One android had fallen over in his attempt to stand up and had landed painfully on his gluteus maximus. Andros shuddered at his screams.

"They're really doing very well for androids," Miranda continued. "But

by comparison with other animals they're slow. The bushlander can run at full speed ten minutes after birth, and the pukka rat comes out mean and ready to bite as soon as it hits the air. We've done quite a lot of programming in the tank, but it could use some speeding up. Your father was working on that before he got sidetracked into his Super program."

"Do all androids go through this?" Andros moved aside to avoid an android that was about to careen into his leg.

"No, for a Super it's worse. Look out, that one's going to grab your leg!"

The android was attempting to stand up by using Andros as a means of support. He pulled his leg free of the android's grasp and it fell over, staring up at him in wide-eyed wonder. The android smelled funny, and Andros turned away in disgust. "There's a nasty odor in here; what is it?"

"Sorry about that. You haven't been around babies much, have you? We try to keep them clean, but with groups of a hundred and seventy-five at a time it's hard to diaper them all at once Don't worry though, they potty-train quickly."

"Can we go somewhere else? The smell..." He fanned the air in front of his face, which was of no help whatsoever. "I'm not used to it at all."

"Your father was working on a way to have them come out of the tanks already trained," Miranda said as she led the way out of the Nursery. "They have an elimination system that is much more efficient than humans, or Supers. On the regular androids, One through Four, your father modified the alimentary canal to utilize almost all the nutrients in their diet and enable them to use less high quality foods. They can break down some hybrid grains and grasses our systems couldn't begin to touch. But one bad side effect is more ammonia as a byproduct. Dr. Malic is working on the problem, but he's nowhere near as capable as your father was. Tegrin is no help either; I think he's just around as a yesman to Malic."

"Why was he so afraid of me back there in the lab? He acted like I was going to discover something he didn't want me to find. Is it anything about my birth?"

Miranda stopped at a window set into the wall. "He's working on the clones I was telling you about," she said stiffly. She was mildly pleased that

Andros had noticed *something* in the lab—he had seemed so bored with it all. "Android clones with less potential than a Four, that's what Malic is making—oh, let's change the subject! Clones make me sick." Miranda leaned her head against the glass, her nose making a smear on the surface.

Andros peered into the room beyond the window; the chamber was full of androids, all clothed, practicing putting together a shuttlecart engine. "They're becoming quite normal," he said, watching the precision with which the androids worked.

"Yes, these are about ready to be shipped out to their new owners, a shuttlecart factory by the looks of the work. Poor things, how would you like to spend the rest of your life putting together shuttlecarts?"

"I'm sure they'll be very well treated," Andros said defensively. "A Roarchik android is an expensive tool and not something to be misused, unless the owner is a fool."

"But can't you see? What is to keep these androids from being sold to a fool? All Fitzsimmons asks for is a good stack of credits. The new owners can cut them up for sleam bait if they want. Your father would have done follow-ups on each company. He would have checked out the working conditions before even selling a Roarchik android. Each one was a person to him, even the Fours. Why can't you be like that? They need you so much."

He patted her shoulder gently. "Miranda, I saw them in the membranes, how real they were. I saw the V.A.T.s and what they can create. But I can't change anything. I can't make you or any other android into a real person."

Miranda pulled away from the window. Her forehead was white from the pressure, and she knew she'd failed. "This way. I have your father's records in my office." Her voice was flat with defeat. "They won't prove a thing, though. The Confederation, Fitzsimmons and I have been over them with everything short of a Telepath who can read infocubes, and there is no such animal. Nothing's there but a crazy note about your being the first of his new plan."

"But if I am an android I was the only one he let grow up normally. I know I was never in those tanks out there, and every Roarchik android has either blonde or red hair. I have neither. That should prove something."

"No, Andros. It proves nothing. Your father could have made androids with any color skin or hair possible in the universe. It's only because it's cheaper to keep the levels of phenylalaninase enzyme low that we are mostly light-skinned and have light hair. Some of the Supers are dark, a deep brown color. Your father was working on matching up most of the major races of the Confederation when he died."

Miranda reached out to touch Andros' dark hair. "I'm sorry you're not as special as you'd like to think. I never went any further than the womb membranes myself, no Super did. We were all raised like normal children. I've been out of the womb now for twenty-one years. That would be pretty old for an android, but I'm still considered young—hardly more than a child. Come on, the offices are right down this hall."

She led him into her cluttered office, a room like the one his father had spent so much time in. "Your father didn't begin the Super-Matrix program until a year after the first records on you," she said, guiding him to a chair and letting him sag into it. She leaned against her crowded desk. "There are tapes here of everything you ever did. Your father would play them by the hour, watching you so he would know how we should be. You were important for us, you helped make us. Surely you know that your father was so proud..."

"But not of *me*. NOT OF ME!" Andros banged his fist down hard on the arms of the chair, hitting the plastiwood again and again. "I am not an android, you see, this proves it. If I had been one of his things he would have loved me, too... he would have loved me..."

Miranda caught his hands in hers. "I want you to look at the records. They might be able to help you. I can't prove one way or the other whether you're human, Andros. But I think you are Dr. Roarchik's son. We were his children. That's what he called us. But you were his son, his Roarchik son! I can't offer you more than that. I'm sorry; maybe in time you will be proud that you are his son. I hope so, both for your sake and for his." *And for all androids. We need you, Andros*, she thought, but she said nothing of it aloud.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Yes, this looks very much like my father's brand of record-keeping." Andros looked up and down the floor-to-ceiling piles of infocube decks

containing his father's records. Boxes of papers littered the floor of the large room set aside for Miranda's herculean task—making sense of some forty years of Dr. Roarchik's work on androids. Infocubes were everywhere, as were folders, graphs, charts, loose papers, their edges yellowing with age—there was no end to it all.

"What kind of shape was this in before the Confederation started going through it?" Andros picked up a pink cube at random and looked for a viewer. He couldn't find one at first, and Miranda had to move a stack of folders to reveal the unit on her desk.

"It was worse." She glanced at the cube Andros was scanning. It wasn't anything of much importance—a list of reorders on chemicals dated three years before Andros was born. "Your father was a packjack. He never threw out anything, and he kept his files in no known order." Miranda shook her head in despair. "He even scrawled important notes on the backs of order forms and tossed them casually into a box."

"How have you been able to find anything, then?" Andros removed the cube he'd been looking at and started to put it down. Thinking it must have a place somewhere, he handed it to Miranda, who glanced at it and tossed it onto a heap in one corner of the room.

"Reject," she explained. "That whole pile of stuff is completely useless. Your father did date some things, and we know from the lab records when certain experiments were conducted, but as for most of this..." Miranda shrugged. "We go by guesswork, mainly. Did you know that he coded a lot of his work by the color of the cube he used from year to year?"

"Say! That sounds really clever. Did it help?" He looked again at the decks of infocubes and studied more closely the blocks of color formed by the patterns of the tinted cubes.

"Not really. He forgot to leave any list of what color he used in what year. Master Mathler, a friend of your father's, said that Roarchik probably bought whatever was cheapest that year. So we're working on that angle, but it hasn't gotten us too far, yet."

"Then how did the Confederation find the notes on me so quickly? I should have been a retired admiral before they sorted all this out."

"Now that's the really odd thing in all this. The set of records kept with

the most accuracy deal with you and the Super program. Everything you ever did in your life is recorded in the smallest detail. There's even write-ups about your activities at the Academy. That Cynthia girl must really have been a mind stunner, considering how much time you spent in her room overnight."

Andros turned fiery red. "Do you mean to tell me Father even kept track of...?"

"Yes sir! How often, where and with whom. All in those green infocubes over there." Miranda pointed to a wall-sized set of cube decks, all neatly numbered and filed. "Yours are the only green cubes—that's how I was able to find all of them in this mess. He must have gotten a special on that color the year you were born."

"At what point in my life do they begin?" Andros walked over to the wall, running a hand over the tops of the cubes, which were each three centimeters on a side. There were several thousand of them, all about him. "Is there anything about how I was born, my mother, anything?"

"No, the first entry is the 'Project Stork' one, nothing before that. And I was the one who did the numbering you see on the cubes, so if any earlier ones are missing I don't know about them. I can show you the first cube if you want, but there's nothing you haven't already seen on a stat." Miranda consulted a chart beside the wall rack and reached for a cube that, on the surface, looked no different than any of the others. Skirting the boxes of papers, she made her way back to the desk and fitted the cube into her reader. "Here, have a look."

Andros came over and looked down at the fine print on the viewscreen. "*Today marks the beginning of 'Project Stork.' I have produced the first and most important part of my experiment...*"

Andros read no further. The material was engraved on his brain. "This is it? No information on my conception? No reason for why he did this to me?"

"Nothing more than a complete record of every action, illness and body change you ever had. We do know he used this data to make the Super-Matrix possible. He spent twenty-three years gathering that stack of cubes, to the neglect of everything else in here." She waved a hand at the piles of untidy papers and uncoded cubes. "Your development was very

important to him."

"You mean the Supers were important. I was just your prototype," he said bitterly.

"We were always taught that you were a real child he was using to be sure we were developing as close to a human as possible. That is your best proof. Your father did need a model to be sure he was raising us correctly. No one has tried to make androids like us."

Andros turned off the viewer and returned the cube to its proper slot. "When did the Confederation find out Father was already raising full term androids instead of just something capable of breeding?" he asked.

"The Feds didn't know until Fitzsimmons moved in. They'd thought we were some sort of new Vat, and were surprised to learn we were as full term as a human. That sort of thing isn't financially feasible, and they couldn't figure out why Dr. Roarchik would bother with anything too expensive to sell. I don't think they really believed his insisting we were just like humans. It caused a lot of back-fur to fly when it got out, let me tell you."

"What happened to all the other Supers—the children who hadn't finished growing up?"

Miranda turned away, silent for a moment. "Fitzsimmons had them taken away. He rounded up every unmarked android he could find in the training centers and just took them away."

"But where did he... ?"

"We don't know for sure. He moved so fast. We were still licking our wounds from the dust-up and when we came to take the children away they were already gone. But he has killed every adult Super his guards have caught except me, and he destroyed all the ones still in the womb membranes. So I think you should be able to draw your own conclusions." Miranda's back was still to him and he could see her shoulders shaking. Andros knew she must be crying, and he felt utterly helpless.

"How... how many were there—the embryos?" He remembered the baby in its womb sac kicking against his hand. Alive—it had been so very alive.

"About five hundred in the wombs and," Miranda's voice came in choked gasps, "one thousand in the training schools."

Bile rose in Andros' throat. The image of smashed womb sacs dripping nutrient fluids, and tiny things wiggling in the open air, engulfed his mind.

"One thousand!" It was too many children to think of one by one. "Are you sure Fitzsimmons could have murdered one thousand android children?" Andros' mind lurched with the horror of it. Fitzsimmons might be able to destroy something like the embryos that was not yet a being, but children? He must have put them in a camp somewhere. He wanted to hide them from the Supers. Andros fastened on that as a means of quieting his mind. "Have you found anything to prove the children *are* dead? Fitzsimmons might have sent the information about them to the Confederation, and..."

"No such records have ever left this place. I know that. The Confederation knows nothing. I checked with Master Mathler in Bleydeaux. The little ones are simply gone—gone as if they never existed."

"Then Fitzsimmons moved them without Confederation approval. He couldn't have done that. He's only a caretaker. He can lose his position for less than that. Those children are valuable."

"And dead!" Miranda turned on him with a look of cold hatred in her eyes. "Don't you forget that when you leave here. The man you helped put in charge has murdered innocent children. Not androids, children!"

"I want him out of here." Andros strode around the room, kicking boxes out of his way. "I can do that much. Once I send in a report of what I've seen here, android or human, they'll have to listen to me. I'll do everything I can, Miranda, and if I am human there'll be some changes made around here. I won't allow another supervisor to be appointed without my checking his credentials first."

"Will you allow the Super-Matrix program to continue?" Miranda was fast regaining control of herself.

"Was there anything in my father's files about what he would do with the Supers once he perfected the matrix?"

"Well, he wanted to free us. But he got very paranoid after the Confederation refused to listen to him any more, and his records reflect his state of mind. Nothing makes very much sense. There's a lot of things in codes, some bits and pieces of a speech on equality and some notes on his more bizarre experiments. Did you know he was even planning a telepathic android?"

"Oh, the Confederation would have loved that! They had enough trouble over the question of telepathy in Jugs."

"Right. And think what an advantage it would give anyone organizing an android revolt if he knew exactly what the other side was up to? Dr. Roarchik was sure that if the process would work on a Jug it could be as effective in manipulations on androids. But as far as I can tell he never had the chance to put it into effect, unless..." She was gazing off into the distance, trying to recapture something—a memory?

"Unless?" Andros touched her, bringing her back from wherever her mind had been wandering.

"There was one group of ten Supers in the wombs, one of the last groups your father did. There might have been something special about them. He was watching them like a sleam at a churchka hole. They might have been telepathic, or something even stranger. He wrote that he wanted to try it out, and he did do a lot of odd experiments along the way. There were notes about making androids with four arms, or ones with gills. All sorts of manipulations can be done to a growing Vat to suit it for its job, and he was interested in adaptations. I don't know how many of them he might have tried. I do know of one or two. Dr. Roarchik was the sort of man who could create a monster and still see beauty in it if he felt it was an improvement on the android race."

"My father, the god," Andros said bitterly. "My life, yours, all of us—we were just part of his obsessions. That makes me feel very unreal!" Andros' proving his status as a human was even more important now. How could he get control over the Complex and be sure someone competent was in charge unless he could prove ownership and the right to pick whom he pleased? Who would take his word, or Miranda's, against Fitzsimmons'? He had to be a human—so much depended on it.

"What was in the rest of this mess that might be of help? Have you found *anything* at all?"

"Did you hear the story about Sextus Mirab, the literary historian on Hanson's World?" asked Miranda, letting a pile of red and yellow infocubes fall through her fingers onto the floor.

"No, but what does it have to do with Father's files?"

"Hanson's World," she explained, "is a colony planet, a Terran colony three generations removed. Dr. Mirab was worried that the colonists would forget their original culture and he wanted to help them keep it alive by understanding Terran literature, past and present."

"But what... ?" Andros cut in impatiently.

"Listen to me and I'll tell you, but don't interrupt. Mirab took an ancient poem that had been considered some kind of classic by the old ones of Terra, and spent thirty years of his life translating it into Comspeak. It was a very difficult piece of work, written in a language called 'English.' That does have a lot of Comspeak roots, so it should have been easy to translate, but it wasn't. He couldn't find cross references or definitions for many of the things or names mentioned in the poem. After thirty years of hard work, Dr. Mirab discovered from a colleague on a more up-to-date world that his 'Jabberwocky' was a bit of nursery doggerel that wasn't meant to be taken seriously. He killed himself out of shame."

Miranda glanced around the crowded file room. "I get the feeling I am working with your father's jabberwocky, and in the end I will kill myself when I find out that it has no meaning at all."

"Father was a rehab case, but not that far gone. Let me take a crack at it and see what I can discover. I may be able to figure out some of the codes. Father's tech crew was always giving me puzzles to solve, and some of them involved codes..."

Andros worked late into the night, with Miranda bringing him tea and some energy bars at intervals. He fell asleep over the cubes. His mind was a whirl of numbers, patterns of DNA chains, and mindnumbing quantities of words that made no sense at all.

* * *

IT was late morning, but Andros' eyelids were having difficulty staying

open. His whole body screamed out for sleep. He had snatched a few hours here and there, and Miranda let him sleep until 1000 hours; then she stuffed food and a pep-up into him, but he still felt like the bottom of a drainage canal. His head pounded and his eyes threatened to roll up and bury themselves in his overworked brain. When everything became a fuzzy blur, Miranda recommended he knock off reading for a while and rest. Her idea of rest included a tour of the final operation in the Complex, packing the androids for shipping to their new owners. When Andros protested, she said there was someone she wanted him to meet in the warehouse who might be of help. Rising to the bait, Andros followed Miranda down the colored lines to the warehouse.

It was a cold cavern of a building with long rows of crates and multiunit shipping containers fading into the far shadows. In the dim light, android-driven shuttlecarts flitted across the vast floor, their headlights weaving ornate patterns in the air as they moved stacks of containers from one place to another.

There seemed to be some set order to their movements. The carts danced across the warehouse, but there was no music. These androids had been equipped to work in dim light, thereby saving on power, and music would have been a distraction. Andros, used to the incessant background sounds of most offices and study areas, found the quiet as chilling as the room temperature. It was a silent waltz, with its primary goal the careful shifting of crates from place to place. For all he knew, the shuttles might be moving the boxes from one corner of the warehouse to another, and then back to their original positions. Watching the whirling shuttles made him feel dizzy, and the pep-ups were not helping his stomach very much.

"Why did you bring me here? I want some sleep and I don't feel well." Andros was whining, and he disliked it. He disliked Miranda even more for bringing him to this freezer of a room.

"I brought you here to meet an android. He could be important to you." Miranda was as neat and bright eyed as when he first saw her; she seemed to have no need of sleep, and her lab coat and trimslax were as tidy as his were rumped and creased. Andros almost wished he were an android; there did seem to be *some* advantages. Or maybe it was just Miranda's stubbornness that kept her going, or the fact that she hadn't fallen asleep on a stack of info-cubes.

"Was this android working for my father when I was born?" he asked,

speaking around a yawn.

"You have a single-spaced mind, don't you? Come on, he's right over there at that secondary console. It directs some of this traffic around us."

Andros looked blurrily in the direction Miranda had indicated, and by force of will caused his eyes to focus on the android in the tan uniform busily punching out a tape on a semicircular computer console. The creature was following the directions of a read-out projected onto a large screen over the console. His hands moved across the keyboard almost faster than Andros could see. This, then, was one of the master musicians for the shuttle waltz.

"The read-out is for the whole warehouse, but that particular console only covers one sector. A print-trained android has to be able to separate his section out of the mass of data coming in over the print-out and key it to his sector only. It's tricky work," Miranda explained.

"Uh, huh." Andros yawned again. He was well aware of the superiority of his father's androids; why drag him down here just to see a well-trained Three go through his paces?

"You didn't show me the packing area," he mumbled, not really caring whether he saw it or not. He had to keep his mind on something just to stay awake.

"I couldn't. It has to be done in a sterile environment. The androids are deepsleeped, then packaged in liquid nitrogen for shipping. Besides, I hate that part of the Complex. They always look so dead in those transport tanks—like carcasses set out for a dissecting lab. They do the final tattooing there, too." She rubbed at her own helix. "I'm none too fond of that, either."

Miranda walked over to the console, keeping a close watch for the fast-moving shuttles. Andros followed her in a hop, skip and trot motion that some of the androids on the shuttles found excruciatingly funny. There was almost a collision between two of the carts because their drivers were laughing at Andros rather than watching their view-screens for traffic directions.

Getting laughed at was embarrassing to Andros, but getting hit by a shuttle would be even more so. Miranda hadn't worried about the

traffic—but then, she knew the android at the console and how good he was at dealing with something not on his program tape.

Andros made it to the console in time to hear Miranda asked the android, "Can you be relieved from duty soon, Matrix-Three?"

"Five minutes. I will be off duty in five minutes. I must finish orders. Important shipping orders." The Three never took his eyes off the screen, and his fingers continued to move through the conversation.

Andros couldn't see much of the Three's face. He was blond and broad-shouldered; his bulky body indicated he had been created for a heavy-labor crew. Andros wondered why a laborer was doing clerical work; had there been some change in programming since Fitzsimmons' takeover? Andros filed the question away as one more he wanted the director to answer.

"Come over here for now." Miranda took his hand and led Andros in the direction of a food dispenser bank, deftly dodging the shuttlecarts. "You'd better eat something while we wait for Deros. You've got a lot to do today."

Andros' stomach revolted at the thought of food and the idea that he might not get to rest as soon as he'd hoped. Groaning, he punched the keys for a bowl of soup and some hot tea.

"Deros?" he said. "Do you mean that Three? I didn't know they had names—or that they were smart enough to remember one if they had it."

"All androids have names, even the Fours." Miranda set the dispenser for a fish steak sandwich and some pickles, a combination that turned Andros green with nausea. He pushed his bowl of soup from him and sipped his tea.

Miranda sat down across the table from Andros, watching with amusement his attempt not to watch her eat. "I think I'll have a bottle of wortleberry pop," she said, just to see him turn even greener. Then, deciding the joke had gone far enough, Miranda softened and handed him a bottle of pills. "Take a couple of these, you'll feel fine in a few minutes."

"Not more pep-ups! That's what made me feel rotten in the first place."

"No, they're something to settle your tum—although after that crack

about android names I shouldn't take any pity on you."

"Sorry, I just can't see the purpose of giving Threes or Fours names. I'm not sure it helps them at all."

"We're more than just so many bodies. Names can be very important to us—all of us, Supers to Fours. You're so much more real with a name. Did you notice how long it took you to call me 'Miranda' instead of 'Matrix-One'?"

Andros flushed and reached for his soup. The pills had helped and he was feeling hungry. "I was angry with you," he explained, "and I knew not using your name would make you mad."

"You see, that proves my point. Without a name, a person is a *thing*."

"But how do they get their names? They each have a number code as part of the matrix tattoo, isn't that enough?"

"Is Ensign 377-45-60 enough for you? Your father named most of the androids himself. He had worked out a tape of possible combinations of sounds, and used that for most of the lower ranks. Some of us he named personally. Since his death I've been naming the new androids using his system, but Fitzsimmons doesn't like it. He feels the same way you do—androids don't need names. Soon not even a One or a Two will be allowed that small possession."

The Three joined them, his shift over. He made a selection from the food dispenser and sat down next to Andros.

"Andros, this is Three-Deros," Miranda made the introductions. "Three-Deros, this is Master Andros Roarchik, the son of Dr. Roarchik."

"Greetings, son of Roarchik." The Three was watching Miranda, waiting for her to do or say something. He was very uneasy. Andros attributed that to meeting him, but Miranda changed his mind quickly.

She reached across the table and held one of the Three's hands in hers. "Deros is one of my group, he's a Super, too." *And something very special to me*, her voice and actions told Andros. To Deros, she said, "I want Andros to know more about us, to try to understand why we're people and not just things."

Deros glared at Miranda and pulled his hand away. "You had no right to break my cover without warning, particularly for Roarchik's sprat."

"Now wait a minute." Andros turned to face Deros. "What gives you the right to call me a 'sprat'? If you're going to look like a Three, you'd better learn how to act like one, and blasted quick."

"Uppity sort, isn't he?" Deros glanced at Andros with barely concealed dislike. "This space harpy thinks he's going to fill his father's lab coat?"

"He had planned to turn the whole operation over to Fitzsimmons, but I think I've broken him of that idea."

"Straight on. Fitzsimmons will run this place into the dust in less than a year. The man's no fool, unfortunately, but he's looking out for himself first."

"Deros is here to keep an eye on shipping. That's why he's doing a Three, it was the only way to get work in the warehouse. I think it was very clever of him, don't you, Andros?" Miranda was trying to smooth Deros' temper and make him relate to Andros.

"Someone had to see that things were run efficiently down here; you didn't care about it, Roarchik," Deros growled.

"And you make such a good Three, too." Andros' smile annoyed the android even more. "But the surly bit won't pass. Threes aren't programmed for it."

"Cute, very cute. Okay, Roarchik, give me your game." Deros touched his scarred cheek. "These are real. I'll have to wear them the rest of my life. But I know what I am and that's all that matters. Can you say the same?"

"No, I wish I could. I need all the help I can get, Deros. I'd even like yours, if I can have it."

"Good, I'm glad the two of you have decided to behave," Miranda interjected quickly. "You were acting like a pair of fighting cocks sizing each other up. I was waiting for the feathers to fly." She reached out for Deros' hand, and this time he took it in a tender grip, caressing it with his free hand. "Now, tell Andros about the falsification of the shipping forms and the shortages of stock on hand."

"Miranda, what's to keep Fitzsimmons from having this whole Complex wired into his office?" Andros craned his neck to look up at the roof that appeared to be kilometers over his head. "I admit it wouldn't be an easy job, but..."

"Don't get your paranoia up, Roarchik," Deros laughed. "Next you'll be worrying that Miranda has a recorder hidden on her bod. If the Sleam tried anything like snoopers around here, he'd have to use android labor to put them in, and guess who'd know it the minute the first pick-up was installed?" Deros bowed ironically in Andros' direction.

"And who in his right mind," Miranda grinned, "would want to spend his time listening to a bunch of low-grade androids? Silly old Three!" she murmured to Deros in a throaty voice filled with affection.

"True," Deros said. "Fitzsimmons is so sure of himself that he doesn't care what we 'Threes' think or say, just as long as we get his orders out on time. That's the only thing that matters to the Sleam—that and his faked records."

"Are you sure something is wrong with the records?" asked Andros. "Or are you just guessing because you don't like the man?"

"Ho, he is paranoid, isn't he? No guess, Roarchik, I can read a print-out faster than Fitzsimmons or Fressli can put one together and, babyboy, these records are rigged. Someone, and I bet on Fitzsimmons, is chilling away a lot of androids that never leave this plant. The production increases hide a lot of it, and so does rigging the books to match up androids made to androids sold. But Miranda knows how many bodies come out of the V.A.T.s and I know exactly how many finished androids leave this Complex, and we can prove to you that the numbers don't match, no matter what the books say."

"But why? I could understand selling on the side, but this..."

"Good question." Deros took a swig of the murky blue fluid he'd ordered from the food dispenser but had as yet not touched. "I don't have a good answer, though. He isn't making anything higher than a Three, he's into clones, and he's got a lot of extra androids stacked away—it could be anything."

"I haven't been able to find out anything from my end, either," Miranda

shrugged. "I've tried everything I could think of to get someone to talk, but—nothing."

"Are there any other Supers in the Complex?" asked Andros. "They might know something to add to this." He wanted to get a look at some of these Supers. It had been a relief to see that Deros didn't resemble him in the slightest. The fear that his father might have used him as the mold for all Supers had been dispelled somewhat by meeting Miranda, but Deros was the first male Super he'd seen and it was a comfort to find not one bit of his own physiognomy reproduced in him. Only their names seemed to have a similarity. *Father probably picked my name off a tape, too*, Andros reflected sourly.

"Miranda and I are the only Supers in the Complex," Deros had taken his time answering the question, staring into the depth of his glass. "I manage this end of it myself and Miranda covers the front offices. It's safer that way." Andros wondered if he was lying. If there were two disguised Supers, there could just as easily be more. These two did not trust him fully, and he could understand that. He didn't trust them completely, either.

"But how did you manage it? The face marking, I mean. I know Fitzsimmons was responsible for hers, but did my father have you marked this way?"

"Your father never branded any Super-Matrices, not even to help hide us." Miranda's voice was as cold as liquid nitrogen. "We had a doctor do up Deros, someone who is working with us. Fitzsimmons kills every Super he can get his hands on, and he checks for faked markings. My brands are real, too. This one set of numbers," she pointed to a row of marks on her rank tattoo, "lists me as his personal 'pet.' He hopes to learn more about where the other Supers are, and as soon as I stop being useful, or he suspects me, it's into the recycle tank for me."

"Nearly all the Supers that are left have been tattooed; they blended into Bleydeaux society as quickly as possible," Deros said. "And if Fitzsimmons starts cloning a gang of look-alike, think-alike androids, it's going to be harder on those of us that are the old style. We'll be watched that much more carefully. He'll be getting rid of all the Ones and Twos left at Roarchik's very soon, and as for Miranda and me—well, as you said, I make a good Three. I won't be easy to catch."

Miranda touched her own Matrix-One marking as if it still gave her pain. "How can an android be at one with himself if there is no self within him?"

"What?" Andros was surprised by such a mystical remark from Miranda.

"Fitzsimmons' androids will not be people. They *will* be things. He won't give them names or care what happens to them at all."

"But whatever an android needs in the way of personality is programmed into him to fit his ultimate function. A name, or lack of one, won't change that basic programming." Andros read the disapproval on Miranda's and Deros' faces. "I can understand Fitzsimmons being the wrong man for the job of running Roarchik's, if he is falsifying the books or stashing away extra androids, but condemning the man because he won't give each android a name is not a valid argument for dismissal." Andros was at a point where he could agree that a One or a Two was entitled to have personal feelings, and meeting Miranda and Deros had convinced him that a Super was a different breed of synthetic cat. But rights for a Three?...

"Look, I'll explain it to you in a way that will even penetrate your durasteel skull. Four-Karel, will you come here at once?" Deros called to an android who had been standing at the food banks getting his lunch.

"I come, Matrix-Three."

The android shambling toward them had the vacant face of a typical Four. Andros wondered if this was another Super they were going to spring on him. The android's face was so placidly blank. Would it really be that easy to keep up so low-grade a role for very long? And Deros had said he was the only Super in this area...

"Greetings, Four-Karel. This is Master Andros Roarchik. He is the son of Dr. Roarchik. He would like to talk to you." Deros had fallen back into the speech pattern of a Three, and to Andros' amazement his face had taken on the same blank calmness of the low-rank android as easily as putting on a mask.

"Roarchik dead." Four-Karel looked at Andros, or looked through him. A Four's eyes never quite focused on what it was looking at—a disturbing

characteristic if you were trying to hold a conversation with one.

"This is Roarchik's boy baby," Deros said.

"Yes. Roarchik have baby. I was told that. I remember. Master Roarchik want to talk to me?" The android stood in front of Andros, a plate of food in his hands. He made no attempt to sit down, nor did he pay any attention to his lunch other than to hold the plate carefully.

"Yes. Have a seat. I don't want to keep you from your food."

The Four shook his head. "I not allowed to eat at table with One or Human. I wait until you have asked questions."

"Oh." Andros searched his mind for something to say to this creature. "What do you, ah, do here, Four-Karel?" He asked the first question that came to mind. This could be a Super marked to look like a Four, and they might be using Andros to test the disguise.

"I drive shuttle. I move crates. I pack shipping boxes."

"Are you really a Matrix-Four?" If this was a test, it had gone far enough. "It's a very good bit of work, I must say, but it must be difficult to keep it up. I congratulate you."

"I am Four-Karel. I do not understand the rest of your question. Am I being given instructions?"

The android was honestly bewildered. He shifted from foot to foot, trying hard to understand what Andros had said, but it was clearly beyond his mental capacity.

"He's real!" Andros whispered to Miranda, as if the Four could not hear him.

Miranda laughed and faced the Four. "I am One-Miranda. Greetings, Four-Karel." Miranda spoke to the android for the first time and the Four looked at her and acknowledged the introduction with a nod of his head. Andros noticed that the Four had been very careful to avoid looking in Miranda's direction, and he now realized that there must be some sort of conduct rituals for conversations between androids of differing levels.

"Greetings, One-Miranda. I am pleased you speak to me. Am I of help to you also?"

"Yes, you are of help. Tell me if you like your work here in the warehouse."

The Four looked puzzled by the question. He mulled at it for several seconds and then answered. "I was programmed to work in warehouse. That is why I am here."

"Yes, but what do you like to do best?" Miranda persisted.

Andros wondered where this line of questioning was leading. An android of the Four matrix was programmed to do a job, like it or not. He would not even be capable of complaining about his working conditions.

The Four had visibly brightened at Miranda's question. It was one he could answer without having to think about it. "I like flowers," he said. "I grow flowers in my quarters. My flowers are beautiful." He beamed at Miranda as if a light had been turned on behind his eyes. "I will grow more flowers. I water my flowers, I love flowers..." Miranda held up a hand to cut off his litany of praise for horticulture.

"Who programmed you to love the flowers, Four-Karel?" she asked, smiling at him.

"Programmed? I was programmed to be warehouse crewman. I was not programmed for flowers. I love flowers by myself. This is right to love flowers?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, it's perfectly all right for you to love your flowers. Now, will you tell us how you first became interested in them?"

The Four started, his head turned from side to side in quick, nervous jerks. He was clearly upset by her question.

"Nothing will be done to punish you. You have done nothing wrong, and no one will take your flowers away. We are only so pleased to find someone who cares so much about flowers."

Reassured, the Four smiled hesitantly. "I find flower growing beside warehouse. Not growing well. Ground was dry. I know flower is thirsty. I

bring water. Flower was happy to have water. I bring water every day, I..." He stopped, and looked pleadingly at Miranda. "I will not lose flowers?"

"I'll make sure you don't, no matter what you might have done that is wrong."

The android glanced from side to side, then bent closer to the listening group and put his plate of food down on the table. "I see that flower not get right care beside warehouse. I come back at night after shift over. I dig up flower. I take flower to quarters. I put flower in empty dish. Flower is beautiful. I get more flowers from Complex. But," he looked hopefully at Miranda, "I only get flowers that are sick. I make them well. I am flower doctor!" he said with pride, tapping himself on the chest. Andros had never seen a lower-grade android exhibit pride in anything before; it was a puzzling thing to watch.

Then, in a burst of what was obviously to him a very special invitation, the android said, "I take you to see beautiful flowers. You will like them." He nodded, proud to be able to show off something that was so important to him. Dr. Erik Roarchik exhibiting a new model android could not have shown more pride.

"We would love to see your flowers. Please lead the way, Four-Karel." Miranda motioned Andros to follow the Four.

"But I don't want to..."

"Hush, you're going to learn something, whether you want to or not."

"But what does this ridiculous Four and his everlasting flowers have to do with my father's work?"

"Everything. Four-Karel was only a crewman, but he thought out his care and love for his plants on his own. Doesn't that tell you something about the ability of even a Four to think? This android, with no programming or help from anybody, has found himself in himself. He is a real person."

"And a bloody bore!" But Andros had lowered his voice so that the Four gaily marching ahead of them, his lunch forgotten and still talking about his beautiful flowers, would not hear the remark.

CHAPTER FIVE

After the tour of Four-Karel's plant collection, Andros had hoped to go back to his quarters and get some much needed sleep. But Miranda had other plans for him.

"You must see Caliban today. Fitzsimmons isn't going to give you much time on Mhalkei before he acts. Sleeping might be what you think you should do, but not waking up wouldn't be too pleasant."

"If I got killed in my sleep I wouldn't know it anyway," Andros said reasonably. "I don't think Fitzsimmons will move that fast, anyway."

"He wouldn't want you to see Caliban—he knows too much about your birth."

This was enough to rouse Andros' flagging interest. Grumbling about androids and their complete lack of humane treatment for humans, Andros finally agreed to take a speed shuttle out to Bleydeaux, fourteen kilometers away from the Complex, and meet Caliban.

Caliban was not his real name. He was Elihu Mathler, Chief Records Clerk for the planet Mhalkei. All official records of births were in his offices, and he was the choicest source of gossip on the planet.

"I'm going to sleep for three weeks when this is over," Andros muttered to himself as he crossed the shadeless forecourt of the Hall of Records. The buildings were all of a local white stone, blinding in the late afternoon sunlight. Heat waves shimmered in the distance and mirages of pools of water formed on the smooth blocks of the courtyard. Andros walked a little faster, hoping his throbbing head would stay on his shoulders long enough for him to reach the dark shadows of the massive porch.

The inside of the hall was blessedly cool. A wide reflecting pool filled most of the center floor space, and sparkling fountains danced and splashed in the air. Citrus trees in large tubs lined the walls, adding their distinctive perfume to the room, and Andros instantly felt better.

He quickly found the listing for the Chief Records Clerk and dialed his office for an appointment. When he gave his name to the Clerk's male secretary he was told to come right up, the Chief would be very pleased to see him immediately. Sighing with regret at having to leave the pleasant

lobby, Andros requested a shuttle from the attendant android—a Roarchik Two, he noted—and rode through the expected maze of hallways to the Chief Clerk's office.

"Welcome, welcome, my boy! You have no idea how pleased I am to meet the son of Erik Roarchik." The Clerk was an old man, round and bouncing, his face shiny with goodwill. His white hair made a nimbus of soft fleece around a face Andros knew instantly he could trust. He wondered why Miranda had given him the nickname 'Caliban'—there was nothing ugly or misshapen about him.

"I cannot begin to tell you how saddened I was to hear of your father's death. What a waste—such a great man." Mathler shook his head in regret. "I told him that stirring things up in Bleydeaux was unwise, but he just wouldn't listen..." The Clerk directed Andros to a deeply cushioned chair in his inner office, begging him to have a seat.

"There. How is that? Are you comfortable? Would you care for anything to drink? You must have some of my own blended tea!" Mathler asked his secretary to bring the tea, hardly waiting for Andros to answer any of his questions.

"Oh, I forgot to introduce you to Rodge Nestla. He's the best secretary I ever had. I hope you don't think it was rude of me not to have made the introductions. Rodge understands, he's been with me for several years. But I hate to make a bad impression, especially on the son of Erik Roarchik."

Andros tried to get in a brief comment of some kind, but the old man forestalled him. "I know," he said, a pleased smile on his face. "I can make the introductions as soon as Rodge comes back with the tea, and all will be just fine!"

Andros murmured his assent and was saved from further comment by Rodge's return with a tray of tea things: small cakes and sandwiches.

"Ah, this is just what we needed. Now come and join us and meet young Roarchik here."

Rodge shook hands with Andros and smiled at him while the Clerk made fussy introductions. He then had both the men join him at a small table by a window overlooking the forecourt and began pouring the tea.

"Now drink up, boys, and here's to your health!" The Clerk suited his actions to his words, sipping greedily at his tea and munching a thickly iced cake. This gave Andros a chance to size up Rodge without having to pay attention to any of the Clerk's endless chatter.

What he saw, he liked. Rodge had the same open kindness as his superior. He was slender and delicately made, but a few years older than himself, Andros guessed. His fair coloring and pale hair gave him a girlish pastel quality, but his actions were those of a trained athlete and there was a suggestion of stubborn power to his face. His eyes missing nothing. Rodge passed Andros the various cakes and sandwiches, and made sure that Mathler was also well taken care of. He seemed to know what was needed just before it was asked for, and he knew exactly how much sugar and lemon Andros preferred in his tea. Without quite knowing why, Andros felt at ease with both Rodge and Mathler. Nothing of any importance was said during the tea, but Andros felt he had gained two friends—good friends, both of them.

After the tea was over, Andros watched Rodge efficiently clear away the dishes while Mathler led him back to the chair he had occupied earlier.

"Now, as to your visit to us, Andros." Mathler seated himself behind a large, richly carved desk. "I am sure you want to see your father's Admittance of Responsibility and all the other things we have on you."

"Yes sir. But what is an Admittance of Responsibility? I thought I had a birth certificate, or something."

"No, we have nothing like that. If we had, I'd have been very happy to trot it out for the Confederation people who came to me about this. It would have made things much simpler, but Erik..." Mathler sighed, a gesture of great shoulder shrugging and much regret. "Erik was always so mysterious. He loved keeping things secret, even from me, his best friend." Mathler's mouth screwed up in a babylike pout. "He came to me on the day you were born—or at least he said it was the day you were born, and I was perfectly prepared to believe him. Erik Roarchik was always an honest man. He said he was now a father, and since he was not term married, he wished to fill out Acceptance of Responsibility papers for you. It was the proper thing to do, since the mother was not going to take the child. He did not confide in me the identity of your mother. He simply stated she had given the child to him to raise. And personal privacy would naturally keep me from asking so delicate a question. But I do wish he had told me.

It would have made things so much easier for you."

"May I see the infocube with the Acceptance on it? I don't fully understand what it means, and I would like to see..."

"Of course, how stupid. of me! These things are so routine that I forget how little the rest of the Confederation knows about legal records. Rodge, please put in a request for all the information we have on Andros—and on Erik Roarchik, too." He smiled at Andros. "I do not wish to pry into the life of a dead friend, but there might be something or," he said with a roguish smile, "someone in your father's past that could supply us with a clue. Yes, Rodge, that's what we need! Fetch me a clue."

Rodge walked over to a wall-sized bank of computers and tapped out instructions to the main record banks on what information was needed. He studied the viewscreen as he worked, watching the search and cube process. He looked up once to remark that the central bank was reporting so much material that it might take some time to uncode and cube it all.

"I set the retrieval for material pertaining to Dr. Roarchik's personal life primarily, and for any additional project data which might relate to Andros." He glanced up at Andros. "I hope you find that enough. If you'd like I can cube everything we have on your father's legal records for the Complex, tax reports and that sort of thing."

"I'm sure whatever you think is enough..."

"But there's so much concern in your mind about finding something the Confederation may have overlooked that I wanted to give you even more material than they asked for." Rodge smiled gently. "You want so badly to be human that it's painful to me."

"You're a Telepath!" Andros stared at him in amazement. He'd heard of using 'Paths in civil service, but until now had never met one.

"*Empath* would be a better word. My genes were not quite dominant enough to be pushed into a full 'Path. I am a Jug. I was bred for this."

Andros looked at Rodge with awe. A Jug, one of the Confederation's made-to-order people, but a *person* by Confederation law. While he, a supposed android, was not a person. The injustice of trying to decide who was and was not a person was brought forcibly home to him. Rodge had

been bred in a womb sac, his DNA and RNA as manipulated as any android's, but he was human. The egg and sperm that formed him had come from human stock. He probably had no idea who his parents were; donations of such material were a common thing, and the Confederation took all responsibility for such children. The only difference between a Super like Miranda and a Jug like Rodge was that somewhere in his past two bits of human tissue had come together and formed him. That, and the fact that Miranda was not an Empath; she had been made as "normal" as possible.

He remembered what Miranda had told him about the possibly telepathic android babies Fitzsimmons had destroyed, and wondered what Mathler and Rodge thought of Fitzsimmons. It might be useful to have the opinions of a couple of humans before he made any complaints to the Confederation.

"What do you know about Master Fitzsimmons over at the Complex?" he asked. "I just met him yesterday and I'm curious about him."

"Oh, him! I hate to say anything rude about anyone, but he's a very unpleasant man. Fitzsimmons is hated here in Bleydeaux—and he has no taste in teas," Mathler added with a sniff.

"Fitzsimmons is a dangerous man," Rodge said grimly. "If I were you I'd be very careful around him. He's not above having you killed if you are human."

"Rodge! What a harsh thing to say." Mathler was agitated at the suggestion.

"But true, sir. I always stay out of his way when he comes to the office. His mind is so cold and calculating that it's too painful to stay in the same room with him. I don't like him, and I'm sure the feeling is mutual. I'm too much like an android to suit him."

"Most of the people here in Bleydeaux are sure he is up to something out at the Complex," Mathler said. "But there have been so many dark suspicions floating about since Erik died. The Bleydeauxs are even nervous about that android Temple your father built a year ago. They think odd things are going on there, too."

"What Temple? I hadn't heard of that." What would androids need with

a temple, Andros wondered.

"It was an idea of your father and I, give the androids something to worship, something to call their own. I'm afraid it didn't work out too well. Most of them aren't interested," Mathler sighed.

"And Fitzsimmons, what do they think he's doing?" Andros asked.

"They think he's forming an army of androids and that there will be an attempt to take over Bleydeaux and add it to the Complex," Rodge answered. "Most of them are mad at him because they can't get any more Ones or Twos, so they make up rumors, but this one could be true. He could do it if he convinced the Confederation it would be the best thing for Roarchik's. Bleydeaux is an unimportant city here on Mhalkeri—Jastium, as the capital, could handle all our work—but the Confederation runs on Roarchik androids."

"Fitzsimmons couldn't get the androids to follow him. They know he has no interest in android equality."

"True. But he is making a lot of androids out at the Complex who know nothing about equality and Fitzsimmons will keep them that way."

"Then why would they fight for him?" Andros asked.

"That should be easy to figure out. They'll fight because they're programmed to. Power is Fitzsimmons' god." Rodge was watching a row of infocubes march out of the retrieval hatch. "An army of zombie-like androids behind him could be important in gaining such power. Your father wanted nothing for himself; perhaps that's why he died, he wasn't tough enough to put his own welfare first. You can be sure if Fitzsimmons causes a revolt, he won't come out the loser. He would be very sure of that before he started." Rodge checked the row of infocubes, lining them up neatly. "I think we have all the data now." He picked up the first cube in the stack and fitted it into the viewer. "Andros, if you would come and have a look..."

The screen was filled by an official looking document dated the day of Andros' birth, and had an impressive heading which said "Agreement of Responsibility" in elaborate script. Below that were several lines of legalese which Andros could not begin to understand, and places for two signatures. The space marked "mother" was blank. The other line

contained his father's name.

"Master Mathler, would you mind explaining this to me? It does seem to be written in Comspell, but I can't make out one side from the other."

"I'd be only too glad to assist. That's what Record Clerks are for, to explain records." Mathler bustled over to the viewscreen and peered at the cube readout. "Now let's see, it says, 'I the true undersigned do hereby, with sound mind and under solemn oath as a citizen of the Confederation, with free will and without coercion...'"

"Sir," Andros said plaintively, "I can read it, but I don't understand what it means. How does this affect me as a human? Does it prove I'm Erik Roarchik's son?"

"Party of the first part does hereby—sorry, I do tend to get so involved in these, the phrasing is so lovely. Let me see, what would "be the best way to explain this?" He stroked his chin reflectively. "You do understand that you were an outborn child?"

"Yes, I was told that by my father. But that's not very important as far as my rights are concerned."

"Yes, but your father could just as easily have sent you to a creche and washed his hands of you. He didn't. In this document, he states that he is your father and he will not only be financially responsible for you, but that he will also raise you, taking all responsibility until the age of twenty-one—just as if you had been termborn. And now this is very important. He says you are to inherit all of his estate at his death, no matter what other children he might have had after your birth, termborn or otherwise. That is an unusual clause. I tried to tell him it wouldn't stand up in a court of law should he have other children, but he insisted there would be no one but you to inherit Roarchik's. If you can prove you are human, you will be a very rich man, Andros."

"Or if Fitzsimmons can prove you're an android, the Confederation gets everything. There are no other claims on the estate," Rodge said. "This next document will interest you, too." He pushed a button to advance the cube to a new section. It's a proof of supposed parentage document."

"A what? Does the Confederation know about this?"

"Yes." Rodge glanced down at the screen. "But don't get your hopes up, it's not as good as you might think. Your problem is that it's to the Confederation's advantage to have you declared an android. I think nothing less than the Gods themselves descending from the core of the universe could convince them. They want Roarchik's very badly."

"But that's not right!"

"Since when did the Confederation run on rights?" Rodge said bitterly. "I don't even know who *my* parents are. The Confederation decided it was not my 'right' to have that information. I'm not sounding off out of self-pity or anything. I simply want to make the situation clear to you. Come and look at this cube."

The document was a record of tests establishing the fact that Erik Roarchik was the possible father of Andros Roarchik. They were based on blood and chromosome matches. The document was signed by a Dr. A.E. Kumuda.

"Why isn't this enough to prove I'm human?" Andros was genuinely perplexed.

"Two things," Rodge said, tapping the screen. "One: your supposed father was a master at genetic manipulation—he could have rigged you to match his tissues quite easily. Two: we have no tests from your mother to supply the missing chromosome factors. If we had a set of tests from your mother, or your mother herself, we would be in a better position."

Rodge pushed the changeview button again. "This is a bad piece of evidence, I'm afraid. It's the record of your removal from a womb membrane and subsequent examination by Dr. Kumuda."

"Womb membrane! But that's the way a Super is born. I thought I had at least a hostmother or something."

"That's the problem," Rodge admitted. "In most cases where the mother does not carry the child herself, or if she doesn't want to be known as the mother of a child, she uses a host. But with so many womb membranes available in the Complex I suppose your father decided it would be the easiest way to handle the matter. Then too, a host would have been one more person involved with your birth. He seemed to want to do this with as much secrecy as possible, and the less people that knew

about it the better." Rodge put a consoling hand on Andros' shoulder. "If it makes you feel any better, I was raised in a womb membrane myself—all Jugs are—and I'm still human."

"Then is it possible I'm a Jug?" Andros grabbed at any small thing in this sea of documents.

"No, that's why the examination by Dr. Kumuda. It's required by law when a child is removed from a membrane. This document states you are completely unmanipulated for the purposes of increasing any latent powers in your chromosomes. Standard proof of non-Jug identity. The law would have insisted on a tattoo like mine if you were a Jug."

Rodge rolled up his uniform sleeve to reveal the line of lettering inside his elbow that listed his special talents. "The Confederation is very careful about who is or is not a Jug. The legal complications are fierce, as you well know by now."

"So it doesn't say I'm human." Andros slumped against the computer banks.

"Cheer up—it doesn't say you aren't, either," Mathler said, coming to the young man's side. Andros felt comforted by the obvious concern of Mathler and Rodge and relaxed against them for a few minutes, soaking up their warmth and goodwill.

"This Dr. Kumuda might be of help," Rodge said, letting go of Andros and looking back at the screen. "If you can't find your mother, the doctor might be the next best thing. I'll run a check on A.E. Kumuda through Records and see what we come up with." Rodge went back to the retrieval banks and began pushing buttons. "Let's see, name, origin, residence, presence of doctor still on Mhalkeri, and any and all identity information on said A.E. Kumuda. You know, I tend to distrust people who use only initials—it generally means they have something to hide." Rodge patted the side of the retrieval bank with affection. "But this beauty will flush out our elusive doctor in seconds."

Unfortunately the Record banks came up with very little. A lone infocube apologetically popped out of the retrieval slot and sat waiting to be put into the viewscreen.

Rodge scanned the cube at a high speed readout that was beyond any

ability Andros had ever had—and high speed readouts had been one of his best abilities at the Academy. It was a must for an astrogator.

"Not too much." Rodge slowed the quickest down to a normal reading speed. "Our doctor seems to be as difficult a person to tie down as your father. But naturally your father would have picked someone unknown for something as secret as this project."

"Well, give me what there is, it may help somehow." Andros bent over the screen. "Maybe I would remember this doctor if there's some sort of physical description. There were a lot of Medcorpsmen and techs around the Complex; it might be that one of them is our missing Kumuda. The name isn't familiar, but there were so many of them when I was little. I may have forgotten the name, but I am good at remembering faces. Have you got a picture?"

"No luck. No physical of any sort. Only a brief record of having been at the Complex, and that as a pediatrician. Your father apparently consulted with several pediatricians about baby care and development before creating his Supers. Doctors have to register with Records when they change planets. That's the only reason we even have a name listed. Your father had twenty such doctors out to the plant for a conference of some sort; Kumuda was simply one of them."

"Yes, but that *one* signed my birth documents."

"That is a help, and the fact that Dr. Kumuda is still on Mhalkeri. But the odd thing is there is no request to practice medicine here, nor is there a full Confederation file. Of course, you can't practice without the file, it's a license..."

"But if Kumuda came here from another planet, can't you send there for the files?"

"Good idea," Rodge said. "Let's see, Kumuda came from Repoze; that's an outer colonial world. Let me check." Once again he played with his computer banks. It took only a couple of seconds for the answer to come back. "Oh no. Repoze was hit by an Ishurki raid five years ago. The records were wiped out, along with most of the planet."

"Ten to one my father planned that raid!" Andros muttered.

"You can take heart in one thing, at least," Rodge comforted. "There is no record of Kumuda's having left the planet, nor is there any death certificate. Our mysterious physician is alive and on Mhalkeri somewhere. And here's a request to tour the government-run creche at Jastium. It was filed two weeks ago, with a notation that the permit will be picked up here at the building. Kumuda didn't even give us an address to send the reply to; really secretive sort, I'd say."

"Was there any answer from the creche?" Andros almost pushed Rodge away from the screen in his impatience to find his pediatrician. "If I can find out when Kumuda is touring the creche, I can get permission to go there, too. They're not likely to turn down the son of Erik Roarchik."

"Stop shoving!" Rodge gave him a friendly poke in the ribs. "Being rude won't find your doctor any quicker." He laughed when Andros jumped and squawked; he had been sure he was ticklish. "There's no answer yet, but as soon as there is we'll file a request for you and that should take care of it, particularly since you have such a high regard for yourself—they wouldn't *dare* turn you down, indeed!"

"Well, I am Roarchik's son, and he did do a lot of work that was useful for making Jugs, so I thought..." Andros ended on an abashed note. "Sorry, Rodge, I didn't mean to sound like I was throwing my weight around."

"No, you did that when you shoved me away from the viewscreen."

Both men laughed. Andros had missed the easy camaraderie of the days before his father's death. The cadets had filled a void in his life, that of simple friendship, and here was Rodge ready to offer it to him again. The thought of this pleased him immensely.

Mathler beamed at the two of them. It pleased him to see young Roarchik getting on so well with Rodge. He worried that the Jug spent too much time in the offices and not enough time with some friends. But friends were hard for a Jug to find, even if he was technically a human. Most people didn't care for the company of an Empath.

"Oh, I am so pleased! A clue indeed, Rodge. We can fill out the request forms right now, undated naturally, and as soon as Dr. Kumuda gets an answer from the creche, we can put in the request for the same day." Mathler bubbled with childlike joy as he dug out the proper forms and

had Andros sign them. "We'll prove you human yet!" he crowed.

"I must thank both of you for your help, and for more than just help. This information about Dr. Kumuda may be just what I've been looking for." He glanced down at the pile of infocubes and said shyly, "You two are something I've been looking for, too, someone who seemed to care about what happens to me..." He blushed and shuffled the cubes. "Miranda has been a help too; I didn't mean to sound as if she wasn't. But she's doing it for a reason. She wants to resurrect my father in me. I'm not Erik Roarchik."

He looked up at both men and smiled. "Can I take these with me? Miranda may be able to help with some of the problems of the documents, and I might be able to correlate some of this with information in my father's files."

Mathler began to pick up the cubes. "Rodge, please fetch a carrier for these. We can't have Andros dropping cubes all down the halls, it would raise havoc with the shuttlecarts."

Rodge expertly fitted the stack of cubes into a deck and handed them to Andros. "These are just copies, there's no need to bring them back," he said. "Good luck with the hunting." He gave Andros a light shove in the stomach with the deck.

"Yes, and do tell the charming Miranda that her Caliban will someday swoop down on her and carry her off to a cave by the sea!"

This reference to Mathler's odd nickname made Andros feel bold enough to ask why Miranda called him that. Mathler laughed. "Oh, you'll think it such a silly thing for two grown men, but your father and I were very fond of the old Terran classics, and Shakespeare in particular. Don't you think Folger's translation into Comspeak was brilliant? Well, when Miranda was born, since she was the first of your father's Supers, I could not resist quoting from Miranda's speech in *The Tempest*: 'How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world that has such people in it!' We naturally gave her the name Miranda; it seemed so appropriate at the time. So I also renamed your father Prospero, and he in turn wanted to call me Gonzalo. But I insisted on Caliban. It was so funny!" Mathler went off into a fit of infectious giggles. "Me a Caliban! Miranda was so pretty as a baby that I threatened to try and harm her honor as soon as she was old enough!" Mathler went off into another peal of laughter. "Oh, you must

forgive an old man his jokes." He gasped for breath. "I would have been a willing slave to your father, particularly when it came to taking better care of his records and files. They would have been so much neater." Mathler's laugh ended on a wistful note. "Now there is no one but Miranda to call me Caliban. Tell her that if things get too bad over at the Complex, she's to come to me. I heard she's mixing with some of the Temple crowd, and that's not good. I'll take as much care of her as my Prospero would have wished for his child."

"Thank you, sir. Things *are* getting worse at the Complex, so I'm sure she'll be glad of your offer." Andros turned to Rodge and said, "I suppose we must consider Fitzsimmons as Antonio?"

"Yes, and the Temple is the sinking ship," Rodge smiled. "Fressli would be very good as Trinculo, the jester."

"And Rodge is Ariel, a spirit of air and light." Mathler was caught up in the game and clapped his hands with pleasure at it.

"Then sir, who am I?" asked Andros.

"Why Prince Ferdinand, of course." Rodge made a mock bow to him. "And may you prosper with the fair Miranda!"

CHAPTER SIX

Andros left the Hall of Records mulling over the things he'd learned from Rodge and Mathler. He stood in the dim twilight waiting for a speed shuttle which would take him back to the Space Port and his quarters. A quick dinner and into bed was shaping up as the ideal way to spend the rest of the evening. There were not many other passengers waiting on the platform. Andros skimmed them idly, checking out the Matrices-Ones or -Twos present. He knew that a number of them were employed in Bleydeaux, but he had seen very few in evidence. Glancing at his fellow passengers, he caught a glimpse of Fressli disappearing behind a pillar. Andros stared in his direction, and then stopped. What was Fressli doing in Bleydeaux and, more important, why was he taking a shuttle to the Space Port? The only answer, Andros felt, was that Fressli was following him—a rather unpleasant thought. *But if I were Fitzsimmons, I'd have me followed, too*, Andros reflected. He shrugged and walked down the platform to the gate for his arriving shuttle. *If Fressli is following me, my*

evening is going to be quite a bore for him.

* * *

BUT Andros' plans for the rest of the night were to be changed. When he entered his sleeping room at the Port, Miranda was waiting for him, dressed in a long dark green gown and a cape. "How did you get in here?" Andros demanded. He was tired and irritable. Fressli had indeed followed him almost up to his door.

"I have friends on the housekeeping staff." Miranda eyed the deck of cubes he was carrying. "Did you learn anything from Caliban?"

"Yes, I learned 'the ditty does remember my drowned father' and things like that. You have a lot of questions to answer."

"Oh really? Well, if you want to know if I find you a 'thing divine,' that's not going to get you anywhere."

"No, particularly since you are no virgin."

Miranda laughed. "I see Caliban has been playing his games with you, too. Now that we both know what a fine classical education your father gave us, why not get down to the serious questions?"

"All right, how about the one where you never told me you were Father's first Super?"

"Ah, that one. Forsooth and yea verily, Caliban has spoken the truth." She looked down at her long fingered hands. "I wasn't sure when to tell you that. It may or may not have a bearing on whether you're human."

"How?" Andros flopped down onto his bed, propping a pillow behind his back.

"If your father had made a boy first it might have proved he was using you as a model. But his creating a girl makes it look like a case of 'I've done a boy, now for the other sex' sort of thing."

Andros pulled her down on the bed beside him. "Don't worry," he said when she started to protest. "I have no intentions on your 'honor'—besides, I'm too tired for that. I just need to sit down, and looking up at you gives

me a crick in the neck." He did not add that sex with an android was not something he considered desirable.

When she had settled onto the bed with him, he continued, "Did it ever occur to you that a female is easier to create than a male? The XX and XY factors being what they are, a girl is genetically a simpler thing, not nearly so complex as we males."

Miranda smacked her forehead in mock surprise. "O Great Mother, why was I made so foolish? And I've only spent most of my life studying genetics."

Andros ducked the pillow she threw at him. "You are right, though," she admitted. "It does make more sense that way, but I bet the Confederation wouldn't buy it."

"No single thing will be enough for them. All I can do is build a case out of bits I've found that prove I'm human. Here's your pillow back."

Miranda ducked out of the pillow's flight trajectory and grinned at him. "You should have taken up law instead of astrogation, it would have done you a lot more good."

"But very little law is practiced in deep space, and that's where I want to spend the rest of my—oof!" She had caught him squarely in the chest with the pillow.

"You are a mean android. Maybe the recycle pits are the best place for you." He threw the pillow at her again, and she expertly ducked it.

"One funny thing did happen to me while I was coming back from Bleydeaux," he continued, watching with relief while she tucked the offending pillow behind her back. "Fressli is taking more than a casual interest in me. He followed me back from the Hall of Records."

"Umm, did you see him before you went to Mathler's?" Miranda chewed her lower lip; she was plainly unhappy about Andros' discovery.

"No, but then I wasn't watching for anyone. I was so tired that even if I had been looking for Fressli I might not have found him. I was really dead." He paused to think. "I can't understand it; I felt much better after meeting Caliban. Did you know he calls Rodge Ariel? Have you noticed

how peaceful they are, and how time seems to stop when you're with them? Or am I going soft in my head?"

"No, you're right. There is something special about those two." She smiled softly. "I love both of them dearly. Rodge has made offers of a relationship with me, but he has enough problems as a Jug not to be stuck with an android wife."

"He asked you to marry him?" Andros was shocked. Marriage between a human and an android was illegal.

"He asked me to stay with him as long as we both wanted it, and he would even take a vow in the android Temple if I wished. I turned him down. There was Deros to consider, and I can't have him, either." She turned away, hunching her shoulders in a way Andros had come to recognize as her way of hiding any deep emotions.

"What shall I do about Fressli, clip him in the mouth? I don't like the idea of being followed," Andros said to get her mind off her retreat from him.

"I'm more worried about Fitzsimmons than Fressli," Miranda said, still gloomy. "I don't think I should go back to the Complex. He's gotten suspicious of me—I met a friend from the Temple last week and I think we were seen together. Fitzsimmons thinks the Temple is something evil, and I don't want to end up recycled because of his prejudices about religion. Fressli following you tonight can be a complication. I wanted to take you to the Temple."

"I heard something about it from Mathler; he said you should stay away from it." Andros yawned. "Besides, whatever you have in mind, forget. I'm bushed and I need my sleep. I want to get back at those records first thing tomorrow. I have some cubes from Rodge that I want to correlate with some of Father's stuff..."

"Fool! Can't you see that's why Fitzsimmons had Fressli follow you to Mathler's? He knows how close your father and Mathler were, and he's afraid you might have gotten some information that the Confederation doesn't have."

"But the records are open. Keeping back any evidence would be a crime, and Mathler knows that. Anyway, he didn't give me anything more

than he gave the Confederation or, through them, Fitzsimmons. Unless..." Andros sat up abruptly. "Miranda, did you ever hear of a doctor named Kumuda working with my father? That was the name on my birth documents. Rodge checked it out and found that Kumuda is still living on Mhalkeri, but not practicing medicine. If I can find the doctor who delivered me, I can prove something about my birth."

"I don't know... I'm not too sure... Kumuda?" Miranda searched her memory. "No, that wasn't the chief Medcorpsman that worked with me when I was a child." Miranda seemed to be thinking very hard, but something about the deliberate way she came out with each word made Andros wonder if she was telling him the whole truth.

With Rodge's help, he would track down this Dr. Kumuda, whether Miranda helped him or not. He decided not to tell her about his plans for meeting the doctor at the creche. "Go out to Caliban's, Miranda. He said he would take care of you if you had to leave the Complex, or you can stay here, I guess, but I am going to sleep. I need to get back at those records in the morning."

"What makes you think Fitzsimmons will let you back into the Complex? And if he does, how can you be sure he'll let you out again? Fressli seeing you with a deck of cubes might be enough to end you in a recycle tank, android or not. Fitzsimmons can hole up in that Complex behind a wall of androids and deny he ever saw you. Get it through your head, this man plays his games to come out the winner, even if he has to cheat or kill."

"I have a feeling I'm not going to get any sleep. You are either going to talk me to death, Fitzsimmons is going to sneak in here and murder me, or I go off to your Temple. You win, you vampire-cat." Andros shoved her roughly out of his way and wearily got to his feet. "Take me to your Temple, but if I snore during anything sacred, it's your own fault!"

"You won't fall asleep, I can promise you that." Miranda bounced to her feet and hurried toward the door. "Don't worry about Fressli," she said as the door dilated, "if he follows us I have several ways of losing him, and some of them are downright unpleasant. I have a few things to settle with that pukka myself."

* * *

FRESSLI sat in the middle of a large, greasy puddle. Toppled garbage cans surrounded him, their contents liberally splashed over his dark gray trimslax and tunic. A fish spine hung from one ear, and he was sure there was a rat watching him from the other side of the puddle. He scrambled to his feet, kicking cans out of his way. The resulting deposits of trash and the pain in his foot did nothing good to his temper. He contemplated several nasty ways of having Andros and Miranda tortured, but gave up the fantasies as he felt for his communicator. It was coated with slime, but still workable. He had to check in with Fitzsimmons, and was not looking forward to telling him that he had lost Andros and Miranda.

Fitzsimmons' major concern, luckily for Fressli, was whether the bleeper device was still working. When reassured of that, he was confident that Fressli could again pick up their trail. "I expected that hell-cat to try giving you the slip—that's why the Weeper's on Roarchik. Where are you now? We can figure coordinates from here if you transmit the signal and your general position back to the Complex."

"I'm in the android district of Bleydeaux, and Miranda knows it better than I do." Fressli was profoundly glad Fitzsimmons couldn't see him. "She led me down a dark alley and just disappeared." He was not about to explain how Miranda had, before disappearing, toppled a stack of trash cans down onto him and sent him sprawling.

He removed the tracking unit from his belt and attached it to the communicator. It, too, was slimy, but seemed to work. In less than a minute he had a steady pattern of bleeps on the viewscreen showing Andros' direction. He then punched a code for the area he was in, grubby alley and all, and a maplike grid of glowing light formed over the bleeps.

"I've got you now, Vat!" Fressli muttered, pushing cans out of his way as he followed the map pattern out of the alley and after the blinking light of the bleeper.

* * *

ONCE she was sure they'd lost Fressli, Miranda made straight for the Temple. She had not been able to tell Andros much about it on their trip out from the Port. "I want you to feel it with your emotions, not your reasoning mind," she explained. "So just sit back and accept this."

"This" proved to be a darkened doorway leading off a deserted square

in a slummy section of Bleydeaux. The android quarter, Miranda had called it, the place where industrially-owned androids were housed. From the look of the surrounding buildings, it didn't seem like any place his father would have approved of. Dark alleyways, crumbling buildings, dim lights, and androids stealthily moving through the shadows of their home ground.

The Temple had been a large warehouse of some sort; Miranda was vague as to who owned it, Roarchik's or the androids themselves. By Confederation law, androids could own nothing, not even the tenements their owners had picked out for them to live in.

There was a set of stairs just inside the doorway leading down into a basement. It was too dark to see where he was, but Andros could sense the presence of others all around him. He was pushed from behind by Miranda while someone in front of him led the way with a dimmer-light along what sounded from the echoes of his feet like a narrow corridor. Suddenly a curtain was pulled aside in front of him and there was a burst of light from the room beyond. Swiftly Andros was shoved through the door and into a huge, brightly lit hall. The room was several stories high and at least three hundred meters square. The hall was filled with orderly rows of durasteel pews on each side of a central aisle. The door he had entered through was at the back of the Temple, with the aisle stretching off into the distance in front of him. There were other aisles, down each side of the room, and several doorways leading off the main room. To his left was a choir stall filled with white-robed androids chanting "D-N-A, R-N-A," over and over. At the end of the aisle he could make out the altar. Being able to see it so clearly at such a distance gave him some idea of its massive size. It was a gigantic replica of an android V.A.T. and out of it rose, flowing, ever changing, the double helix of a DNA chain, reaching upwards almost to the roof of the building. He turned to ask Miranda what all of this meant, and found that she was kneeling in the aisle, her arms outstretched toward the helix.

"Blessed be thy name, O Vat! Blessed be the fruit of thy womb, we thy children. Blessed be the Great Mother, Vat!" Miranda's fingers wove the patterns of the DNA chain as she repeated her litany three times, and then got to her feet.

"Come on, the service isn't too far along. Find a seat quickly and don't ask any questions until it's over. They moved slowly down the aisle, edging

around other androids who were kneeling and repeating the dedication to Vat. Miranda found a row of empty seats and darted into it, dragging Andros behind her.

The choir was still chanting but the chant became softer. One voice, a woman's, magnified several times, began a prayer to Vat:

O ALL WISE, GRACIOUS MOTHER OF THESE YOUR CHILDREN,

ALL-POWERFUL DOUBLE HELIX,

OUR ONLY PERFECT PARENT,

SUSTAIN US, THE ANDROID RACE, THIS DAY;

GIVE US THE WISDOM TO FIND OUR PATH

AND THE STRENGTH TO PREVAIL

IN THE DARKEST HOUR AGAINST OUR ENEMIES.

WE THANK YOU FOR THE CHROMOSOMES WE HAVE,

AND FOR THE CHANCE TO FIND OURSELVES IN OURSELVES.

GUIDE US IN OUR ADVERSITY, AND LEAD US

TO THE PERFECTION OF THY PLAN.

PERFECT PEACE!

PERFECT FREEDOM!

After the prayer, there was a pause. The androids sat with bowed heads, each silently in his place. There were easily two thousand androids in the room, and still it was half empty. Andros wondered what it would be like filled with androids, and if it ever, in his father's time, had been.

He was beginning to feel restless. Did the androids have sermons? He hoped that, if they did, they would not take the form of some sort of worship of his father. To have the old man made into a god by his own creatures would have been unpleasant and embarrassing.

Deros, sitting several rows away from Andros and Miranda, and still dressed in his Roarchik uniform, got to his feet. Facing the altar, he intoned the words that Miranda had used when she entered the hall. He, too, wove his fingers in the pattern of the helix. Finished with the litany, Deros turned and bowed to the four corners of the room. "O Watchtowers! I pray you guide me and protect me!" Then he bowed to the androids around him. They responded by nodding their heads, allowing him to continue.

"We are the Children of Vat, and too long have we been in servitude," he said. There were several cries of "Glory to Vat!" from his audience. "We are a people, we are not slaves!"

Again he was greeted with cries of "Glory to Vat!"

"But we must remember that all races go through a period of trial, a time of testing. It is part of the evolution of a race. We are not to accept this trial passively. It is a strengthening of our purpose and our will for the formation of a unity. We are in such a time of testing. We are going through the cleansing fire. We must accept this, our initiation into the bright flame of freedom!"

He sat down again after bowing to the four corners of the room, and there was silence in the hall. Andros did not know if this meant Deros had said something objectionable, or if it was simply part of the ritual.

Another android had risen to his feet. He was too far away for Andros to make out his Matrix group, his company chop mark or his uniform, but one thing was clear even at this distance. The android had hair as black as his own.

"Miranda, look!" Andros hissed, nudging her. "His hair..."

"Hush. Don't say anything." She gave him a cold look which instantly silenced him.

"Our time of testing was in the V.A.T.," said the android, after his ritual litany and bows to the four corners. "We are born free! We need no fire or initiation."

The cries of "Glory to Vat!" seemed to come only from the large group surrounding the speaker. The rest of the hall was strangely silent.

"We are a free people. We need nothing from the humans but to take that which is already ours!"

"Glory to Vat!" The androids around the dark-haired android rose to their feet, beating their clenched fists together in a frenzied rhythm. "Sons of Vat!" they chanted. "SONS OF VAT!"

With a wave of his hand, the android silenced his clique. "We will be free. We will not ask freedom of anyone, or anything. We will not beg to the Council. We will take what is rightfully ours if it costs every life in this room! I have said it." He sat down, his closing ritual performed. A few androids close to him pounded on his back and shoulders in congratulatory approval.

"We are blessed by the presence of Roarchik!" Miranda had risen to her feet. She did not offer the litany or the helix, nor did she bow to the Watchtowers. It was simply a bald statement of fact. Andros Roarchik was here.

The effect of the announcement was electrifying. A hum of excitement filled the hall. Heads turned. Androids stood up on the benches to get a better look at the man seated next to Miranda.

"GLORY BE TO VAT!" The shout was so loud the building shook with it.

"GLORY BE TO VAT! ALL BLESSED IS VAT!" A rhythmic clapping began, a joyous sound of praise echoing off the walls. Androids moved forward down the aisles to see the Roarchik heir. Others ran to the altar, prostrating themselves before it.

"GLORY BE TO VAT WHO HAS GIVEN US THE STRENGTH TO PREVAIL!" Some of the androids were dancing, a swaying handholding chain which wove itself around the hall.

Then from the choir loft, the same clear female voice began the prayer to Vat. One by one the androids returned to their seats, silent once more. Two young girls walked toward the altar and poured a clear liquid into the V.A.T. As the fluid splashed into the tank the helix gave one final twist and sank back into the V.A.T. The altar darkened and the services appeared to be over.

Various groups of androids left their seats to cluster around Miranda and Andros. The android who had been demanding freedom as a right raised a fist in his direction and swept off into a side room, surrounded by his followers.

Andros was caught in a group of Threes and Fours who reached out to touch him lightly on the face, marveling at his even being there. Deros came up beside him and gently moved the crowd back. He turned to say something to Miranda, leaving Andros alone in an open circle of admiring androids. They preserved a set distance from him as though he were a king or a god.

"Ah, Miranda," Andros called to her, "can you answer some questions now? And I think you'd better get me out of here." The excitement of the androids at seeing him had left him shaken.

"Yes, just a minute." She pushed her way through the mob and began to lead him in the direction of a side aisle rather than the main one, which was choked with androids either leaving or waiting to see Andros.

"Deros says he think's there's a human somewhere in the area. A Three at the door says he tried to get in by claiming to be a Confederation agent. He had no I.D., so he was turned down; we don't care, as a general rule, to allow humans in here."

"Do you think it was Fressli?"

"I don't know. The Three said the human had red hair, and had it not been for his unmarked face would have taken him for an android. He even asked the man if he was an unmarked Super, the fool!" Miranda chewed her lower lip, a sure sign that she was doing some very heavy thinking. "Oh well, even if it was Fressli, he didn't get in; but I don't like his knowing you might have been here—and I hope he doesn't get any ideas about passing himself off as a Super. In some parts of Bleydeaux that could get him killed—or worse, directed to another Super. I'll put a tail on him; the tailer, tailed! Come on, Deros wants you to meet Bron."

"Who's Bron?" Andros pushed his way out into the side aisle, stopping to shake hands with various androids who wanted to touch the son of Erik Roarchik. He noted an absence of Ones and Twos in this friendly demonstration, and wondered why.

"Bron is the leader of the Sons of Vat. He's the fellow who was sounding off about fighting for freedom."

"The one with the same color hair as mine."

"Yes, him," answered Deros. "And one or both of you will no doubt come to hate that resemblance. It's hot-winds like him that are giving the android freedom movement a bad name. In fact, he could set off the kind of explosion Fitzsimmons would love."

"Are a lot of the Ones and Twos following him? I noticed they were a bit standoffish, even after the welcome I got when I was announced."

"No, he has a few good workers, but mostly he's a rabble rouser. The rest of us have better manners than to go flinging ourselves on you. And then," Deros grinned, "there's folks like Miranda and I who will save our huzzahs until you do something constructive for the android race." Deros led the way into the side room that Andros had seen Bron and his followers enter after the services.

Bron was standing in the middle of a group of admiring androids in various uniforms, but all wearing red scarves around their right arms. Most of them were Twos—or marked like Twos. Bron was a Matrix-One by the marks on his face, but one look at him convinced Andros he was a Super. He was almost enough like Andros in coloring and size to be his brother; only the facial tattoos and slightly heavier build made a difference.

"When was Bron made?" Andros whispered to Miranda, as they stood on the fringes of Bron's acolytes.

"Next Super after me." Miranda threw him an arch smile. "He was the first male child your father made."

"Figured as much." Andros was not pleased to find himself facing his own doppelganger. The resemblance was external only—Bron's rhetoric contained nothing with which Andros could agree. But Andros was new to the problems of being an android. Bron had lived with them all his life.

"We will not tolerate Fitzsimmons any longer," Bron was lecturing his followers. "We must unite and free ourselves. We do not need this new Roarchik *human* to lead us. We are free men, not his slaves."

"Don't fret yourself," Andros spoke up from the edge of the crowd. "I have no intention of being your Messiah, and I want Fitzsimmons out as badly as you do. But if you don't mind a word of advice, my father tried the methods you propose and look where it got him."

Bron turned to face Andros. The crowd parted to leave a clear path between the two of them. "I don't need your advice, any more than I need your help, Roarchik. I don't need anything from a human. I will take what I want, not beg for it." His eyes swept Andros with cold contempt. It was clear he disliked the resemblance as much as Andros did.

"Then you'll find yourself in a martyr's grave very quickly. Do you really think your Sons of Vat are strong enough to fight the whole Confederation? There's a lot of heavy firepower on their side, and you will need the support of every android in the Confederation, Roarchiks and all the others. You don't even have the support of the few androids here tonight—continue as you are and you'll lose the same way my father did. Martyrdom must be very fashionable on Mhalkeri."

"But I will win. The truth and justice of my cause will help me win the hearts of all androids, just as it helped your father. And I know the one thing he did not—the weak underbelly of the Confederation." Bron smiled coldly. "The Confederation is run by androids and could not survive a general strike. I would lead such a strike."

"Not bad. The efficiency would be cut by half, paperwork would pile up... yes, you're right, that is the weak point. In fact, if I were setting out to destroy the Confederation completely, that's the method I would use. But I would stop spouting slogans and work with more than my mouth." Andros watched the android turn brick red. Talk was an easy commodity, action was not.

He wondered why his father had not thought of a strike. Andros' knowledge of how the Confederation worked convinced him that even the threat of a strike could bring it to its knees. *Father was never one for logic, though. He always liked to ride full tilt at a windmill instead of sitting down and figuring out how old or weak his giant might be. Father preferred tilting with the gaudy, very visible sails of the windmills and was swept to his death because he didn't realize they were giants, after all.* Andros would not have made that mistake. He knew StarFleet too well, having been a part of it for so long at the Academy. He knew the giant was there and had very weak legs. The bite of a rabid dog

would do more damage than the growling of a tinsel lion. In Bron, Andros saw a perfect rabid dog—and he, Andros, could show him where to bite.

"I'm not about to help you destroy a whole civilization, but I do agree you're on the right path." Andros paused. "You have only one problem to overcome—not all the androids will follow you."

"And so you will lead them, Roarchik? Do you think simply because you're human and a Roarchik you are sacred to us?"

"No, and as I've already said, I'm no martyr. I like living too much."

"Even as an android? You'll never be able to prove yourself anything else." Bron laughed harshly. "Look at us, two cut from the same V.A.T., not human. No one will ever believe you to be anything but an android if they see me beside you."

"They will follow the name Roarchik, unfortunately. Miranda has made that very clear to me. Not that I want the job but, android or not, I would be better at it than you are."

"Miranda is a fool!" Bron turned to glare at her. "You should never have brought this stupid maw-worm to us. He's useless to our cause and would only enslave us if we gave him the chance. I won't risk my life again for the name of Roarchik."

"Nor would I, Bron." He was as upset by the resemblance as she'd known he would be. Watching the two of them looking like identical gamecocks, Miranda wondered if Bron might be the catalyst that would push Andros into leading the androids. "But Andros is right, the whole race of androids would follow the name Roarchik. What is there to follow in the name 'Bron'?" She walked out of the room, Deros and Andros close behind her.

"You shouldn't have said that to him, Miranda," Deros said. "He thinks he's doing the best thing for the androids with his Sons of Vat. Crossing him can be dangerous. He's a fanatic, and his followers obey every order he gives. There may not be many of them, but it would take only one or two to kill you, or to start another riot in Bleydeaux."

"He is right about one thing, though," Andros spoke up from behind them. He'd been mulling over some of the things Bron had said. "A general

strike would do it if you could get every android to cooperate. I wonder..."

"We may make a Messiah out of you yet!" Deros slapped him on the shoulder.

"And I intend to dance on Bron's grave," added Miranda, falling into step with Deros and Andros. "I have a feeling that won't be too far in the future."

"We don't need any more deaths," Andros frowned. "Wasn't my father enough for you?"

An android with the markings of a Two and bright red hair couldn't have agreed with him less. When Fitzsimmons heard about Bron, that android's days would be very short. Fressli stayed well back of Andros and his group; they were the only ones who could identify him. Bless that stupid Three at the door asking if he were a Super. All it had taken was some makeup and waiting until another guard was at the door. It had been easy to convince the even more stupid Four that he, Two-Fress, was an android from the Space Port. And now he had a lot to tell Fitzsimmons. Carefully he trailed along after Andros and Miranda, his face a copy of calm Twoness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Are you sure this Bron is a Super?" Fitzsimmons leaned back in his chair and watched Fressli remove his android markings with a chemical cleanser. Fressli had spent the night trailing Bron once Andros had left for the Port, and had found the Sons of Vat headquarters for his troubles. He had loitered outside the building until dawn, watching the androids that came and went; Bron had stayed inside.

"He's a Super, all right—and a double for young Roarchik. I thought they would wet their trimslax from shock when they first saw each other." Fressli giggled, then stopped abruptly. "Bron is the one to worry about, not Roarchik. He's a dangerous thing, sir. He plans to take over Bleydeaux with this Sons of Vat group of his. I think we should have him killed now that we know where to find him."

"Possibly." Fitzsimmons toyed with the infocube containing a record of everything Fressli had seen and heard in the Temple of Vat. "He isn't too

fond of Roarchik, is he? I wonder if we can put that to use."

"You should see how much Bron resembles the kid. I could almost believe the old man used his own son as a model for his androids."

Fitzsimmons frowned. "You can believe anything you want but don't you dare say it aloud. The *man* Andros is an android, and if he's ever able to prove otherwise..." Fitzsimmons' hands clenched on the cube, almost crushing it. "I think the time has come to make sure Roarchik is never able to prove anything again."

"Do you want me to reV.A.T. him? I have a little return compliment owed to him and Miranda, and I want very much to deliver it." Fressli bitterly remembered the trap and the mud puddle. It hadn't been easy tracking them to the Temple, and the weak signal of the bleeper had misled him several times. "And couldn't you have put a better bleep on the kid? I almost lost him when they went into the Temple. It doesn't pick up at all underground."

It was only because your computer said there was an android meeting place there that I was able to find them at all. And I needed to be an android to even manage that."

"I know, but it was the best I could do. He would have felt anything bigger penetrating his skin." Fitzsimmons looked down at his infocube, then put it into the viewer. He moved the tape along until he had a clear picture of Bron on the screen. "No, I don't want this one killed at all. I think we'll have him kill Roarchik for us, and then keep him in line by threatening to let the rest of the androids know what he has done. A tame android like this could be an asset."

"He looks so much like the kid; do you think we could pass him off as Roarchik with the Council, or use him to control the rest of the Supers?"

"Those tattoos aren't as removable as your own makeup, Fressli. The low radiation traces remain on the skin even after the surface is clear. The Confederation insisted on that protection against androids masquerading as humans. All it takes is a g-counter run over the skin and the marks would register. Then too, Bron is too familiar to the Supers. They all know by now that he looks like Roarchik. I think it would be much better for him to kill Roarchik and have the fear of being torn apart by an enraged mob of androids always with him. He could be useful to me." Fitzsimmons

stared at the screen, stroking his beard and looking pleased with himself.

"Can you be sure Bron will kill Andros? It would be hard to guarantee that, what with Miranda sheep-dogging the sprat."

"We should take care of Miranda, too. She hasn't reported back in this morning. I have a suspicion our little doggy has run away. Yes, we'll get both of them." Fitzsimmons was lost in thought.

"Tell me," he said abruptly, "where would you go to find the worst anti-android faction in Bleydeaux? I seem to remember you telling me about some bar or club..."

"Oh, the Hell-Vat! They hate androids, claim all the good jobs in Bleydeaux are taken by nonhumans. They're nothing but a bunch of hotwinds who'd never do an honest credit's worth of work even if they could get it. Shuttle racers, I think most of them are. Tough bunch. They waylaid me once, knowing I worked at the Complex. Lucky for me I had a couple of labor Threes with me to beat the slime out of them."

"Umm, I think I'll pay the Hell-Vat a visit and," he looked down at the viewscreen, "I think I'll take this along to show them—things like the Prayer to Vat and Bron's speech should have just the effect we want. Stir things up a little for the Supers and keep them off guard." Fitzsimmons took the cube out of the viewer and pocketed it. "I also intend to meet Bron. I'll get both sides on *my* side—and Andros Roarchik is going to be exactly in the middle!"

* * *

THE Hell-Vat was on a dingy side street in a low-rent district of Bleydeaux. The building had obviously been at one time a repair shop for shuttlecarts. There was a sign over the sliding doors, but its letters were so faded by time and dirt that Fitzsimmons could not make out what they had once said. Paint peeled from the outside walls of the building, and tall weeds grew against its walls.

A muscular young man leaned in the half-open doorway, watching Fitzsimmons approach. The Racer was dressed in a black leather vest and a pair of heavily patched trimslax, the general uniform of a racing car gang.

"You want somethin', fancyman?" he asked out of one corner of a gap-toothed mouth.

"Yes, I'm looking for some people who aren't too fond of androids." Fitzsimmons stopped at the door, his way blocked by the Racer.

"Dat so? What would you want with folks like dat if you was to find dem?" The racer looked Fitzsimmons up and down, eyeing his obviously expensive yellow tunic and blue embroidered short cape. Fitzsimmons doubted the wisdom of wearing so expensive an outfit; he had been hoping it would impress the Racers, but realized now it might only serve as an invitation to a mugging.

"I have some information about the Sons of Vat," he said with as much booming confidence as he could muster. "They're preparing to take over all of Bleydeaux."

"You sure o' dis?" The Racer was interested in spite of himself. Fitzsimmons was sure he was ripe for the bait.

"I have here an infocube which a friend of mine smuggled out of the Temple of Vat. Temple, my mother's feet! It's a nest of revolution, a pesthole of stinking traitors! It must be crushed by people brave enough to stand up for what is right and decent in this city!" Fitzsimmons knew he was buttering the bread rather thickly, but he was dealing with a very thickheaded man.

"Da Mac would like dat cube. He always is sayin' dem androids are gonna kill us all iffen we don't stomp dem first. You come wid me, da Mac will be real interested in dis here cube."

Fitzsimmons followed the Racer into a grease-stained room half filled with shuttlecart parts and cut down racing buggies. He recognized several missing shuttles from his own Complex in the process of being stripped down, but decided this would not be the time to mention that.

Since his companion had his back to him, Fitzsimmons was able to get a very close look at the design applied to the back of the Racer's vest. It was a nightmare of garish colors, and depicted a scene of an android being murdered in a particularly graphic and bloody fashion. The design had a border of skulls and crossbones and several less savory portions of android anatomy interwoven in a wreath, with blood red as its principal

color. Fitzsimmons, who had ordered killed more than his share of androids, still found the design disturbingly nauseating.

The Mac proved to be an even bigger and dirtier version of his doorkeeper. He was seated at a battered table, a liter-sized bottle of beer in one massive paw of a hand. Fitzsimmons had always thought of himself as a large man, but now he had met one even bigger.

"Hi, Jollie, why'd ya bring me a Fancy in here like dis wid no warnin' nor nothin'?" The Mac scratched under his sweaty armpits, and glared up at Fitzsimmons from under the thick black eyebrows that grew together over the center of his nose. "Look at him, a clown like dat. Why'd ja do it, uh?"

"He knows somethin' about dem vattin' androids, says dey gonna stomp us before we can stomp dem. It's just like you said, Mac, dem Vats is dangerous! I thought you'd wanna talk to him, get the straight stick outta him yourself." The Racer shoved Fitzsimmons forward.

"Uh, you know somethin', you tell it to da Mac," Jollie said. "An' if it's not real good, well, da Mac is gonna be makin' a rug out o' your hide and usin' your teeth for a necklace, uh, Mac?"

"Right!" The Mac took a deep swig from his bottle and said, "Okay, you got anything, show it ta me."

Fitzsimmons glanced around the room for a viewer and saw a battered, out of date model sitting on one of the workbenches. "Does that thing work?" he asked, walking toward it and pushing the cube into place.

"Uh, it works." The Mac got slowly to his feet, still clutching his beer bottle, and ambled over to the viewer, kicking engine parts out of his way.

"Look at this." Fitzsimmons adjusted the focus on the old machine and set the tape at the beginning of the Prayer to Vat. "You'll really get a winder of a jolt out of what I'm going to show you!"

The Mac only grunted and began to watch the film on the still slightly out of focus screen.

* * *

EVENTS were going just as Fitzsimmons had planned. The tape had been enough to enrage the Racer leader, and make him swear to tear apart every android he could find in Bleydeaux. He'd been fully prepared to gather together his group and run amok through the streets immediately, killing androids where he found them, but Fitzsimmons was able, after much explanation, to convince the dimwitted Mac to wait until dark and catch all the android leaders at their Temple and destroy them at one blow. The Mac promised to meet Fitzsimmons in front of the Temple at dusk with as many of his men as he could gather, plus any other dissatisfied Bleydeauxs who would join their cause.

Fitzsimmons left the Hell-Vat minus his cape, which the Mac had admired with ponderous hints until Fitzsimmons had given it to him. But he felt the trade worthwhile; he had accomplished that half of his plan with ease, and the cape could be replaced. The second half of his scheme, Bron, would not be accomplished by anything so simple as giving up an embroidered cloak. In fact, he planned to give Bron even less; it was Bron who would do the giving—Andros' dead body, with any luck at all.

When Fitzsimmons returned to his office, Fressli was waiting for him with a stack of infocubes. "I went down to the S.O.V. headquarters and took some shots of the androids. Several of them have been identified as Supers." Fressli pushed a cube into the viewer.

"Bron has a couple of deputies, both marked as Ones. And there's a black guy, unmarked, but since he's at the S.O.V.'s, he's an android too. I'd heard that old Roarchik had done some Malcolm-X Colony types, but I thought most of them died with him. I'll try to get more of a line on the Malcolm-X as soon as Phillips can get me some data—I left him there to watch things. He's been reporting in every fifteen minutes or so."

"Good. You get to bed, you look like the wrath of the gods."

Fressli grinned. "I've been going on pep-ups, and I could do with a nap, but," he glanced down at the viewer, "don't you think it would be safer if I went with you to the S.O.V.'s?. I'll carry my laser and shoot our way out if necessary. Going into their headquarters by yourself could be dangerous. You're not exactly the best loved man in Bleydeaux, you know."

"Particularly by the androids. But the very element of risk is what's needed to bring down big game like Bron. He'll know I must have something important to say to him if I show my skin in S.O.V. territory.

Besides, you're inclined to gutshoot far more often than I'd like. If I ever hear of you going behind my back and doing anything without my express approval, it'll be very unhealthy for you. I mean that. I run Roarchik's not you."

"Yes sir," Fressli replied sullenly. Fitzsimmons was taking a lot on himself lately. Fressli almost hoped Bron *would* trim him down to size.

"I'll send one of our Threes ahead to let him know I'm coming," Fitzsimmons continued. "I think that will intrigue him sufficiently to wait until he's had a chance to talk to me before trying to kill me." Fitzsimmons smiled coldly. "I think I'm going to enjoy this. Big game hunting has always been one of my favorite sports, and I haven't had much time for it on Mhalkei. Android hunting may turn out to be the best of all. I like a wily animal; it makes the kill that much more satisfying."

* * *

BRON met Fitzsimmons at the door of the S.O.V. building. His deputies stood behind him, watching Fitzsimmons get out of his speed shuttle. He was sure they were armed. And one of them was the Malcolm-X model Fressli had mentioned. He wore no uniform—instead he was dressed in civilian garb of a blue tunic and trimslax, with a red scarf around his right arm. As Fitzsimmons started up the path to the door, a couple of androids, both of them Twos, fell into step beside him. They were just close enough to take him out should he start anything. Bron signaled the androids to frisk Fitzsimmons. They found him clean of weapons.

"It was very brave of you to come here unarmed," Bron said, "but I suppose you're used to dealing with androids who can't harm you—like babies still in their womb sacs. We aren't quite so harmless. How did you know I wouldn't have you shot down as soon as you cleared your cart?"

"I was much more worried that you wouldn't be here. Your leaving would have been good tactics for something as hunted as you are. But killing me without finding my reasons for being here could have been stupid, and you're not stupid."

He stared hard at Bron. He could see why Fressli had suggested switching Bron for Andros. The resemblance was very close, too close. Bron would have to die, if the androids tried pulling Fressli's trick of passing Bron off as Andros. The Mac and his group would take care of the

messy details in such a way that he would never be connected with it. He smiled a sleamlike grin for Bron's benefit and hoped the android would not have to be killed until his usefulness was over. "You look a good deal like young Roarchik," he said, following Bron and three of his escort into the house.

Bron spat at Fitzsimmons' feet, "That clown! He's no more worthy to run Roarchik's than you are."

"I only do my job as ordered by the Confederation. Blame the Council for your problems, not me. I'm just a simple, overworked bureaucrat," Fitzsimmons lied smoothly. "I had to kill the rebels, they were killing humans...."

"And the babies in the womb sacs, were they rebels too?" The Malcolm-X model spoke up.

"It's all right, Nusair," said Bron. "We'll make this butcher pay for his crimes."

Fitzsimmons spread his hands apologetically. "I had to do that, too. Did you know that some of those android embyros were going to be Telepaths? The Confederation couldn't allow that. We had enough problems when the first telepathic Jugs were produced."

"And the Jugs are human, so you couldn't kill those babies, but we don't count because we're things, right?" The young blond One in a ComFleet dress kilt shoved against him as they went through the doorway and into a narrow hall.

"Garyl," Bron said coldly, "let me handle this." Bron led Fitzsimmons into a sparsely furnished room containing a bench and several torn cushions on the floor. The whole building had a very temporary air to it, Fitzsimmons noticed. There had been weeds in the yard and the interior was dusty and drab.

"Sit," Bron said, pointing to one of the pillows. Fitzsimmons awkwardly squatted on one of the well-worn lumps. The stuffing was coming out of a tear and the cushion was dirty. He found it difficult to find a comfortable position on it, and his legs jutted out at a ludicrous angle.

Bron sat on the bench with one of the androids who he identified as

One-Chane. The other two androids took up positions behind Bron, their hands resting on their hips in an exaggerated parody of power.

"All right, why are you here?" asked Bron. "I assume this is not for the purpose of telling us you plan to leave Mhalkeri?"

"I'm in charge of Roarchik's for as long as the Confederation wants me there. I am not a free agent; I go where my government sends me." Fitzsimmons sighed, trying to sound very put upon. "I came here for your help, really. It's about Andros Roarchik. He will probably be put in control of the Complex soon, and he has some plans for it that I don't like at all."

"Such as firing you?" asked Garyl. "That's what I would do in his place."

Fitzsimmons looked up at the handsome android, trying not to show his dislike too openly; he disapproved of using androids in ComFleet, even if most of their jobs were menial. "Roarchik intends to follow his father's plans and gather an android army together to conquer the whole Confederation. I think he plans a strike or something." Fitzsimmons watched Bron out of the corner of his eye to see how he took this bit of bait. Bron's own speech, and his conversation with Andros, had given Fitzsimmons a clear picture of Bron's plans; ascribing them to Andros should stick in the android's craw. Judging from his face, it had done just that.

"I think you're lying," Bron answered. "I talked with him just last night and he has no intentions of freeing the androids. He's too much of a coward to risk the sort of war you describe."

"Did I say anything about freeing the androids? He wants to destroy the Confederation because they won't let him be an astrogator, the spoiled brat! He doesn't give a hole in space for the androids. You should know that if you talked to him. You would all be used to run ComFleet for him. He would be the supreme head of the military system that dared to call him an android. Can't you see how much he hates all of you? He's running himself into the ground trying to prove he's not like you. He despises you. As soon as he's gotten what he wants, you'll all be in the same condition you're in now. Slavery for Roarchik is no different than slavery for anyone else. His name won't make your labor any easier. Is that what the Sons of Vat want for the android race?" Fitzsimmons' bait was in place; he had either enticed his beast or he was a dead man. He watched the play of emotions on Bron's face and glanced one by one at the android's

subordinates.

Anyone, he thought, who thinks that androids are inscrutable has never spent enough time studying them. These are as transparent as viewscreens.

"All right, if what you say is true, why are you here? You could call the Confederation, report your findings, and they would take care of Roarchik. You've never shown any interest in bettering conditions for the androids, so why now this sudden appeal to us?"

Fitzsimmons would have to stalk this Super very warily; the game was wily indeed. "But I would rather handle it quietly. Dr. Roarchik's name is a well loved one among the androids. If I told the Confederation about his plans and he were arrested or killed, I'd never leave this planet alive. Miranda would kill me with her bare hands for harming her precious Andros."

"Miranda!" Bron spat again. "That human-lover. She's not fit to be a child of Vat. First you, then Roarchik. She's a common joygirl, fit only for the scummiest of houses. She'd sell all of us for one human's bed."

"She's helping Roarchik get the android backing he needs. She's his best weapon against you. I've been using her to get information about you androids; how else did you think I knew where to find you?"

That worked. Bron rose to his feet, his face crimson. The tattoos stood out like stains on his cheeks. "She'll die for this, she and her lover. We will not be slaves to another Roarchik. The last one promised us freedom and gave us death. This one will not be allowed to give us slavery. I'll kill him myself. I vow it by the Great Mother Vat!" Bron raised his clenched fists and beat them together. "Vat! Vat! VAT!" he shouted, his followers echoing him and adding to the din.

"This man may leave here unmolested," Bron announced. "We have more important things to do at the moment than give him the punishment he deserves." He turned to Fitzsimmons. "I'll take care of Andros Roarchik. His crime is greater than yours in that he masquerades as a friend to the androids, while your opinions have always been known. But if you don't shape up, your own time will come soon, very soon."

"I fully intend to make as many reforms as I can in the android

Complex—as many, that is, as my orders allow me to do." He smiled up at Bron and his group as he scrambled clumsily to his feet. One leg had gone to sleep under him, and he stumbled. Bron deftly caught him and steadied him on his feet.

"Thank you very much, Bron. Thank you for *all* your help. I'll listen to your warning, and deal with it as it deserves. Just wait and see how much I can do for you." Fitzsimmons smiled his best sleam smile.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Why do the androids worship Vat?" Andros looked up from his brunch. He had stayed late at the Temple talking to androids who had known his father, hoping for some information about his birth. He'd learned nothing new, but had gained a little more respect for his father's creations.

"Would you have preferred worshipping your father as a god instead?" Miranda took a bite out of her egg sandwich, watching him over the top of the thick bread.

"No, I would have hated that. I'd have died on the spot if they started any prayer to Roarchik—that, or laughed myself sick."

"Exactly. That's why your father set up Vat as a totem for the android race, to prevent them worshipping him. He knew that would be silly. He was, at his best, a modest man."

"So he invented Vat instead."

"Yes, he and Caliban together. They thought the new race of Supers needed a mythos and a religion just like any other race. Unfortunately, they forgot to take into consideration that a religion must arise naturally out of the minds of those involved. You can't give a religion to a people without some cultural background behind it."

"Then you're saying the androids don't really believe in Vat?" Andros felt a sense of disappointment. Something in the services had touched him deep in his subconscious, and he was still trying to sort out his feelings about the Great Goddess Vat.

"Oh, some of them do, mostly the Threes and Fours. The rest of us either reconcile it to our lifestyles or change it into something we can believe in. I personally find worship of the Great Mother comforting, even though I know it was invented by humans. Others, like Bron, have things like the Sons of Vat to fulfill their needs. I think as we mature and gain a true culture of our own, folk figures will develop, cults will form and Vat will become much more real to us."

"I saw you kneeling in the aisle. You seemed very caught up in all of it."

"Yes, of course. I was taught by Caliban and your father that Vat was my religion; I have the right to question it, or argue with some of its tenets, but I still believe in it. I can see the logical necessity for belief in something. I think your father and Caliban were right in thinking the androids needed Vat. Their only mistake was in making it up out of whole cloth and handing it to us instead of letting us work it out for ourselves."

"I found it strangely appealing. I never was very religious before."

"It is a religion founded by humans; perhaps it should be a religion *for* humans."

"Do you think that's how religions got started, by men thinking them up and other men adding to them?" Andros was truly intrigued by the theological argument Miranda was making. He himself had been raised in a loose form "of humanistic nature worship to which he paid only occasional lip service. He knew many of his fellow cadets from Earth had been either Christians, Wiccan, Nerthusian, or Materialists. Some of the alien students had had religions so strange that he could not have begun to understand them.

"Oh," Miranda said, "I'm not denying the basic existence of the Gods or their prophets. I think all religions need a strong central goal and a powerful leader to give them their original impetus. But the religion must match the culture it is in and do something for the people involved. Vat, as yet, does neither. In time She may become all that your father and Caliban wished Her to be. I hope so; we androids need something good to believe in."

"Yes, just as long as it isn't the cult of St. Roarchik!" Andros laughed nervously.

"That's not as funny as you might think. If you're as much help to the android race as I think you're going to be, you might be made into a saint in future generations." Andros had gone pale at her half-joking suggestion, so she hurriedly added, "But don't worry about it. Sainthood for you is not likely to be conferred for several generations. We have to give people time to forget some of your more obnoxious tendencies and remember only the good things about you."

"You're taking it for granted that I'm going to help the androids. I thought I'd made my position on that quite clear."

"You did. But your father programmed me to turn off my audio equipment at the first mention of the word 'astrogator'."

"Very funny. I will admit I'm beginning to understand some of the problems, but I'm still not convinced androids should be free, nor am I at all sure I am the one to lead them—plus," he ticked off the reasons on his fingers, "I am still a very devout coward. If I believe in anything, it's the sanctity of my own skin and my wish to keep it attached to me at all times."

"I'll accept that for now," Miranda said cheerfully. "Will you come back to the Temple with me tonight? I want you to get a better picture of what life is like for an android."

"Subtle, aren't you? Do you really think my talking to all the androids in the universe will change anything?"

"There's always hope for anyone, even you. Then too, if you can't prove you're human you'd better start learning more about Vat. You're going to need something strong to believe in if you find out you're an android."

Andros choked on his lunch.

* * *

MIRANDA and Andros managed to be on time for the evening services. They crossed the wide square in front of the Temple just as the sun was setting, and were met at the door by Deros.

"It's a good thing you two didn't go back to the Complex today," he said after greetings had been exchanged. "Fitzsimmons is on to you, Miranda,

and he isn't too happy with our Roarchik, either. Grapevine has it that they might be planning something nasty with Bron. One of my contacts saw Fitzsimmons coming out of S.O.V. headquarters this afternoon, and he was smiling like a fullbellied sleam who'd just dined on a morsel of android and enjoyed it immensely."

"Ugh, I don't like the sound of that!" Miranda did some more lip-chewing. "If Bron let Fitzsimmons leave the S.O.V. alive, there must have been some reason for it—and anything that unites Bron and Fitzsimmons can't be too good for us."

"Right. Several of us will keep a close watch on Bron tonight. If any trouble develops we'll get Andros out as quickly as possible." '

"Good. We'll sit close to the back of the hall. If the S.O.V.'s start anything, we'll make a rush for the door."

Deros nodded. "I'll station myself at the top of the stairs just inside the entrance and keep watch there. If Bron leaves a few of his group outside I can deal with them to give you a clear path out. I'll have a couple of labor Three with me to help out if a clean break is needed."

"And if that doesn't work, we go to Plan Drina."

"I'll tell her to stand by, then; she wasn't going to be in the Temple tonight—someone's hatching—but I can get message to her to be on alert status."

"That ought to cover it. Blessed be Vat."

"Blessed be Vat," Deros repeated, leading them into the maze that led to the Temple main hall.

"What is 'Plan Drina'?" Andros whispered in the dark.

"Hush!" Miranda's voice came out of the darkness. "We're almost to the hall and I can tell the services are about to start. I want you to see this from the beginning." Miranda grabbed for his hand and hurried him toward the lighted doorway, then knelt hastily in the aisle to begin her litany to Vat. Andros knelt awkwardly beside her and tried to follow her hand movements as he intoned the "Blessed be."

They found seats in the last row just as the choir filed into the stalls and the chant of *D-N-A, R-N-A* began. The lights in the hall dimmed and a soft tremor of subsonics moved gently across the crowd, soothing them and preparing their minds for the appearance of Vat. The two young girls in white robes that Andros had seen last night came into the hall. One of them carried a womb membrane filled with red nutrient fluid. She placed the womb gently into the V.A.T. and began to sing.

"CHILD OF VAT, BLESSED BE YE; CHILD OF VAT, BLESSED BE YE!"

The other girl connected the wires at the top of the V.A.T. She sang: "GREAT MOTHER VAT, BLESSED BE YE; GREAT MOTHER VAT, BLESSED BE YE!"

They stepped back from the altar and began to dance the convolutions of the double helix as the giant glowing form rose upward out of the tank, towering above their heads.

"BLESSED IS VAT!" the girls cried aloud. They were echoed by the choir, which then continued its chant of *D-N-A, R-N-A*, until it softly flowed into the prayer to Vat.

Andros watched the service with great interest. His conversation with Miranda about religion, and the knowledge that his father had designed this ritual, gave it a reality it had lacked the night before. His father should have stuck to theology rather than revolt, Andros thought dreamily, caught up in the flow of the prayer. He found himself chanting parts of it under his breath as it continued.

SUSTAIN US, THE ANDROID RACE, THIS DAY;

GIVE US THE WISDOM TO FIND OUR PATH

The concept of needing a religion was becoming increasingly clear. One other idea scraped and jangled in his mind. If, as he had always thought, an android was a "thing," it would have no need to believe in anything but its programming. He remembered the Four and his flowers, and wondered if he was here, giving thanks to Vat for their beauty. That android's worship of Vat would actually be a worship of nature itself. Andros' own brand of nature worship had become over the years a stale, stylized husk of what it must once have been. He idly wondered who or what had invented his religion. The prayer to Vat soared to the ceiling, Andros

chanting loudly along with the female android in the choir.

PERFECT PEACE!

PERFECT FREEDOM!

He was one with these people; he was, with all his heart, worshipping Vat!

Startled, Andros could see what a powerful thing his father and Mathler had created. The prayer had much in it that was Mathler's style. Andros was sure the old man had written most of it; his father had never shown any gift for beautiful use of language. The line about "prevailing against our enemies" sounded like something his father would have added, but no matter; the prayer was beautiful. The service was beautiful. Vat was beautiful. Blessed be Vat!

The time had come for the speaking, and Andros found himself on his feet. He intoned the litany to Vat three times and saluted the Watchtowers. "I, too, want to follow Vat," he said. "I can see the right of all androids to be considered as people and not things. Things do not worship gods. Things have no feelings..." He would have gone on to make the point that in worship of Vat, the androids had proved themselves to be independent beings, but his speech was cut short by screams of rage from the section where the Sons of Vat were gathered.

"Do you hear what he calls us—THINGS!" Bron was on his feet, pointing at Andros. "He will enslave us by the use of Vat. He will soften our resolve by the worship of an uncaring Goddess which his father invented! Shall we follow another Roarchik into hell?"

"NO, NO! SONS OF VAT! FREEDOM FOR THE SONS OF VAT! OUR GODDESS IS NOT THAT OF ROARCHIK!" Bron's clique were all on their feet screaming and beating their fists together. **"OUR GODDESS IS AN ANDROID, SHE IS NOT THE HELIX OF ROARCHIK! ANDROIDS, JOIN US IN THE WORSHIP OF THE TRUE GODDESS!"**

"Kill him, kill the blasphemer!" Bron yelled. "Freedom for the Sons of Vat and those children of Vat who follow us!"

Several of the S.O.V.s were running up the aisle toward Miranda and Andros, knives glistening in their hands. "Death to the slime who would

suck us down into slavery!"

"DEATH TO ROARCHIK!"

Miranda clutched at Andros. "I think this is our exit cue. Quick! Deros is forming a wedge at the outer door, follow the maze to the left on all turns and you'll get out safely." Miranda pushed their way through the milling androids. Several Ones had rushed out into the aisles to stop the S.O.V.s, giving Andros a clear path to the curtained doorway and into the maze.

"But where are you going?" he asked, rushing past the last androids between him and the door.

"I have something to do here—Plan Drina. I'll see you soon if we both make it through this." Miranda was gone, lost in the crowd, leaving Andros to find his own way through the dark maze. He could hear the savage cries for his blood ringing in the hall behind him, and the shouts of Deros calling something from the top of the stairs. Andros climbed the steps two at a time, trying to make out what Deros was yelling at him.

There was another sound from the top of the stairs, a dull roar which seemed to be coming from outside in the square. Andros could not identify it. He stopped at the top of the stairs, but Deros was not there. He was uncertain what to do next. He could hear the group of Ones who had come to his aid in the hall at the bottom of the steps, holding back the S.O.V.'s. He could hear more androids running through the maze—but friend or foe, he could not tell. There was only a mixture of screams of *Blessed be Vat!*, *SONS OF VAT!*, *FREEDOM FOR THE CHILDREN OF VAT!* ringing in the corridors.

Then there was a chilling shriek of bloodlust from the square outside, and the sound of a scuffle—then Deros' voice raw with pain... cut off in mid-agony.

* * *

FRESSLI had arrived at the Temple square in time to see Andros and Miranda enter the building. Things were going according to plan so far. To make sure of success, Fressli had with him some unauthorized equipment—a laser. He knew the androids were not allowed to carry lasers, and the Racers could only afford an occasional vibroblade, so he'd

decided to make very sure Andros died. Nothing would be left to chance. Fitzsimmons would arm his men from the Complex with knives or riot clubs, but there was always the chance that sneaky pukka rat Andros would escape. It was none too easy to escape a laser blast. He tucked the weapon deeper into his trimslax and flipped on his communicator to report in to the Complex. Fitzsimmons wanted to destroy the top android leadership and here it was, just waiting for him and his men.

Fressli hastily removed his android makeup. The Mac and his Racers were due any moment, and it would not be too safe for Fressli if they decided to make him their first victim. Rubbing briskly at his face, he could hear someone coming from the north side of the square. He started out from his well-shadowed hiding place and then ducked back into it.

The group filing nervously into the square was not a mob of unruly Racers, but various citizens of Bleydeaux led by the Records Chief and his secretary, Rodge. The group formed a line in front of the Temple encircling the door, and waited.

There was the ring of hobnailed boots on the cobbles of the square. The Mac and his Racers, about fifty strong, had arrived. They milled about on one corner of the square, uncertain of the silent group in front of the Temple.

"Tell the Boss we've got trouble," Fressli muttered into his communicator. "Mathler's got a bunch of Goodies together to protect the androids. That damn Jug of his must have picked up on something—blasted Empath!"

"Don't worry, the Boss is on his way with sixty of our people. We'll soon convince the Bleydeaux nicelys to crawl back into their candy canes." The tinny voice on the other end of the line belonged to one of the perimeter guards, a man well known for his sadism. "I sure wish I could be there, but Fitzsimmons was worried the S.O.V.s might show up here while he was gone, so I'm the welcoming committee if they've double-crossed us. It's pretty quiet here, Fress—get a Vat for me, kid!"

"I certainly intend to—out." Fressli cut the communicator circuit. He was hoping for Andros or, better yet, Miranda. Bron would be done in by the Racers, whether Fitzsimmons wanted him alive or not. Fressli's hands were sweaty as he fingered the laser, slipping it in and out of his belt. He was beginning to understand what Fitzsimmons had said about big game

hunting. He gripped the laser and waited.

In the square, Mathler had stepped forward out of the line of Bleydeauxs, most of them android owners here to protect their property. He moved to the center of the square a lone figure, hoping to be heard by the Racers. "Go back to your own sector, by order of the power vested in me by the Confederation!" His voice sounded weak and thin in the silence of the square.

He shouldn't have to be standing out there, Rodge thought. Bleydeaux had a Civil Proctor, but he had wrung his hands and whined that he and his men could do nothing about the Hell-Vat Racers and that he did not want to risk his men to save a few unruly androids. His nabs were not there for the protection of androids; that was the problem of their owners. And besides, it would be better for Bleydeaux if the android Temple were shut down. Yes, he would talk to the planetary council about it in the morning. Rodge had expected nothing more from him. The Proctor was a coward, Confederation-appointed because of his political background, and it was said he paid protection to the Hell-Vat to keep the Racers out of the more prosperous sections of Bleydeaux.

Rodge and Mathler had gathered their group by themselves, picking men they knew would have a lot to lose if the Ones and Twos they owned were destroyed. Rodge had been of great help in selecting men who could best be motivated by self-interest. In fact, he had almost single-handedly organized the whole force after he'd picked up the first whiffs of trouble floating in the air over the Racer sector that morning.

"Go back to your sector. Leave the androids alone; they have assembled peacefully and within their legal rights!" Mathler shouted into the rising wind.

"Shove it, Croaker!" yelled back one of the Racers.

Mathler held his ground. The Racers he could see were armed with knives, sticks, rocks and various lengths of chain. His side was armed with little more than words. Even if they'd owned weapons, most of them would not have known how to use them. They were peaceable, middle-aged men trying to reason with savages. And the savages were armed.

"You must leave. The androids have the right to worship their Goddess. They are doing you no harm. Nothing good can come of your being here."

It was as if he were speaking a foreign language or describing Einstein's Theory of Relativity to a cageful of Barbary apes.

A rock sailed out of the shadows beside the buildings, catching Mathler on the cheek. The Racers roared their approval. In the dark, Fressli chose another stone, a larger one. He figured the distance and trajectory, and let it fly. The stone hit Mathler directly in the chest, knocking him to the ground. There was a moan from his group of businessmen, a scuffling, and loosening of the line in front of the door. Bloodshed was something most of them had hoped could be avoided.

"Let's rush the old cooters!" The Mac was out front, a heavy length of chain dangling from his hand. His Racers surged forward; a dull mutter of oaths and the rattle of chains sounded in the square.

"You fools!" Rodge ran to Mather's rescue. "Don't you realize you're being used? Fitzsimmons is letting you do his dirty work for him!"

A stone flew out of the shadows, missing Rodge by inches. He reached out for the mind behind the missile and found Fressli there. Mathler was able to get to his feet and the two of them ran limpingly back into their thinning ranks, expecting a barrage of clubs or stones to drop them before they could reach safety.

The Racers also retreated to their corner, unsure of where the stones were coming from. Fressli cursed himself for hasty stupidity in letting Rodge spot him. Running out of the shadows, he moved toward the side of the Mac. "I'm on your side," he panted. "Fitzsimmons sent me."

"He didn't say nothin' about dem old Croaks. I think we been had." The Mac shifted from foot to foot. It was one thing to tear up a few androids, but taking on wealthy Bleydeaux merchants would get him in trouble with the Proctor, protection or no protection. "I was just gonna rip it up some, kill me an android or two. I didn't know dem city Fancymen was gonna be here. I don't like it nohow."

"Don't let them bother you, there's not a weapon in the whole gang of them. Can't you see they're just a bunch of soft-headed old gaffers?"

"But the Proctor!" The Mac scratched his crotch nervously. "I don't want to take no nabs because some Croaker gets bloodied..."

"Watch." Fressli pulled his laser out of his belt.

"A laser." The Mac backed off rapidly. "You grottin' clod, we can get five to ten for just wavin' one o' dem around. Put that away!" The Mac was making as fast a retreat as was possible in his densely packed group of Racers.

"I'm only going to fire over their heads—and I do have a hunting permit for this, so you can cool your pants. You won't get in any trouble."

Fressli fired high over the heads of the Bleydeauxs, and watched with satisfaction as they wavered and fell apart with panic, some of the men even running away down a side alley. "All right," Fressli yelled at the Mac, "what are you waiting for? Here come your androids out the door—go get them."

Deros and his small band of Ones and Twos had burst out of the Temple just as the laser went off. Mathler's men parted to let Deros pass. He was halfway into the square before he saw the Racers. He skidded to a halt at a yell of warning from Rodge, then paused, not sure of where the laser fire had come from or who was friend or enemy.

The Mac swung his chains over his head as he ran out into the square, letting them sail and catching Deros around the waist and legs. The android went down in a tangle of twisting metal.

The Mac was on top of him. A knife flashed in the moonlight, and Deros' uniform was ripped from his torso. Another slash, and the Mac held aloft his bloody trophy torn from between Deros' legs. The Racers fell on the screaming android, ripping and slashing at him. An arm slid across the cobbles, landing at the feet of a timid chemistry lab owner who fainted at the sight of it. Blood pooled under the feet of the Racers and trickled away between the cobbles.

The men guarding the Temple had faded into the night, leaving Mathler and Rodge standing alone. There was one thing stronger than the greed of those men—self-preservation.

Finished with the pulped mass that had been Deros, the Racers moved toward the door of the Temple, waiting for more androids to come out.

From his viewpoint beside one of the buildings, Fitzsimmons watched

the carnage. There would be more androids out of that building quite soon—Andros and the S.O.V.s. His plan was working perfectly except for the laser fire. He had ordered only riot clubs and knives for his men, and whatever the Racers could dig up for themselves. If he found out who'd fired a laser, it would be very unpleasant for that person.

He saw a quick motion at the door of the Temple. The laser could wait. Leaning against the building, Fitzsimmons found a comfortable spot to watch his handiwork develop.

Andros stood behind the half-opened door, watching with horror the events outside. His fingers cut deeply into the plastiwood doorframe, his hand shaking as it gripped the material for support. Deros' death was like some scene out of a nightmare, and the Racers were creatures of hell. He knew it might well have been himself out there on the ground except for Deros' going ahead to protect him. The mob outside was screaming for more blood as they moved toward the door.

Behind Andros, the S.O.V.s were gaining ground. He could hear some of them starting up the stairs. His choice was one of being torn to shreds by the Racers or slaughtered by the S.O.V.s. Neither one seemed likely to be a pleasant experience.

By peeking around the door edge, he could see a scattering of Deros' androids still in the region of the Temple facade. They were pitifully few and in terrible danger, with only Rodge and Mathler to lead them, but they were there. If he could slip out the door without being seen and get safely to Rodge's side he might have a chance to escape—or bring about Rodge's death as well as his own.

The Sons of Vat were closer. One of them spotted him at the top of the stairs and gave tongue. The pack would be in full cry in seconds. If he could get them running out into the square thinking they were chasing him... a few dead Sons of Vat didn't worry him nearly so much as his own death. He dived out of the door, skinning his hands as he landed at the edge of the narrow porch. Keeping down was his major concern; better to lose some skin off his hands than to end up like Deros. Staying as close to the building as possible he ran, in a low crouch, into the ranks of the androids.

Mathler had managed to round up a few of his scattered troops and they, too, were blending into the mass in front of the Temple. Andros felt

safer with other unmarked faces around him. He would be that much less easy to find. The group muddled around their side of the square, uncertain as to what they should do. Lives were at stake, android and human. They were like cattle awaiting slaughter, unsure of why they had been chosen for death.

Rodge was nowhere to be seen. Andros turned in the crowd, scanning the shadowy areas of the square. He hoped he would not find a reenactment of Deros' death. But Rodge was behind him on the porch, trying to hold back the Sons of Vat. They recognized him as a Jug and, shoving him out of their way, they poured into the square—pushing Andros and his frightened group right between themselves and the Racers.

Andros, trying to move out of the mass of crashing forces, was grabbed by the shoulder. It was Bron. "Kill the enslaver of androids!" Bron struck him across the face.

"Kill da Vats!" The Mac and his Racers were within smelling distance of Andros and Bron. The two were swiftly surrounded, the Racers reaching out for either one of them. Andros felt a searing pain as his arm was ripped open from shoulder to elbow by a knife. He drew his own vibroblade and struck back at his attacker.

Bron had let go of Andros to fight for his own life. Beside him, several of the S.O.V.s, including Nusair, tried to protect him. On the outer fringes of the melee a small man bounced with rage and excitement. "You can't do that!" he shrilled, pointing to Bron. "That's *my* android!" One of the Racers hit him across the mouth with a short length of chain, leaving the man on his knees blubbering and spitting teeth.

Andros was never able to fully reconstruct the events happening around him that night. He knew he was being Pulled like a rag toy between the Racers and the Sons of Vat, with both of them claiming the right to kill him. His body was a mass of cuts and chain bruises. He and Bron were back to back, too busy trying to save their own skins to worry about ideologies.

Andros thought he saw Fressli in the crowd around them, but he wasn't positive. *Fressli's the kind who would take better care of his hide than to bring it here*, he thought as he butted a Racer full in the gut. There was much to be said for having a hard head, he realized, grabbing the Racer's nail-studded club out of his hands as he fell. Andros bashed the man's

skull in before he hit the-ground. With the vibroblade in one hand and the club in the other, Andros carved an island of safety for himself and Bron. Fressli ducked under the flailing club and popped up next to Bron; the android, with his back to Fressli, never saw him coming. There was the slight flash of a muffled laser, and Bron crumpled to the pavement. Fressli looked up from the body and saw Andros. His mouth was a wide *O* of surprise as Andros caught him fully alongside the head with the club. *I hope I've killed the maggot eater*, Andros thought as he turned to protect his side from an attack by the Mac. Andros could hear the other androids coming out of the Temple, adding numerically to his side... he hoped.

The absence of any official authority or a squad of riot nabs had him worried. He knew his father's rebellion had started in Bleydeaux; could the Proctor be sanctioning a raid on the Temple of Vat? But any thinking beyond that of staying alive would have to wait. Andros caught a Racer with his back to him straight in the spine. Listening with satisfaction to the crunch of broken bones, he hit him again. One less clot to worry about. *"If I get messed, a lot of others are going to get messed with me..."* A fragment of some conversation that Andros could not quite recall drifted through the carnage, and it was proving to be correct.

The boiling mob of Racers, Complex guards, androids, S.O.V.s and a few Bleydeauxs, filled the square. There were bodies underfoot, both dead and dying. There were no leaders left in control, just a bloodthirsty mob releasing pent up frustrations on each other. It was not a war, it was a massacre. People were killing their own allies—Racers were killing humans, androids fighting androids.

Andros—caught in the middle, surrounded by people all seemingly bent on killing him—was rapidly tiring. As fast as he knocked one man out, another took his place. Android or Racer, he was not up to making such fine distinctions. If it moved toward him, he hit it.

There was a thundering rumble overhead, sounding as if the roof of the Temple had blown off. The air reeked of explosives, stronger than the smell of the sweat, blood and excrement. Andros did not dare look up until a blinding flash of light illuminated the whole square. The ground shook and hard ultrasonic waves rolled across the area, burrowing deeply into the brains of the combatants. Many of them dropped their weapons to hold their ears in pain. The frequency rose, flattening the crowd to the ground. A giant choir of voices, louder than anything Andros had ever

heard before, began the Prayer to Vat:

O ALL WISE, GRACIOUS MOTHER OF THESE YOUR CHILDREN....

Andros lifted his ringing head and looked up over the now-open roof of the Temple. He was on his knees, his head pounding with pain, his eyes blinded by the light.

ALL-POWERFUL DOUBLE HELIX...

Rising into the sky for kilometers, it seemed, was the glowing double helix of the Goddess Vat. It pulsated and glowed with brilliant colors, its rage translated into the patterning of the genetic code.

The effect on the Racers, guards and Bleydeauxs was profound. The Mac, a few meters away from Andros, was sniveling with fright and curling himself into the fetal position on the ground.

Because he was looking up at the Goddess, Andros did not see the tightly knit group approaching him until they were almost on top of his crouched body. Suddenly he was surrounded by black clad nymphs. Strong hands reached down to lift him up, arms encircled him and he felt himself being carried off into the shadows of an alleyway beside the Temple. He got a brief glimpse of the leader of his abductors. His last thought before he passed out was of the glittering hardness in the eyes of this android female.

CHAPTER NINE

Andros felt warm water on his cuts; a compress had been applied to his head, his arm was encased in bandages and the furs he was lying on were quite comfortable. He doubted that anyone taking this good a care of him intended to kill him immediately. He opened one eye to a narrow slit. The room he was in had dim lighting, and someone was moving back and forth in front of the light source.

"If you're awake now, you can turn over so I can get at your back. I can roll you over, but with that cracked rib of yours it would be less painful if you did it yourself."

Andros opened both eyes and saw the female android who had carried

him away from the mob. She was indeed the Great Mother herself. Tall and straight, she was dressed in a long white caftan; the soft fabric clung to her well-muscled body. Her hair was dark, streaked with silver and pulled tightly upward into a braided crown on the top of her head. Her eyes were deep black and the most compelling things about her.

"Good. Now that you've managed your eye exercises, roll over." Andros meekly complied. The female began rubbing some stinging solution into his raw, torn back.

"Yipe!" The pain brought a sharp exclamation from Andros.

"Hush up. You're lucky to be alive. A little more pain won't kill you."

"Yes ma'am." Andros doubted the wisdom of her comment, but willed himself not to shudder as the liquid ate into his battered flesh. "Who are you?" he managed to ask between bouts of teeth-clenching.

"I am One-Alejandrina, also called Drina by my people. I would advise you, however, that excess familiarity or patronization from the son of Erik Roarchik will do little good." She poured more of the liquid over his bare backside and rubbed it briskly into his skin.

"Arrgh! You're destroying what little those clowns left of me. My lady, is this really necessary?"

"I wouldn't be doing it if it weren't. Don't you realize I have more important things to do than change diapers for a half-grown whelp like you? For a man of twenty-three, you're a scrawny specimen. Didn't they feed you at that Academy of yours?" She prodded him in his unbroken ribs as if she were inspecting a side of meat she did not like by half.

"Yes, ma'am. I've always been on the thin side. I take after my father that way."

The female sniffed, and continued her examination of his ribs. "Just bruises on this side. I'll have to tape you, but then I want you sitting up as soon as possible. I do not have the equipment or the medications to deal with lung inflammations." She expertly bound his ribs with a tight dressing and helped him into a sitting position, stuffing several pillows behind him.

Wincing, Andros felt he could count every bone in his body by the way they hurt. He was amazed to find he had so many bones and joints to feel horrible all at the same time. "Uh, they really worked me over; how long have I been out?"

He tried moving his "good" arm and then thought better of it. It was a solid bruise from shoulder to wrist. Both his legs throbbed and there was a nasty-looking cut on the shin of his left leg.

"It's morning, if that makes any difference to you. You're not going anywhere in the shape you're in, so don't try moving from that bed." The tone of her voice added an unspoken "if you know what's good for you."

This was no lady to tangle with. Andros had never met anyone who combined so much beauty and so commanding a will in his entire life. "Yes, ma'am. Are you a Super?" he asked tentatively. Her face had the markings of a One, but her actions proved her to be something else entirely. Her age was all wrong for a Super, though; every Super Andros had met had been younger than himself, and he knew the program had started after his birth. But this was no ordinary android.

"What I am is no concern of yours. You are to rest and get well." Her voice softened somewhat as she looked down at the bandaged man. "I worked with your father. I was his first lieutenant in the rebellion, and I'm carrying on his work."

Memories of his father's lovely secretaries crossed Andros' mind. They had all been fiercely loyal to Erik Roarchik. "And the people who carried me out of the square," Andros persisted, "who were they?"

"Six of my little girls. We call ourselves 'The Protectors.' And that's what we have done in your case. From the look of you," she glanced over his battered nude body, "you need someone to protect you. Miranda has been very sloppy!"

"Is Miranda a Protector?" That would explain a lot about Drina's knowledge of him, and she was probably going to try pressuring him to help the androids while she took care of his wounds. *I'm a real captive audience*, Andros thought ruefully.

"Who do you think activated the image of Vat?" said Drina. "That sleam Fitzsimmons? Of course Miranda is one of us, my right hand, in

fact—or perhaps I should say left, considering how clumsy she's been lately.

"Ah, discussing me, no doubt." Miranda came into the circle of lantern-light. She, too, was dressed in the black jumpsuit of the other Protectors. "Sorry, Drina, I didn't expect it to get so messy. We still haven't identified everyone out there..."

Drina turned on her like a striking cobra. "Are you aware of how many deaths there were last night? Thirty-five of our best androids were killed by your wretched planning. And that includes Deros and Bron."

Miranda's face was pale, and she froze at the sound of Deros' name. "Bron," she said chokingly, "we can do without him and his blasted S.O.V.s. They killed Deros, their hatred caused all of this..."

"Fool. Go find a dark corner to snivel over Deros in. When the time comes, we'll need every one of Roarchik's children behind us. Andros, you will not escape your heritage either, no matter how much you blather about being an astrogator."

"Do you think *you* will be able to force me to lead your bunch of idiots into another death march like my father did? Things like last night didn't seem to teach you anything about me or your cause. I will not help you."

"No, you are too tough to kill easily," said Drina. "That's the one trait your father lacked; he gave up far too easily. Your strong sense of self-preservation will work in our favor."

"If you can get me to help you." Andros tried to stand up but found it impossible. He slumped back on the fur-covered bed. "I'm no wet-bottomed whelp you can push around, Drina. You saved my life, and I'm grateful for that, but gratitude alone isn't going to win freedom for the androids. Only time, hard work and a lot of smart thinking will do any good at all. Your splintering off into the S.O.V.s, the Protectors, and the universe knows what else will only serve to weaken you. I wouldn't help a pack of sniping jackals like you for all power and glory the Confederation could offer!" Andros leaned back on the bed, spent by his anger. Let this Drina do what she wished with him; he was fed up with android quarrels and factions.

For the first time, Drina smiled at him. He could almost feel the

warmth of her approving glow. "Well said." She patted his hand and pulled the furs up around his body to keep out any chill. "You are worthy of the name Roarchik. I was afraid they would make you soft at the Academy. But it takes more than the Confederation to tame Roarchik's little eagle. I am pleased with you, the fire is still there." She turned away, crossing the beam of light toward a table Andros could only dimly make out in the darkness of the room.

"Is she crazy, or am I?" he asked in a whisper to Miranda.

Miranda laughed. "Don't mind Drina, she rakes all of us over the coals once a day—for our good health, she says." Miranda turned to speak to Drina. "Should we take Andros somewhere safer? Fitzsimmons will be back, probably with a search warrant for Andros. We should get him out of the Temple."

"Why?" asked Andros, "should there be a warrant issued for me? I haven't done anything."

"My dear, you are guilty of assault with intent to kill one Tav Fressli by striking him with a lethal weapon."

"What? Fressli was going to kill me. I saw him blast Bron and he was aiming for me, but I got him first. I thought I'd killed the little snout." Andros again tried sitting, but had to give it up as a bad impulse. "I bet Fressli and Fitzsimmons engineered that whole stinking thing last night. It has the smell of their brand of carrion about it."

"Naturally they planned it. But part of the plan was for you to end up dead, not Bron. Fitzsimmons is hopping mad about that death, it loses him any chance to control the S.O.V.s. And since your body wasn't found with the others, he knows there's a good chance you're still alive. Fitzsimmons wants badly to change your status from quick to very, very dead."

Drina came back to the bed carrying a plate of food. "Eat this, it's good for you." Andros took the plate, which contained an appetizing stew. Drina went back to the table and returned with a spoon. "I assume you don't eat with your fingers," she said severely. "I've heard some rather unpleasant things about the lack of manners in Spacers."

Andros grinned around a mouthful of the stew. He was ravenously

hungry, and the food was excellent. "I'm not that hardened a Spacer, my lady Drina. I never even got off the ground except for some training flights."

"Good, then the habits you picked up at the Academy will be that much easier to break." She sat down on the edge of his bed, watching him eat. "Don't you leave a bit of that, either. I do not tolerate waste."

"I've got an idea," Miranda said suddenly. "Let's send him to the Nursery. You could look after him, and he could learn more about our work."

Drina paused to consider it. "I'm not sure that's for the best. I have better things to do with my time—and are you sure showing him the Nursery would be wise?"

"He's already in this as deep as can be; he might as well know everything. If he tried to leave us Fitzsimmons would have him killed on sight, so I think we're safe enough."

Drina nodded. "I don't trust Fitzsimmons or the Proctor. Between the two of them they could manage to order the Temple torn down to the last stick. The Nursery might be the best solution at that." Drina watched Andros scraping his plate dutifully clean. "We'll move him as soon as he's finished eating. I can get you more if you'd like."

"Please." Andros held out the plate to her. "It's very good and I'm so starved I could eat a maxiterminal, wire by wire!"

Drina beamed at him, and went to fill his plate again. It was obvious she had made the stew herself and was pleased by his approval. Andros found her blatant ego gratification amusing. He wasn't nearly so afraid of Drina as he had been, but felt it wise to continue treating her with the respect she expected.

"Which creche shall we take him to?" Miranda asked. "Sector Four or the new one?"

"It'll have to be the infant caves, they're the closest."

"But they're right under the Temple! He needs to be as far from Bleydeaux as possible."

"True. But how far do you think he can travel in the condition he's in?" Drina glanced upward. "Fitzsimmons will have the Temple surrounded by his men after last night. Trying to get Andros out of here, even by using the emergency exit, would be as difficult as teaching a Three calculus."

"Much as I hate Fitzsimmons, I do have to admit the man is efficient," Miranda sighed. "Anyone leaving Bleydeaux will go through triple checks, if he can get out at all." Miranda resorted to her lip chewing. "Do you think Thirty-Four might come up with a solution?"

Drina snorted. "Not bloody likely! First you let him install cameras so he could watch everything going on in the Nursery, and now he's rigged up some sort of computer that no one can figure out at all. It flashes large banks of lights and buzzes every time someone goes near it. But so far, that's all it does," Drina laughed bitterly. "Of all the things Roarchik ever made..."

"But it couldn't hurt, and it is on the way to the caves."

"All right; call in some of the girls to help with the carrying. He can't make it on his own."

Drina took the now-empty plate from Andros. "I know you will want to be brave and manly and try to walk to the caves on your own. But if you try it, I will personally knock you cold, sling you over my shoulder, and carry you there myself. If I have to do it that way and you get thoroughly bashed against every wall I can find, it will be your own fault."

"I'm quite willing to do whatever you wish about transportation, Lady Drina. I am almost yours to command." Andros had thought about protesting the idea of being carried anywhere, but one look at Drina convinced him she could deck him with ease. *Even if I weren't sick as an ashcat I wouldn't want to take her on. Father's androids were hard to hit, even when I was well.* He grinned to himself, remembering a fight he'd tried to have with one of his tutors when he was in his teens. The android had never touched him, but neither had he managed to get in a blow. Lady Drina, he was sure, would not be that careful about his safety.

Four of the black clad females that Andros dimly remembered from the night before came over to the bed and slowly picked him up. They had obviously practised moving people in this fashion before and were quite expert at it. Using a four-person chair carry, they followed Drina and

Miranda out of the room and into the deserted main hall of the Temple. The group was close to the altar, and Drina moved toward it muttering, "I'm going to have to use the fast bit, but Vat is understanding of our needs."

She stepped forward, arms aloft in the Goddess position. "Great Goddess Vat, open unto us, thy children!" At her words the tank began to sink slowly into the flooring, revealing a stone and metal staircase which led downward. They entered the opening, the girls being careful not to jostle him or bump his body against the walls of the narrow passageway. Overhead he could hear the tank closing behind them with an echoing scrape of heavy stone.

The stairs wound down into the darkness. The only light came from the lantern Drina carried. Soon the stairs came to an end, opening out into a maze of corridors cut into the bedrock of Bleydeaux. "Did my father come up with this, too?" Andros did a rough reckoning of the work involved in the cutting of one corridor alone, and marvelled.

"No." Drina lifted her lantern to check some carved hieroglyphics at the entrance to one of the corridors. "These were here long before your father's time. They're the tombs of the old city of Bleydeaux. Mathler got the idea of using them while searching the city's historical records. He said they were over four thousand years old, and go back to the time of the Old Ones of this planet. They died out long before there was even a Confederation." She led the way down the corridor and Andros' carriers followed.

The corridor was dark for several meters and then after a turn in its direction it was dimly lighted by glowing panels leaning against the walls. Andros asked why more permanent lighting had not been installed.

"This place is an archeological treasure house. It must not be changed in any way." Drina moved closer to the walls, adding the light of her lantern to the dim panels. Suddenly the walls came alive with scenes of past glory. Shapes only dimly seen by the light of the panels took on a vivid color and became glowing pictures of the people, games, feasting and lives of those beings who had once lived on Mhalkeri. "Do you see why we haven't torn this up to put in better lighting? Those paintings are beautiful."

"And practical, too," Miranda added. "We pose as a group of archeologists researching the Old Ones. Mathler keeps issuing

exclusive-permits to us, and in return we've promised to do nothing to damage the structures of the tombs. Better us than a bunch of scribbling, littering tourists! Now, let's take you to see Thirty-Four. This way." Miranda moved down the corridor and the females carrying Andros obediently followed. Drina walked grimly beside them, letting Miranda find her way by the light of the panels.

"Lady Drina, who or what is Thirty-Four?" Andros asked.

"An android." Her answer was as sharp as it was short.

Miranda called back from the front, "He deserves a better answer than that."

"Then you come back here and give it to him. You were the one so set on bringing him here." Drina sounded even more grim in the echoing corridor.

"Thirty-Four," Miranda's voice came hollowly back to him, "was one of your father's attempts to create a Super, or a sort of Super. Anyway, this was before you were born. Your father was doing some research on Rostand's theory of the thirty-fourth cell division of the cerebral cortex, and he proved the theory correct. The result was Thirty-Four."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. I wasn't trained as a biologist. What cell division do you mean?"

"Well," said Miranda, coming back to walk beside the smolderingly silent Drina, "during foetal development of the normal brain, the cells of the cerebral cortex divide thirty-three times on a pyramidal basis of one, two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four, and so on, until there are nine billion cerebral cells. After each cell has divided exactly thirty-three times the DNA shuts off the process and no more brain cells are produced during the lifetime of that individual.

"But with Thirty-Four, your father managed to force the cells to divide one more time—in effect doubling themselves to a total of eighteen billion cells."

"But wait a minute," Andros said. "That would mean this Thirty-Four would need a skull twice the size of anyone else—he'd be a freak!"

"Ha!" Drina's mocking laugh was as rough and cold as the stones in the walls. "Well done, Andros. I didn't think you would grasp the crux of the problem so quickly. Rostand himself knew this product would be a monster, that's why *he* never tried his theory or brought it to completion."

"He couldn't," protested Miranda. "There were no womb membranes available to test the concept when he evolved the theory. Also Rostand was emphatic about the need for a larger brain case to hold the increase in cells; he knew the experiment would produce something different—but he never called it a freak."

"It's an abomination and a curse to all androids," Drina said flatly, glaring at Miranda.

"And possibly the smartest being ever created."

Andros listened with interest to what was obviously an old quarrel between Drina and Miranda. He looked up at the two strong-minded women and wondered which one was right, or if both of them were wrong. A skull double the size of a normal human's!

"We're here, and you can judge for yourself, Andros, what blessings your father would have foisted off on the android race." Drina led the way down a shallow flight of steps to the arched entranceway of a family tomb. Miranda stood in front of the tomb and waited. Slowly the wall slid aside, light shone out into the corridor.

"Come on," Miranda nodded to the girls carrying Andros, and they moved forward into the chamber. "It only opens if he wants it to," Miranda whispered to Andros, "but he likes me, and I knew it would be all right to bring you here."

"Here" proved to be a massive room, vaulted and carved, lined with the monuments and wall niches of a great family of old Mhalkeri. The boxlike sarcophagi were now used as countertops for gadgetry that tangled and trailed across the floor. Wires were strung everywhere. Banks of computers covered the walls, obscuring the paintings that decorated the tomb. The machines hummed and blinked, lights flashed and rows of keys clattered. Infocubes poured out of a slot, dropping in a heap on the floor.

And in the middle of the room, like a bloated spider in the center of its web, was Thirty-Four. His head was indeed grotesque. Narrow chin,

flabby cheeks and small shiny eyes buried in fat made up the lower part of his face. Then there was the braincase, rising up and out like some hair-covered balloon. He had the body of a pagan idol. Thirty-Four massed about a hundred and thirty kilos of bulbous fat which almost disguised the unusual size, if not the shape of his head. He squatted in the middle of his tangle of wires, naked, his eyes half closed, his hands resting on his giant, dimpled knees.

If this was his father's idea of a superbeing, Andros was just as glad his father had not started this experiment with himself as the first one.

Miranda spoke to the thing, telling it that Andros Roarchik, the son of Erik Roarchik, wanted to talk about his father. The creature opened one eye and peered at Andros. He closed it briefly in what might have been a wink.

"EVEN USING A POLYMER EPOXY WILL NOT HELP, ICARUS. YOU WILL REACH THE LIMITS OF THIS PLANET'S OXYGEN LONG BEFORE YOUR WINGS COULD MELT FROM THE HEAT OF THE SUN." The voice rumbled deeply out of the depths of Thirty-Four's massive body. He then completely closed the eye he'd used, and attempts on Miranda's part to get anything more out of him were met by the sound of wall-rumbling snores. He was asleep, or pretending to be.

"You see, I told you nothing would come of wasting time with that," Drina said as the group moved down the corridor toward the Nursery.

"I had hoped he'd be a bit more lucid. Sometimes he makes a lot of sense with those wacked-out remarks of his."

"So did the Delphic oracle," muttered Drina.

Miranda ignored the remark. She turned to watch Andros being maneuvered down another flight of shallow stairs. "We're almost there. I'll run ahead and get a bed fixed up for you." Miranda moved swiftly down the corridor and was soon lost from sight in the dim shadows. Drina glowered after her, sniffing to herself about monsters and mutations.

"Why did my father create something like Thirty-Four, lady Drina? He must have known from Rostand's work that it wouldn't turn out normal."

Drina nodded. "'Dr. Roarchik was a fanatic about making the perfect

android. His name had become so synonymous with android creating that most people thought he did invent them. He didn't—there were already three companies turning out androidlike creature before your father was even born. That fact always stuck in his liver, so he pushed and clawed his way to the top position in the field of improvements... so much so that his androids were always something new and unique. The Supers are pure Roarchik. He finally managed to do what he set out to achieve, an android race capable of reproducing itself. Thirty-Four was a misstep on his path to fulfillment, an aberration. Roarchik knew that the RNA chemical structure changed with training; tests with rats and other small animals had shown that. With the RNA carrying the memory-fixing codes, Roarchik felt that a being with more cerebral cells to house more data would produce more and better RNA which could then be incorporated into the brain patterning of the more normal-looking androids. But, as you can see, it didn't work out that way. Thirty-Four is quite mad, and his RNA useless to us."

"I'd wondered why Father felt eighteen billion cells would be better. We don't even use a fraction of the nine billion we have naturally. But I didn't know about the differences in RNA. That must have been interesting though, watching the thirty-fourth division take place. It must have been quite traumatic for the embryo to suddenly have twice the normal cells in his head."

"You have the wrong idea about cell division. It doesn't all happen at once. Even though it is a pyramidal structure, the cells aren't perfectly synchronized. An individual cell divides at its own rate until the DNA shuts it off. Remember, the brain case itself has to be treated to make the bone cells increase to contain the larger brain. Your father knew from the moment of the first cell division that Thirty-Four would not be a normal android. He did this with full knowledge and the intention of creating a monster. I almost hated him for that." She looked away from Andros, picturing, no doubt, some scene from her past. Andros tried again to remember which of his father's secretaries Drina had been, but he had purposely avoided them as much as he could and so was not able to separate one from another in his mind.

"We'll be in the Nursery soon. I do not wish any conversation about Thirty-Four to continue. He's a secret from all but my closest people, and I'd like to keep it that way. I was glad when he turned out to be insane. Roarchik needed to know he wasn't a god."

The hatred in Drina's voice startled Andros, but he didn't dare ask her about it. Drina had made it clear the subject was closed.

"This is the Nursery." Drina stood in front of another tomb archway. Stretching out her hands, she pressed a section of carving on each side of the door. The slab, with much creaking and grinding, slid into the stone walls. This machinery was thousands of years old and still functioned as if the Old Ones were still using it. Andros marvelled at it as he passed through the portals.

CHAPTER TEN

The Nursery was a large room with rows of stone sarcophagi lined up in even formations on the floor. The walls were flanked by makeshift cribs filled with small children and infants. Tall shelving took up what wall space the cribs did not fill, so it was impossible to see either the wall paintings or the tombs cut into the walls.

The sarcophagi were being used as tables for changing the infants' diapers or for holding the pots of formula, racks of bottles and food supplies. The room stank of wet bottoms, sour milk and baby powder, reminding Andros forcibly of the android training center.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it—particularly when you're well enough to help with the diaper brigade." Drina ignored the greenish cast to his face as she directed the girls carrying Andros toward a small cavern off the main part of the room. This was another area filled with plaques marking the graves of dead Mhalkerians. The sour smell prevailed even here.

"Can't you do anything about the smell?" Andros asked as he was lowered onto one of the beds in the room.

"We do have air vents leading to the surface, but we have to be careful not to have too many, and to hide them well," Miranda said. She'd been speaking to another android beside one of the other beds, but now she came over to Andros and tucked the covers in around him. The bed was a narrow durasteel and canvas cot such as would be used in emergency field set-ups. Mathler had probably provided them from some Confederation storehouse, Andros assumed, noting the Confederation chopmark engraved in the metal of the headboard.

Miranda fussed around the bed, stuffing pillows behind his back, fluffing his blankets and making sure he was comfortable. "There, that should do you." She gave a final pat to one of the pillows. Drina stood in the doorway, hands on hips, a look of disapproval plainly written on her face.

"I wouldn't expect too much in the way of coddling if I were you, Andros." She motioned to the girls who had carried him and they left the room. "Miranda has other things to do, and so do I. The rest of the nurses here will take care of you, and as soon as you're able I expect you to earn your care. Is that clear?" She turned and left the room without waiting for an answer.

"What's stuck in her liver?" Andros asked, watching Drina stomp her way through the part of the Nursery he could see from his bed.

"Oh, she's been like that ever since Dr. Roarchik was killed. She cared a lot about him." Miranda looked pensive.

"Look, don't let her upset you too much, she's been having to hold everything together, and she did have some hopes for you."

Andros groaned and rolled over on the bed preparing himself for another lecture on "Why the androids need you, Andros."

"Drina was with your father from the very beginning of his work on the Supers. After he kicked all of the techcrew out of the Complex, Drina became the only person he would really trust. She was the only one he explained anything to about the Super program. I think she cared more than a little for him personally, too. We all respected Dr. Roarchik, but she was the only one who loved him enough to stand up to him and tell him when he was wrong. He had some early experiments for his Supers that Drina said would have created monsters, and she made him give up on making the Super anything but a carbon copy of a human."

"But she didn't manage to talk him out of the revolution."

"Talk him out of it? She practically ran the whole thing herself. She picked the Confederation warehouses to be hit, and some say she did it all without his permission and that he only got into it because she started the mess. Revolution! Two empty warehouses burned and four humans killed—and that wasn't by our people; some of the other androids..."

"I know, I read up on it after he died. It was all so senseless. I didn't suppose Father could begin a war."

"He didn't know one end of a laser from another. He supplied the ideology and Drina supplied the battle tactics. They were a great team. Something went out of her when he died, she aged quite a bit. I think she blames herself for his death. Drina was the most beautiful woman anyone had ever seen around the Complex."

Andros shuddered, remembering his father's luscious secretaries. They had all been Ones. "I hadn't known that an android could love anyone. I didn't think they were programmed for it. Why..."

"Drop it, human!" Miranda faced him, a cold virago. "How dare you sit there prattling about love? Drina loved your father. They shared something you can't even begin to understand. We have feelings, we can love. It's people like you who make us hide everything real in us." She collapsed on the cot, sobbing wildly, beating the metal framework with her fists. "Deros!" She choked on his name, her body shaking with grief.

Andros tenderly gathered her into his arms, stroking her hair and patting her back. "Hush, hush there, Miranda. Please, Miranda." Her sobs trickled off into hiccups. "I know you cared for Deros. I could tell when I saw the two of you together..."

"We loved each other." The statement was robbed of all emotion, cold and flat.

He lifted her chin with his good hand and wiped the tears off her face with his other sleeve. "With both of you being Supers I suppose you were going to have a child by him."

"We wanted that very much, but Drina wouldn't allow it. She said a child of ours wouldn't fit in with the Master Plan for the android race—something genetic, I suppose. Besides, I had a job to do in the Complex and it would have been hard to hide my pregnancy."

"Hide? Why would you have to hide it? The Confederation, knows that Supers can breed and there's never been anything against it other than it not being economical."

"Remember those babies? Fitzsimmons gave orders that any pregnant

android was to be brought back to the Complex. He offered a bounty of ten thousand credits to anyone who brought one in, alive or dead."

"He had no right to do that. Father was allowed to breed androids if he wished, he was allowed to do just about anything short of a revolt." Andros laughed bitterly. "He might have androided the Confederation out of existence just by the numbers of them he could turn out. But killing pregnant females! Fitzsimmons surely had no authorization for that."

"He said he did. Something about finding those Telepath android babies gave him the right to destroy all embryos he did not have full control over."

"As soon as I get out of here, there are going to be a lot of questions asked of the Confederation about Fitzsimmons, and I don't think the Confederation will like the answers any better than I do." His mind was filled by a red-tinted vision of Miranda, her belly big with child, lying dead on Fitzsimmons' office floor.

* * *

GRADUALLY Andros' wounds healed and he was able to get out of bed for a few more hours each day. He got to know the Protectors by name. There was Nanra, the small plump one; Silky, with the lovely slanting eyes; Camet, who dressed his cuts and rubbed his back when he couldn't sleep; Janna, tall and graceful, carrying her full, baby-filled belly with the pride of a queen; and there was Lilith.

Lilith the hunchbacked, Lilith with the burned, scarred face. Lilith with the one eye, the other milky and blind. She made his flesh crawl; her ugliness was an offense. He tried not to shrink from her when it was her turn to tend him. He had asked Miranda if Lilith could be freed from the nursing patrol, explaining that he was not sick enough to need so many nurses.

Miranda looked at him sadly and sighed. "I know she's dreadful to look at, but she was once very beautiful, Andros."

His only answer was a grunt of disbelief.

"Yes, she was. Lilith at one time was the most lovely joygirl in all of Bleydeaux. But in the houses like that—the ones that have android

women—anything the customer wants is all right as long as he can pay for it. After all, with enough money a house can simply buy a new joygirl. Lilith was tortured into the shape you see today by a sadistic customer who could pay to do anything he pleased with her. After his fun was over and Lilith was of no more use to a joyhouse, they threw her out into the streets to beg. Drina found her half dead from hunger. She hadn't had anything to eat in days. The other beggars took every credit she earned away from her because she was an android. For all the hell that man put her through, he was careful not to remove her face markings. He didn't dare do that. He could ruin her life, but if he touched the marks of a Matrix-Two, the Confederation would have sent him to a correction camp. He should have killed her outright when he was finished. There's no penalty for that as long as he paid her owner for her." Miranda had helped to nurse Lilith back to some semblance of health, had held her during the nightmares, and had tried to calm the hatred in her soul. Miranda had not succeeded, but the babies had.

Denied babies of her own because she was not a Super, and because the small ones would never understand that anyone who treated them with so much love could be ugly, Lilith had found a sort of peace, a place where she was needed and, more important, wanted. Andros listened to Miranda, and tried not to be unkind to Lilith. Each time he saw her ruin of a face he gained more understanding of what freedom could mean to an android. Any human who could do something like this was wrong; any system that could allow anything like this was wrong.

* * *

"LOOK, Fitzsimmons, I can get you the order to search the android Temple, and I'll even give you a few of my nabs to help out. But I want a proper assurance that no Bleydeaux-owned android will be killed." City Proctor Hylin leaned back in his chair. A wisp of a man, he was no match for Fitzsimmons. He found himself whining whenever he had to deal with the bigger man, and he was beginning to resent it.

"I've had several important businessmen in here this morning screaming about your searching their companies for Roarchik. Now that will have to stop. I can't have you upsetting people this way." He formed an interlocking arch of his fingers to keep them from trembling. Fitzsimmons said nothing. He simply loomed over the Proctor, hands on Hylin's desk, and watched him.

"They lost some valuable androids in that last raid, and they're upset. You've got to understand my position," Hylin whimpered, readjusting the folds of his kilt over his knees. "What are you going to do about replacing those androids? When are you going to start making decent ones again? I can't help you without any answers for my people."

Damn bureaucrats, Fitzsimmons thought, shifting his weight. *He'll be the first to yell for help if Roarchik manages to get the androids to follow him.* He smiled his best sleam smile for Hylin, the one that showed the most teeth.

"I'd be very willing to pay for the dead androids, but the making of more Ones is my own business, not yours. I feel you were partly responsible for the massacre. You could have sent nabs to clear the square... or were you too afraid of the Racers?"

The Proctor reddened and glared at Fitzsimmons with barely masked dislike. "Humph, humphle," the Proctor struggled for words. "I felt there would be little reason to involve my men in what was thought to be an inter-Racer war. Had I known the Racers were going to fight androids instead of each other... ah, we have always had very good relations with the Temple and, ah, the Racers, too. We don't bother them, they don't bother us. It works the same for both groups." The Proctor shut his mouth with a snap, trying to show he wanted the conversation to end.

And you collect bribes from both, Fitzsimmons smiled again. "But the good citizens of Bleydeaux wouldn't be too happy with you if they felt you were being soft on Racers?" Fitzsimmons' voice was silky with malice. "Chief Clerk Mathler will be sure to report such softness to the Confederation."

Fitzsimmons had sliced directly to the heart of the Proctor's major irritation with the Confederation. Mathler, as a representative of the Confederation, was not answerable to the City Proctor's office... and had in the past lodged complaints against Hylin. The android rebellion had produced a flock of such complaints and the results had not been pleasant for the Proctor.

"Hurrumph. I'll draw up your warrant—but keep those Racers in line! I can't afford any more outraged citizens screaming about dead androids."

"Very well, shall we say half and half? You pay your share for the dead

androids and I'll pay mine. And we'll just let the matter of more Ones sit awhile, won't we?" Fitzsimmons sleam-smiled at Hylin, knowing full well the man would have to pay up or risk Fitzsimmons' giving Mathler information which could cost Hylin his job. The Proctor knew Mathler hated Fitzsimmons, but the Clerk hated Hylin just as badly. Mathler would do anything to get Hylin out of his post, but he couldn't remove Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons knew it.

"I'll take care of everything for you, Master Hylin. You don't need to send in your men to help apprehend Roarchik, my own people will take care of it. I also have the help of the S.O.V.s. They hate the idea of another revolt and want Andros out of the way as much as we do."

"Good. I didn't know you had some of the androids behind you." Relief sprung out like sweat on Hylin's forehead. "After the hit on the Temple I thought none of them would care to work with you again."

"I made them and I can unmake them. They know that and so they fear me less than they do a Roarchik. My dealings with the androids have always been honest, and they know it."

"You must be quite a man, Fitzsimmons, having the Racers and the S.O.V.s behind you." *And not a man to cross* hung unspoken in the air. "I'll be pleased to help you in any way I can, but remember: not one dead Bleydeaux android, or I will have to deal severely with you." Hylin wagged a limp finger in the air.

Fitzsimmons' face was a model of bland agreement.

* * *

FRESSLI was the one sent into the S.O.V. headquarters. Fitzsimmons deemed it advisable to sound out the remaining leadership by proxy before meeting with them himself. Fressli had gone reluctantly. He had not dared to tell Fitzsimmons that he had killed Bron, mistaking him for Andros in the dim light. His only hope was that none of the S.O.V.s would recognize him as the one who'd shot Bron. He was not sure who he feared most, Fitzsimmons or the S.O.V.s; both would be less than happy with him over Bron. When Fitzsimmons had learned Bron died by laser fire, he had sat at his desk very quietly and said nothing, his mind obviously going over the list of people who would have had access to a laser. At present he suspected Andros, and Fressli wanted to keep it that way.

Now, with his android makeup neatly in place, Fressli sat on the floor of the S.O.V. headquarters looking up at Chane, the One who had taken over Bron's position. The room was tidy, the cushion Fressli sat on clean and mended. Headquarters was much neater than Fitzsimmons had described it to be.

Chane was ill at ease in his new position, Fressli noted. Nusair, a subordinate, wandered into the room during Chane's questioning of Fressli. "You there," Nusair demanded, cutting in on Chane's remarks, "I saw you following that pukka rat Roarchik around Bleydeaux. What are you doing here with the Complex's brand on your face? You belong to Roarchik or Fitzsimmons, and we don't want anything of theirs around here."

"I will ask the questions," Chane said coldly, motioning Nusair out of the room. Nusair shrugged and sat down in one corner, leaning against the wall.

Fressli feared Nusair more than Chane; the latter was only a One and not likely to keep his position long, but Nusair had been in the fight in the square and might have seen Fressli there.

"Now, are you sure Roarchik did not leave the Temple?" said Chane.

"I sat watching until dawn had ended and the sun was high and he did not come out. He is still there. I have watched every day."

"I think I know where he might be, then. But why should I trust you?" He glanced meaningfully at the double helix decorating Fressli's right cheek.

"You want Roarchik dead. Isn't that the most important gift you could give to Vat? Fitzsimmons can wait, and he too wants Roarchik dead."

"He wants every android over the level of a Three dead," Nusair rumbled from his corner. His unmarked skin and ebon coloring was unnerving in the headquarters of the S.O.V. "I think in some cases he might be right." He glared malevolently at Chane.

Fressli was swiftly forming a plan. This Nusair obviously felt himself more qualified to lead the Sons of Vat, but Chane had beaten him to the post. That might be useful to Fitzsimmons. Cut the S.O.V. in half over a

leadership fight and they would be that much easier to pick off one by one.

"I think you've been of help, Two-Fress, but I'll take care of Roarchik in my own way. If you want to help the Sons of Vat, go back to the Temple and continue your watching. If Roarchik leaves, I want to know. I might make you a go-fer if I feel good after doing in the tyrant. So make yourself useful."

Fressli got to his feet in one fluid motion, realizing he had been dismissed. There didn't seem to be much chance of getting Chane to play it Fitzsimmons' way, but there was still Nusair. Fressli accidentally, on purpose, bumped against the Super on his way out of the room.

"Can I talk to you, Super-Nusair?" he mumbled, tilting his head in the direction of the door leading outside.

"After you, Two-Fress."

The two of them sat alone on the porch, a scattering of Sons of Vat patrolling the block in crisp formation in front of them. "What do you want with me?" asked Nusair, watching the doorway to be sure they would not be overheard.

"I felt it very odd that a One rules where a Super should be," Fressli said meekly.

"Bron appointed him next in line, not me."

"But Bron is dead and what is now important is the greater good of the Sons of Vat. Do you think they will follow a One after Bron's leadership?"

"Some Ones are even smarter than Supers." Nusair was not going to give Fressli anything to grab onto; he would have to come a bit more out into the open before Nusair would bite.

"It must be very advantageous for you not to have to wear the marks of an android. Did Roarchik make many androids like you?"

Nusair shrugged. "We didn't come out here to discuss the color of my skin, did we? I have better things to do with my time."

"I think you know where they might be hiding the Roarchik, but you

don't want Chane to take credit for the kill away from you. Most of the S.O.V.s would rather follow the Super who could give them the head of Roarchik than the One who teaches them to drill and fight and then does nothing with their training."

"So? Why are you digging at me instead of the head man?"

"I have my own reasons for wanting Roarchik dead, and I think you will be able to manage it before Chane can find his big toe. I want to help you become the real leader of the S.O.V. I want to be by your side as we kill Andros Roarchik. Am I asking too much?" Fressli put as much worshipful innocence into his voice as he could manage without choking over it. Any more of this humble slobbering would cause him to retch.

"Do you know what I think, Two-Fress? I think *you* think too much." Nusair popped his knuckles and watched the door. "I know where he is, too, I'm sure of it. If Roarchik is still in the Temple, you go do what Chane said, you watch. You are to report everything to him—and to me. I want to know more about who is helping Roarchik before I make my move, and I want to know who's in back of me when I do it. Time, little brother, time is on my side."

"I will do as you say; I'm very good at watching, but waiting..."

"Time is my friend." Nusair waved him away in dismissal.

"I will be pleased to help you, Super-Nusair. I know we will be of use to each other." Fressli got reluctantly to his feet. He had accomplished as much as he could for the present. "Go with the blessings of Vat," he said as he walked down the pathway. "Go with her blessings!"

"Go with the Blessing," Nusair called after him, adding under his breath, "Yes, you will need them... human!"

Nusair had been fighting behind Bron and had seen Fressli, his face free of android markings, shoot down the S.O.V. leader. Given a chance, Fressli would probably do the same to him—but he would not be given that chance. The human was no doubt in Fitzsimmons' pay. Very well, Nusair would learn from Fitzsimmons about playing all sides against the middle. But he would be a better and more careful player than Bron had been. Bron had ended up dead.

Roarchik, Nusair mused, must be killed for Vat's sake. Chane would die for Nusair's sake, and the man who called himself Two-Fress—he should die for his own sake. Bron would be pleased to have his killer's blood and bones as a memorial.

"What were you saying to that Two?" Chane had come out onto the porch and stood looking down at Nusair. The sunlight reflected off Chane's face, bringing out the rich coloring of his tattoos—the graphic arts company that owned him had been unsparing of their creative talents when they had designed his facial markings.

Nusair fingered his own unmarked cheeks. "Oh, I told him to be a loyal and trustworthy android for Vat's sake. I think he'll make a good Son of Vat, he's very enthusiastic."

Chane grunted, not bothering to wonder to whom the Two was asked to give his loyalty. He would find that out soon enough.

Nusair smiled and leaned back against the wall of the building. He could wait for a while, wait and plot. No One would rule the Sons of Vat for long. Vat would not allow it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next few weeks were, for Andros, some of the most unusual and rewarding days of his life. The problems of the androids, or his own of proving himself human, paled beside the difficulties of feeding, cleaning and diapering seventy-five android infants and children.

Lilith was the chief nurse and his teacher. Drina had left orders that Andros was to be put to work as soon as he was well enough, and Lilith obeyed to the letter. Gauging his strength and lack of experience, she gave him tasks he could accomplish easily and that would be of the most help to the Nursery. Unfortunately for Andros, most of these were dirty, smelly and even downright unpleasant. He bumblingly learned the intricacies of diapering a wiggling baby, the dubious joy of getting up at 0300 hours to mix formula and feed his lot of screaming infants, and the problems of burping a child without having its most recent meal end up all over his tunic.

The majority of the children in the Nursery were infants. The oldest

were not more than two years old and very few of them were potty-trained. Lilith was very reticent to divulge the exact number of android children on Mhalkei, nor would she tell him where the older children were kept. He knew from half sentences which ended when he came into range that there were more nurseries and training schools for the young androids; but Drina did not trust him enough to let him know too much about them.

The whole idea of full-term androids seemed stupid to Andros. It was inefficient, impractical and expensive. It was also a lot of hard work. The only justification he could see was that these children were not, in the true sense of the word, androids. They were naturally born, carried the full nine months. Their genetic structure was based on the same random chance as a human child, and they were more likely to be accepted as a free race than any of his father's V.A.T. creations. These children had mothers, fathers, a heritage. They were real. They would also doom Roarchik's as a financially stable corporation. If all androids were free and the next generation full-term, there would be no need for a Roarchik's or Nudroids or any other android factory. He was beginning to understand why Fitzsimmons had ordered pregnant androids killed. He, or the Confederation, would have no control over such children. They could not be programmed from the first cell division to be a One or a Three. They would be what the random gamble of genetics made them. These were the android race. Andros found himself thinking more and more about the future of these children, and about his own future. He might be able to prove himself human just in time to see an end to the usefulness of Roarchik's. He would have to find some other use for his life, and these children might be the answer.

At first they had been just so many wet bottoms, so many empty mouths, so much rackety noise. But Lilith slowly changed that for him. She pointed to a small girl struggling to escape from her crib and said, "Look how clever little Akako is!" She showed him how she taught a little boy to throw a ball back to her, and laughed with warm pleasure when he managed it.

She even gave one premature infant, all red and scrawny, a word of praise. "You're going to be a husky one, you are! Listen to those lungs; such loud yowls from such a small person." Lilith patted the incubator proudly. "We didn't know if we could save this one," she told Andros. "Some of Fitzsimmons' men caught the mother out on the streets and used her for a gang jump. They would have taken her to Fitzsimmons for the

bounty, but a group of Protectors happened by and chased them off. We saved the child."

"And the mother?"

"We had to use very crude methods. She was dying from what was done to her, and she begged us to take the child and let her go. Miranda sliced her open with a vibroblade and got the baby out. The mother bled to death." Lilith looked down at her own scarred arms. "If I were a mother I would have asked the same thing; better not to live after the human beasts finish with you."

"Haven't you got a doctor? Someone to deliver all these babies?"

"Dr. Kumuda helps with the deliveries. But we didn't know the woman would go out of the Temple and be caught before her time. The doctor was at another place—there was no time..."

Andros grabbed Lilith by the shoulders, holding her tightly. "Dr. Kumuda! That's the doctor who delivered me. How can you reach the doctor when a mother is about to give birth? How... where... I have to know!"

Lilith's hands folded softly over Andros' fingers. "You are hurting me, human," she whimpered, her face a deformed mask of bewilderment.

Andros released her, smoothing her lab coat gently. "I'm sorry, Lilith. I got so excited by hearing about Dr. Kumuda that I..." He stopped abruptly.

Lilith was staring at him, her one good eye blank with fear. "You hurt me," she whispered, starting to shiver. Her body convulsed in an epilepsylike seizure. Andros caught her as she crumpled into a twitching heap on the floor. He carried her to the rest quarters, wrapped her in a blanket and placed her on one of the beds. The convulsions continued; he tried to open her mouth to keep her from swallowing her own tongue, and was bitten for his pains.

"Here, let me help." Silky was beside him, still draped in the blanket she'd been sleeping in. "She gets this way every once in a while." She sat on the cot and cradled Lilith in her arms, rocking her gently. "Something will happen and it triggers off memories of what was done to her. I

overheard you two talking about the premie, and I was afraid of this. Get me that hype off of the desk near Drina's bed, the red banded one."

Andros searched for the hype while Silky held onto Lilith and crooned softly to her. The hype put Lilith into a deep sleep. Andros sat beside her, holding her hand and looking down at her mutilated face. She had been so kind to him, and so patient with his clumsy mistakes. She was beautiful, he realized, because she was Lilith. He tucked the blankets around her twisted shoulders and went off to make up the new batch of formula while Silky began the diaper brigade.

Lilith was distant with him for a day or two. She would draw back at Andros' approach and he knew that forcing himself on her would only compound the harm he'd caused. To make it up to her and to regain the ground he had lost, Andros began, paying more attention to the children as individuals.

Lilith was right. Akako was a clever little monkey, climbing out of her crib any time she wasn't tied down, and she was beginning to figure out how to untie a knot. The boy, Jedrick, soon learned to bring his ball to Andros to play catch. He began to teach the toddlers the simple counting games he remembered from his own childhood, bringing them back full circle from android to human to android. These babies were the little brothers and sisters Andros had never had, and he found himself warming toward them. He found it was possible to love something that spat up on you, messed its diapers as soon as you changed them, and smiled at you when you rocked it to sleep.

Lilith gradually thawed toward him, taking part in his games and helping devise new ones. And when the time came for the naming of the premature infant when they were sure it could live without constant use of an incubator, Lilith insisted that Andros be given the honor of picking the name. "His name is Leander, because he roars like a lion," he announced to general laughter. Andros bent over the incubator, beaming down at the child as if he had been personally responsible for it. No father could have been prouder of his son.

These children needed him. They were surrounded by the Protectors, all women, and they needed a father, too; Andros filled that need. They also filled something in him. He remembered Dr. Trigolone telling him he would find his place someday, and that it might not be what he had expected. The children became Andros' reason for being. This was the

place where he was needed, and he needed these children and their love.

Miranda was spending more time in the Nursery, and Andros found he had missed her company. As he told her, it gave him someone to argue with.

"We don't argue that much. Besides, with my job at Roarchik's over and things quieting down topside, I might as well be useful somewhere else." She lifted a baby called Helki out of her crib and checked to see if she was dry. She was, for once, so Miranda moved on to the next crib.

"I thought Drina was going to sic you on the Sons of Vat." Andros moved down his row of cribs checking diapers. At the third crib his luck ran out. He took the infant over to a sarcophagus to change it.

"Rodge is working on the S.O.V. problem. They have some new leadership, and from what I hear it's working out fairly well. I only wish Chane were a Super instead of a One, it's going to cause trouble. And as if Chane didn't have enough problems, Rodge says that Fressli's been hanging around the S.O.V. disguised as a Two."

"Fressli's not smart enough to be a Two—a Four-minus is more his style!" The baby was now clean and dry, so Andros returned it to its crib and continued his rounds.

"Aren't you worried about what's going on up there? Doesn't it matter to you that Fitzsimmons is still up to his old tricks? All you can do is make snide cracks about Fressli, but you won't do anything about him."

"That's my Miranda. I was really beginning to miss your acid tongue—I can't imagine why." Andros had found another wet child and had moved away from Miranda to change it. She watched him diaper the baby from across the row of cribs. His movements were swift and sure, but not impersonal. He stopped to tickle the baby's tummy, and made faces at it to keep its attention as he pushed the presstab closings in place on the diaper.

Miranda was in the Nursery for a reason—Andros. And the fact that he seemed to be improving as a person was a help to her and what she had to do.

Drina had taken her aside soon after the clash at the Temple and told

her what the Master Plan was concerning Andros and herself. "Dr. Roarchik invented a girl-child as his first Super for a purpose. He created the Supers with the ability to interbreed with humans, and that first interbreeding is to be between you and Andros. That's why I couldn't let you get mixed up with Deros. You will be the mother of a half-human child and fulfill that part of Dr. Roarchik's plan."

Miranda had protested, yelled and screamed, but Drina was immovable. "You'll do your duty to the Cause just as all the rest of us have had to. We need a tighter hold on him, too. You can be that hold."

Miranda had pointed out that the records of Andros' first sexual encounter with an android had not been successful, and that he'd shown no sexual interest in androids since. Drina harrumphed over it for a minute or two, then explained that Dr. Roarchik had handled it badly, and the android female chosen for Andros had been simply dumped in his bed. But since he already knew Miranda it should be an entirely different thing. "Let him think he thought of it. Seduce him by letting him seduce you."

Drina was so firm on this point that the younger girl eventually gave in. If Dr. Roarchik had indeed planned it this way, so be it. But she doubted Andros would even want her. "It's up to you to make it happen," was Drina's parting piece of advice.

But to Miranda's surprise Andros really wanted to be with her. She was someone who'd known him before he had been forced to hide. She'd known his views on androids and it was a comfort to have someone to help him sort out his confused thoughts.

"These babies," he explained, "are the most fiendishly clever things my father ever thought up. How he managed to pull this over the Confederation I'll never know. Why did he let Drina goad him to a fight? All he had to do was wait until the Supers grew up and present them to the Council as a *fait accompli*. They aren't V.A.T. grown, they're not even androids exactly—they're... they're..." Andros groped for the right word.

"They're nothing at the moment. Status in the Confederation is generally based on parentage, and these are the first androids with parents."

"But can't you see? Androids don't *have* parents; therefore, these are not androids!"

"I don't think the Council will be any too willing to buy your overly-partisan logic." Miranda considered his idea thoughtfully. "But it might be worth a try."

They had finished the diaper patrol for the hour and were resting on Andros' bed. None of the other Protectors were in the room—probably on orders from Drina, Miranda was sure. The cot was too narrow for them to lie side by side, and since neither of them had suggested moving to another cot, they faced each other, their bodies touching all along their length.

"The children of slaves are slaves, though," Miranda said bitterly. "The Confederation wouldn't want to lose its cheap source of labor, and would only consider these children to be more able bodies."

"But if we could free the Supers and continue making other androids for the Confederation, wouldn't that be an acceptable compromise?" His breath, close against her head, stirred her hair, feathering it lightly.

"That would be impossible! We all want freedom. What good is it going to do a Three to know that some androids are free and he isn't? That would mean a split in the android race before it even got started. The making of any other kind of android will have to stop. We can't compromise on that."

"Not compromising cost my father his life."

"You're wrong." Miranda pulled herself up onto one elbow and looked down at him. "I heard about those trips of his from Drina. He sweated blood trying to get some equitable settlement. That blow-up was a last resort for him. Drina only wanted to prove how powerful the androids could be, and how much damage they could do if a real war got started. Believe me, he did not want that fight, it was forced on him by Drina and the Proctor, Hylin. If Dr. Roarchik had wanted a fight he could have caused a general uprising of every Roarchik android in the Confederation. No, that pitiful little mess in Bleydeaux was only supposed to be a demonstration. But it got out of hand. Some non-Roarchik androids got carried away and killed a few humans, so the nabs were called out and... oh, it wasn't meant to end that way!" Miranda shook her head in exasperation at the memory of it. "We were just going to burn a couple of empty buildings..."

"But it all got out of hand." Andros reached out to touch Miranda's still floating hair. His fingers moved down her cheek, tracing the marking that made her an android. "I was taught at the Academy that many battles end up going 'out of control' because of lack of foresight. If Drina and Father had wanted to demonstrate the extent of android power, they should have shown the Confederation what the androids wouldn't do rather than what they could do. If the Confederation ever fully understood how much it depends on Roarchik androids, it would be scared spitless. Bron was right about that at least. I wonder..." Andros' eyes were glassy as he concentrated on an inner vision. He shook his head abruptly and refocused on Miranda. "Tell me something pleasant for a change. Tell me how the sky looks at dawn. Tell me if the flowers in Mathler's office are still as beautiful. Tell me..." He looked into Miranda's eyes, searching for something in them. "Tell me when you started becoming real to me," he whispered, looking at her in wonder.

"I've always been me, Andros; you're the one who's changed. I am real, you know that. The only difference between us is this." She lifted her hands to the tattoos on her face, trying to cover them.

"No, don't. They're a part of you." He pulled her hands away, trapping them with his own. She was Miranda, not some nameless body sent to his bed with no warning. She was a soft, warm, female person, and it had been a long time since anyone had been this close in a bed with him. Cynthia had become only a dim ache in his mind. Miranda could banish that ache. Miranda could...

She seemed to know exactly what he needed, sliding out of her clothing like a snake. The flimsy cot rocked under them as his clothing joined hers on the floor and their bodies interlocked.

Andros rolled over onto Miranda, and the cot, with one final scream of protest, tore away, dumping them on the floor in a welter of blankets, torn canvas and steel tubing. Andros looked down at Miranda and they both burst out laughing.

"Silly, can't you do anything right?" Miranda giggled hysterically until Andros stopped her mouth with a kiss.

"On the floor or anywhere," he breathed softly into her ear. "Oh Miranda, Miranda my love!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Sons of Vat headquarters was changing under the new leadership, Rodge noted as he got out of his shuttle-cart. He had driven past the building numerous times and observed the unkempt nature of the area, but he had never been inside it before now. There had been no need; any information he'd wanted could be picked up far more easily from close range, and he'd had, until now, no wish to speak with any of the S.O.V.

He was met at the edge of the street by a smartly dressed squad of androids in semi-military uniforms adapted from standard android clothing. He was briskly searched and his identity checked. As he went up the walk between two of his escorts he saw that the lawn was well kept and watered, and the porch was swept clean; the guard at the door saluted with a flourish at his approach.

The inside of the building was equally tidy. Rodge was led into the room furnished with several brightly covered cushions and a bench and asked to wait; he was offered tea, and was told Chane would be with him shortly.

Even though Rodge had never been to the S.O.V. headquarters he had met Bron in Mathler's office, and probably knew more about Bron and Chane than any of their own men did. An android's brain was no different from a human's, and just as easy to read emotions from. At times like these, Rodge wished he were a full Telepath. All he had to go on were the vague swirls of emotion he could feel in people and the "aura" a person gave off. He could easily tell if someone was a threat, and was as a result an excellent judge of character. But actual thoughts eluded him unless they were very strong and had a heavy emotional content. He was not looking forward to his meeting with Chane. He had nothing but hints, rumors and good guessing to offer the android... but put together, those little bits could form, a dangerous jigsaw puzzle.

Chane came into the room and Rodge, who had been sitting on the bench, rose to his feet. Bron had always been casual about his dress, but there was nothing casual about Chane. He wore the same uniform as his followers but the dark fabric had been cut to fit Chane precisely. On his right shoulder was a red strip of braid, a holdover of the scarf tradition.

"Why did you want to see me, Master Nestla? We have nothing to do with the Confederation's Hall of Records. Mathler doesn't keep records on

beings like us. We're things, aren't we?"

"Play your political games with someone else, One-Chane." Rodge gave him his proper title, keeping the conversation on the semi-formal level Chane had started. "I'm not here as a representative of the Confederation or of Mathler. When I spoke to Garyl I made my position quite clear."

"Yes, he told me that, but I had no reason to believe you. Sit down." He motioned Rodge toward one of the cushions, and sat down on the bench. Rodge promptly joined him on the bench, saying, "I hate having to look up at anyone, it's rough on my neck."

"Oh, is it so very stiff?" Chane turned sideways on the bench, watching the Jug with sardonic amusement.

Rodge grinned at him. "I'm a Jug, and most of us suffer from being stiffnecked. I think our position has something to do with it."

Chane laughed and said nothing more about Rodge's presence on the bench.

That settled, Rodge glanced around the room, feeling for anyone concealed or listening from another room. "Where is Nusair?" he asked.

"Out. What business is that of yours?"

"A lot. I don't want to see a repeat of last month's lynch mob, and one is brewing. Your Nusair is right in the middle of it—he and Fitzsimmons."

Chane's eyes narrowed to slits. "I hope for your sake, Jug, you know what you're talking about. I was told you're only an Empath. You can only 'feel' things, not really know them."

"I do know this much. Your Super-Nusair is having frequent meetings with a member of Fitzsimmons' staff."

"That's a lie!" Chane stood up and began to pace the floor, his anger and agitation apparent even without the use of Rodge's abilities. "Nusair is one of my most loyal men. He would never betray me, any more than he would betray Vat."

"Even when he hates taking orders from a One?" Rodge knew he had

scored a hit. Chane stopped his pacing and turned to glare at the Empath.

"We're all equal here," he snarled. "No one android is superior to another, be he One, Super or Four."

"Nice propaganda, but it won't buy you a slaapple without a credit to go with it."

"Who is Fitzsimmons' man? We wouldn't let any of his scum within kilometers of the S.O.V. Not even Nusair would collaborate with Bron's murderer. Nusair may indeed be jealous of me—mind you, I do not yet believe that—but he would not betray me to a human."

"Would he to an android named Two-Fress?"

Chane sat down abruptly. Rodge could feel his doubt, the fears of usurpation by a Super and his hatred of the Supers as a group. Rodge could almost see the mental ticking off of how many times Two-Fress had been to the S.O.V. in the last month and who he had spent the most time with once he had finished his report to Chane.

"So you're saying this Two-Fress is a human?" Chane's voice was weary.

"Yes, and I can prove it." Rodge took an infocube out of his shoulder pouch. "Do you have a scanner here? If not I have a portable one in my shuttle..."

"We have a scanner. Come with me." Chane pulled himself to his feet as though weighted down with more than he could carry. He led Rodge into a smaller back room of the building which contained several tables with scanners, decks of infocubes and wall charts of the streets of Bleydeaux. "None of this should be any surprise to you, and none of it is secret." He took the cube from Rodge and inserted it in one of the scanners.

"You'll find shots of Two-Fress without his android face marks and very much in Fitzsimmons' company—he's Fitzsimmons' secretary. Further on in that tape you'll find some shots one of my friends took at the Temple the night Bron was murdered. It shows the killer quite clearly. Fressli is licensed to carry a laser." Chane only granted and continued to watch the viewscreen.

Rodge relaxed and began the mental exercises that would aid him in

capturing Chane's thoughts. Disbelief faded into bewilderment, then hate—and that hate to white, searing rage as Chane watched Bron being shot down by Fressli. The rest of the tape showed meetings with Nusair away from the S.O.V. building. Chane's breathing was ragged; his hands clenched on the table edge with so much force the plastic top was dented.

"How can I be sure this is true?" Chane's voice pleaded that he wanted to hear it was false. "How am I to know you didn't fake this tape? You want me to get rid of one of my best men for your own reasons. How can I be sure you're not working for Fitzsimmons, too?"

Rodge let Chane ramble on. He knew the android needed to get rid of the accumulation of tension the tape had produced, and long training enabled Rodge to absorb excess emotion from other minds without harming his own.

"I am working for only one person," he said when he saw the android was ready to listen to him. "I support Andros Roarchik, the rightful owner of Roarchik's Androids, Inc."

There was another burst of hatred from Chane's mind. Rodge was outwardly unaffected by it, but his own mind was busy sorting out the source and reason behind his hate.

"That slavemaster!" Chane shouted. "He's as bad as Fitzsimmons. Why should I care about him any more than another human? Bron wanted him dead, and I agreed with him."

"Bron died because of someone wanting Andros dead. Fressli thought he was killing Andros when he shot Bron. I was close enough to pick up his shock when he saw that Andros was still alive. It was unfortunate for Bron that Dr. Roarchik made him look so much like his son. And if Fitzsimmons finds out who killed Bron it will be unfortunate for Fressli. Fitzsimmons thought he had Bron tied up with his string."

Chane snorted. "Bron was the one with the string—only it was a rope he was going to hang both Fitzsimmons and Roarchik with. There is no proof that your Roarchik is anything more than I am, an android. Nusair wants to be the leader of the S.O.V. because of Dr. Roarchik's thinking that a Super was better than any other android—young Roarchik is no different. He and Nusair are both traitors to the S.O.V."

"But Andros has never tried to take over your job, nor is he working fist in glove with Fitzsimmons. Nusair and Fressli are a bad team for you to go up against, especially if they find out what is really under the Temple of Vat."

"How do you know about that? Nusair doesn't even know, Bron trusted only me with that information."

"You're forgetting that Master Mathler and Dr. Roarchik both knew of the Tombs, and that Master Mathler has been working with the Protectors by issuing them their 'dig' permit. I know about the babies. Fressli and Nusair hope to find Andros hiding there, but if Fressli finds the children of the Supers instead..." He deliberately left the end of the sentence to Chane's imagination. "Nusair does know how to open the Great Mother, doesn't he?"

"Yes, I had to teach it to him in case something happened to me, but I only taught him the long system in case he should get any cute ideas on his own. I had hoped he wouldn't turn against me," Chane said heavily. "Now I have only Garyl. Can I trust him? He's a Super also."

"Garyl isn't too happy with things, but in a pinch he'll back you before Nusair. He resents the time Two-Fress has been spending with Nusair. The feelings are very apparent to me.

"Nusair doesn't know this Fressli is human, there can be no other explanation." Chane's voice again asked for more hope than he really felt.

"He knows. If you turn the screen back on and look at more of the tape, you'll see him comparing a picture of Fressli without makeup to Two-Fress who is walking across a park to meet him."

"How did you get these shots of them together?" Chane did not put the viewer back on; he was too demoralized by what he had been told and had already seen on the screen to question Rodge's word any more.

"Some of them I took myself," Rodge said quietly. "Others were done by the Protectors, Drina in particular."

At the mention of Drina's name, Chane raised his hands in the salute to Vat. "If the Great Lady, Drina, will come to me and tell me this is true, I'll destroy Nusair and his false Two with my own hands. Drina is the Great

Mother in the flesh and her word is the law."

"I'll talk to her and we can meet at the Temple after dark tonight. Fitzsimmons is looking for both Drina and Miranda, so they've been ducking there. Drina knows too much about Andros' parentage for the sake of the Sleam's rest. I'm only glad something bothers him enough to make him lose sleep."

"Right; the man has nothing where his conscience should be. I'll be at the Temple at 1800 hours—and if this is a trick, Jug," Chane stood over him, "you will be broken. I swear to it by Vat."

* * *

FRESSLI waited impatiently for Nusair in the small coffee house the android had insisted on for the meeting. Fressli had already had four cups of the thick, sweet brew and was being glared at by an impatient waiter who was eager to put the table to more profitable use. Fressli waved the man over and, with inward loathing, ordered another cup of the house specialty. The waiter sighed and went to a counter to bring back the unwanted drink.

Nusair came into the shop, his every movement an indication he was up to something. He glanced behind him with quick little jerks of his head. He scanned the room, looking closely at everyone in it. Then, apparently satisfied, he joined Fressli at the table.

"Here," Fressli pushed the untouched cup at him, "you drink this, I've had all I can stomach. Why do we have to keep meeting in such crumbum places? I know a great bar on Columbine street..."

"I know it, too, Bron used to hang out there." Nusair sipped the rapidly cooling coffee. "I don't want to be seen with you. I think we're being followed. Chane's getting itchy and he's put Garyl on my trail. I had to ditch him on the way here. But he won't matter for long. I'm ready to get rid of Chane and his bootlicking Super. My friends and I plan to go to the Temple tonight and flush out a mouse named Roarchik."

"Mouse?" Fressli was delighted with Nusair's cave-in, but bewildered by how suddenly Nusair was taking command without consulting him first.

"Yes, he's too unimportant to be a rat. The S.O.V. is the key to control of the Confederation, and I am going to control the S.O.V." Nusair smiled at Fressli. *And we will take good care of you too, my pretty mouse-child*, he thought, planning a slow, painful death for Fressli.

"All right," Fressli gave in quickly. "How many men do you have? I can round up some more androids like me who want to join the S.O.V. You'll need every man you can get; Andros Roarchik is crafty, you'll need help."

"Oh, I expect you to be there; in fact, I'd be disappointed if you weren't by my side the whole time. But as for your friends—I think we can do without them."

"But..."

"I make the decisions, Two-Fress, remember that." Nusair's voice was frosty with warning.

"Yes, of course, naturally, but..." Fressli stammered, and reluctantly gave in. If he wanted Andros dead he would have to go along with this fool of a Super. "What time shall I be at the Temple? We have to move quickly—don't want the Protectors onto us. But *I* want Miranda; I have a score to settle with her, the slut."

"We'll assemble at 1730 in the forecourt of the Temple." Nusair got to his feet and checked the room again. "Be there," he snapped, leaving the table.

* * *

FITZSIMMONS sat at his desk, cursing himself for having put only a short range bleeper on Andros. One month, and not the slightest trace of the little bug. He had put every available man out searching for Roarchik. The Temple area had been scoured a dozen times. Hylin, as City Proctor, was able to get Fitzsimmons' men into private homes and businesses as City inspectors, but he was beginning to balk at continuing the search. Hylin had begged Fitzsimmons to give it up; he had pleaded, offered to go down on his knees to get Fitzsimmons to stop tearing Bleydeaux upside-down. Fitzsimmons pounded his desk in fury. He would never give up! Not until Andros Roarchik was dead. A hundred Hylins couldn't stop him from hunting that man down and killing him. No one would run Roarchik's but Fitzsimmons, ever.

He would have to send the Mac over to pay a call on Hylin to make him see reason. Maybe if the Mac took along a few of his more disreputable companions it would turn the screw a bit tighter. Hylin was terrified of the Racers. Fitzsimmons smiled, picturing Hylin sweating himself sick over what the Mac might do to his beautiful City Proctor's building.

"Sir, I think I have something on the Roarchik case." Dr. Tegriss stood in the doorway, the dilation effect pushing him into the room as it closed behind him. It caught his green lab coat and he fretfully yanked it free. "I think I picked up the bleeper... I think." Tegriss looked doubtfully down at the communicator in his hands. "I'm not very good with one of these, I've never used a motion-tape deck before."

"Well don't just stand there, man," Fitzsimmons growled, glad of someone to vent his anger on. "Tell me what you may or may not have picked up." Tegriss shrank even smaller into himself as Fitzsimmons came around the desk and grabbed the communicator out of the now thoroughly frightened scientist's hands.

Fitzsimmons turned on the sound pickup and there, loud and clear, was the shrill piping of the bleeper—a sound as beautiful as music to Fitzsimmons' ears.

"I was out east of Bleydeaux—you said to make a wide search..." He looked hopefully at Fitzsimmons, who said nothing. "Well, I was about a kilometer away from the Temple, and I picked that up." Tegriss nodded in the direction of the chirping communicator. "I was fairly sure that sound was what I should be hearing if Roarchik were anywhere in the area, but there's a problem. There are no buildings where I first got the noise. It was in a dusty field with some old crumbling ruins scattered around, but nothing you could hide anyone in. They're hardly more than big building blocks and a pillar or two. So I started moving around, and the sound got louder in one part of the field. The noise on the tape was louder and the bleeping more frequent. Like it's doing now." Tegriss ran down, and waited for Fitzsimmons to say something.

"Then what? Did you find Roarchik or didn't you? Speak up, man, I want some answers!"

"Yes, sir," Tegriss mumbled, rubbing his small, dry hands together. "I don't know, sir...."

"Oh, stop mouthing off and come to the point or I'll have you demoted to janitor." Fitzsimmons checked the view-screen on the communicator for visuals and got a jerky pan-shot of one corner of the field Tegrís had described. Then a shot of the ground. The image was bouncing so much it was hard to see details clearly. Then the motion stopped and the lens was focused on a broken hunk of durasteel pipe sticking out of the ground. The bleeper track was going crazy, its beeps so close they formed a single steady tone.

"What is this?" Fitzsimmons demanded. "Why were you wasting my time taking pictures of rusty old pipes? Answer me!" Fitzsimmons turned off the keening wail of the bleeper with an impatient twist of his fingers, and froze the image of the pipe on the screen.

"Sir I'm a biochemist, not an engineer. It was just a piece of old pipe to me. But the sound was louder when I held that thing directly over the opening of the pipe."

"Could you see into it?"

"No, sir. I wasn't told too much about how to turn on the viewer and take pictures at the same time, so I figured it was best not to tamper with the machine."

"No, you fool! The pipe, could you see anything down the pipe?" Fitzsimmons was almost beginning to pray for one smart Matrix-One he could trust so that he could be free of idiot humans like Tegrís.

"We-l-l-l-l, it was dark," Tegrís paused to think. "Yes, very dark and it was deep too. There was a funny echoing sound like a pump or something way down in the ground." Tegrís looked at Fitzsimmons hopefully, his doggy face begging for approval. If he had owned a tail he would have wagged it.

"Okay. Get back to your lab work. I think we can take care of this without you stumbling around in any more fields. Besides, you're a rotten photographer. Back to your androids, Tegrís. They're the only thing you do well around here."

"Yes, sir." Tegrís' nonexistent tail would have been between his legs as he slunk out of the office, catching his coat on the door as it closed. He had the feeling he had done something Fitzsimmons didn't like, but wasn't

quite sure what it was.

"Tegriss!" Fitzsimmons bellowed, causing Tegriss to leap into the air and come rushing back into the office.

"YES, SIR!" He was all aquiver with anticipation of being allowed in on something he did not understand.

"Don't say *anything* about this tape to anyone, if you value your job. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir." Tegriss walked slowly out the dilating door, not even bothering to pull loose his torn lab coat as it was caught in the mechanism. He dragged his way down the halls toward the labs. At least he understood what went on there. He was safe in his labs. He sighed and ambled down the hall, a faithful dog unrewarded by a pat on the head or a scratch of his ego.

"Hello, Hylin?" Fitzsimmons watched the Proctor's image form on his communications bank. "I want a run-up on some of the old construction sites around Bleydeaux, particularly to the east of the android Temple."

Hylin was looking quite a bit more harassed than usual. Fitzsimmons wondered whether he would have to put up with more of the Proctor's protests and moral thumb twiddling. "All right, but could you call off your Racers if I help you out? There's a bunch of them camped in front of my building and it's making my staff very upset. We can't get a thing done around here. My women won't even report in anymore; one of them was raped yesterday—or so she says." Hylin's face was greasy with sweat, its contours blurring as though they were melting from the fear bubbling inside the man.

"Sure, I'll get rid of them for you; just get me the information I need," Fitzsimmons said, casually. He was getting a certain perverse pleasure out of watching Hylin turned over the fire of his own terror by a group of punks he could get rid of himself by one call to his riot nabs. "My boys don't mean any harm." Fitzsimmons poured more oil on the fire. "They want to make sure you do a good job of freeing Bleydeaux from android dominance. We only want the best for Bleydeaux, you know."

"I would prefer..." Hylin almost said he would have preferred the androids to Fitzsimmons' Racers, but then thought better of it. His half

started sentence mumbled off into meaningless sounds.

"Now what I want," Fitzsimmons continued smoothly, "is a set of charts on Sector Seventeen and Eighteen, two kilometers north of your buildings and about a kilometer to the east of the Temple. Got that?"

"Uh, let me see—that would put it right about..." Hylin moved off screen to consult his records. "Ah, yes," he said, coming back into view. "That's right about where the old city begins. It's the edge of the cemetery. The tombs of the Old Ones are under that area. They're quite famous as an archeological site," Hylin made a pursed-mouthed moue of disapproval. "Master Mathler controls that sector. The Confederation declared the area a cultural monument and put the Records Department in charge of it. I feel that was most unfair to my offices. I could have provided my own team to do the research instead of the group Mathler has had in place for the past five years. My men would have been faster, too. There hasn't been a single report of new findings since Mathler's group took over the Tombs. He gave an exclusive dig permit to some bunch of women who I'd be willing to bet don't know one end of a shovel from another. Their only asset is that they're all young and pretty. I wouldn't have let such consideration sway me! When I think of the museum we could have had by now. The tourists! The increase in revenues..."

"Yes, yes. I'll see what I can do to get Mathler taken off the project for his incompetence. Now, get me those maps of the Tombs on the printout, quickly." Fitzsimmons didn't give a damn who ran the Tomb digs as long as he found Andros Roarchik somewhere in that area. His promise to Hylin to straighten the matter out was forgotten. "Do you want the surface maps or the underground ones? I can send both, naturally..."

"What did you say about underground maps?" This was it, the hiding place for not only Andros but all the other Supers Fitzsimmons had failed to track down. There must be some way into the Tombs from the Temple itself, and another one probably somewhere outside the old city. Fitzsimmons froze. What if Andros had already been removed from Bleydeaux? But the bleeper was in the Tombs, and they should still be very attached to one another.

"Is there some way to get into the Tombs from the cemetery?" Fitzsimmons asked.

"Yes," Hylin began, then paused. "No, wait a minute, that was closed up

when Mathler's dig team moved in. I used to take friends down into the Tombs that way to show them the wall paintings, but Master Mathler said I was in the way of his archeologists." Hylin sniffed. "I can't see what harm we would have done; my friends are very devoted to great art."

"Can you show me on the maps where that entrance once was?"

"I can mark it for you if you think it would help. I wish you'd put some pressure on Mathler for a change, he's been most unfair about this." Hylin's baby pout was beginning to get on Fitzsimmons' nerves. Sniveling about some dusty old paintings while someone as dangerous as Andros Roarchik was still at large.

"Oh sure, I'll do what I can for you. Send the stuff over and I'll call off the Racers. Out." Fitzsimmons flipped off the viewscreen.

In less than a minute the clear plastic sheets slid out of the print slot. They were a block-by-block grid, printed in red and ready to be placed over a map of the city of Bleydeaux.

Fitzsimmons carried them to his desk and turned on the clear map top section set into the surface of his desk. He dialed the maps that corresponded with Hylin's charts and placed the clear overlays one by one over the map. He smiled down at the sheets with genuine love. They were his key to unlocking the mystery of Andros' sudden disappearance trick. He frowned at the last sheet. Hylin had scrawled a message for him on one corner of the map. It read, "This is the last help you'll ever get from me if you don't get the Racers under control."

Fitzsimmons glared at the message. How dare that whining pukka rat threaten him? *Aaah, let him sweat himself to death! Sniveling fool.*

Fitzsimmons banished all thoughts of Hylin or the Racers from his mind and studied the maps with particular care.

* * *

FRESSLI found Fitzsimmons bent over the maps, tracing out possible routes back to the Temple from the cemetery. "Sir, I finally got the Sons of Vat off their artificial asses. Nusair has agreed to take me to the Temple tonight to get Andros; he's sure he knows where he's hiding."

"And I know where he is, too. I might even know more than your Nusair." Fitzsimmons looked up from his maps. "Those androids have been smarter than we gave them credit for; they even got Mathler hooked into this. When I get rid of Andros I'll take care of that interfering old bugger, too. He's provided them with underground caves to carry out their scheming. The Confederation will love him for that. Look at this. There are kilometers of underground catacombs running under most of Bleydeaux."

Fressli bent over the map on the desktop. The overlay was one that showed the layout of the catacombs themselves. Fitzsimmons had traced a path with a stylus that left a dark line leading from the opening in the cemetery to the area right below the Temple.

"There is some entranceway in the Temple. I'm sending some men out to see if we can reopen the cemetery passageway. Hylin said it's been closed, but I have my doubts."

"But would they need an opening in the cemetery since they have the Temple?"

"Every burrowing animal has two exits from his den. It's a survival trait, and these androids do know how to survive, blast their Super hides."

"Then I'll go in with Nusair from the Temple, and you can come in from the cemetery and we've got them!" Fressli stroked the map with one finger. "They were fools not to think we'd find out about the caves someday."

"Everything is found out eventually, Fressli. It just takes time and a lot of thought." Fitzsimmons watched his assistant turn gray around the gills. He had begun to suspect Fressli of not being entirely honest with him.

Fressli knew rumors were flying in Bleydeaux about Bron's death by laser. He knew it would only be a matter of time before Fitzsimmons changed his opinion about who killed Bron. Fressli was sure that if Fitzsimmons should jump to the logical conclusions, his days as Fitzsimmons' secretary were numbered. And Fitzsimmons had uncomfortable ways of firing employees who'd failed to carry out his orders correctly. Fressli began to plan his escape route should Fitzsimmons' attack on the android Temple fail. Fressli didn't want to be one of those suspected of causing the attack to mess up.

Fitzsimmons turned off the map panel. "You go in when?"

"About 1730 hours, at the Temple forecourt. I don't know how long the actual getting into the crypts will take. Nusair isn't telling me anything, but knowing these androids and their love of ceremony with regard to Vat, it could take anywhere from ten minutes to three hours."

"My group will start from the cemetery about 1800 hours. Depending on how hard it is to get in through the opening—and I doubt it's all that tightly closed—we should be at least halfway in by 1830 to 1900 hours. I think the hunting will be good tonight, don't you? Be sure to bring your laser. I don't care how the vermin die."

"Yes, sir!" Fressli quickly decided that while Fitzsimmons might be down in the Tombs by 1900 hours, he himself would be as far from Bleydeaux as he could manage. And with a very active Space Port close at hand, that could be very far indeed.

Nusair could be avoided easily; while he was going through his mumbo-jumbo to Vat, Fressli would slip off into the shadows of the Temple, remove his makeup and duck out. *I bet Roarchik wishes he had as easy a chance to get out of here!* Fressli thought. Missing out on seeing Miranda and Andros finally get theirs was a pity, but his own life was more important to him than such vicarious pleasures.

"Tonight, then," he said aloud. "And death and destruction to Andros Roarchik."

"But he'll listen to you, Lady Drina!" Rodge sat across from Drina on one of the back benches in the Temple. It had been difficult to contact her, and even after he had gotten a message to her, she had come with reluctance.

"I don't fear for Chane, he's an honorable man. Most of the S.O.V. will follow him, and he has Garyl to back him up if needed. Chane knows the work we're doing here and I have no wish to enter into S.O.V. politics. You showed him the tapes, that should be enough for him to act on. He doesn't need me."

Rodge groaned inwardly at the stiffnecked stubbornness of Drina. "But you know Nusair is working with Fressli, and if you want to safeguard those babies of yours, you'd better make sure no henchman of

Fitzsimmons ever sees them."

"True, but I would personally slit Fressli's throat if he dared show his weasel face around my children. And I feel much the same about you interfering in my affairs. I know old Mathler trusts you with everything he knows, but then he can't help it entirely, can he?" She pursed her lips and glared at the Jug. "You'll find, Rodge, that I'm not so trusting, nor as easy to read."

Rodge nodded glumly. In all the years he'd known Drina he had never been able to pick up much of anything from her mind. She was very much in control of herself.

"But the children's lives may be at stake," he pleaded.

"How long do you think they would live if every S.O.V. knew about them? I don't want my children turned into weapons or used for propaganda. Chane I trust, but I don't want his men to see the children. I do not want the S.O.V. in the catacombs."

"At least agree to meet with Chane. He's afraid of Supers, I will admit, but he's doing a better job with the Sons of Vat than Bron ever did. They want to help you, and your word carries a lot of weight with him. He'll take care of Nusair and Fressli for you without anyone going down into the crypts. But you must go to him."

"He ought to look up to me. I think he has a very good idea what I am." Without any other explanation, Drina abruptly gave in. "Very well, for the sake of my children and my having known Chane when he was that young in mind if not in body—it's a shame that man wasn't born a Super." She knotted her fingers together in a restless gesture. "Have him come at 1800 hours, but make him bring as few of his men as he'll feel safe with. I'll talk to him, and I'll help with Nusair. I diapered Nusair, you know, he was one of my children..." She slumped slightly on the bench, and Rodge realized she had aged perceptibly in the past few weeks.

Lifting her hand to his lips, he kissed it. "Thank you, Lady Drina," he said, still holding her hand. "This could be very important for all of us."

"And particularly for Andros. If this is some Son of Vat plot to kill him, so help me, Rodge..."

"Mathler has trained me too well, lady. If I were involved with anything that would harm Andros Roarchik, he would take me apart long before you could get to me. We both want to see Andros in his rightful place as head of Roarchik's."

"Even though there might not be a Roarchik's if the androids are freed? Never mind answering that. I only wish *I* were as sure he's right for the job. Time alone will prove anything."

"And Fitzsimmons may not give us much of that."

"Fitzsimmons! He's next on my list after Fressli. I want Fressli for myself and I want him alive." Her face was a tattooed mask of cruelty.

"What do you intend to do with him?" Rodge was troubled by the hatred he could see on her face but not feel with his mind.

"I intend to cut out his living heart and eat it—raw."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Temple was empty. There had been no services held since the massacre. The building was dusty and still. The walls echoed to the sound of Nusair's and Fressli's footsteps. The rest of Nusair's followers had fanned out and were searching the side rooms, but they too were empty. The androids came back into the main hall as Nusair walked down the aisle toward the altar. Fressli was pushed along by the group of S.O.V.s around him until they all reached the area in front of the massive white tank. The Sons of Vat knelt, Fressli with them, and Nusair stood alone in front of the altar.

"A G C U !"

Nusair's voice echoed off the tank. He spread his hands wide in benediction toward the V.A.T.

"AA AC GA GC CA CC UA UC
AG AU GG GU CG CU UG UU"

He wove the pattern of the double helix in the air before the tank and it slowly began to open. This was the long way of opening the

V.A.T.—repetition of the genetic codes. First the four nucleotides, then the sixteen dinucleotides. Finally, with the tank fully open, Nusair prostrated himself and began the Sixty-four trinucleotides.

"AAA ACA GAA GCA CAA CCA UAA UCA...."

"Can't we go in now? The door's open," Fressli whispered to the Son of Vat next to him.

"AAG ACG GAG GCG CAG CCG UAG UCG...."

"Shush, this is necessary, the Goddess must not be angered."

"AAC ACC GAC GCC CAC CCC UAC UCC...."

"But what would happen?" This android blathering was what Fressli had been afraid of when he told Fitzsimmons he didn't know how long it would take Nusair to enter the Tombs.

"AAU ACU GAU GCU CAU CCU UAU UCU...."

"There are traps set in the tank; this releases them and we can safely enter the Goddess," the android whispered back.

"AGA AUA GGA GUA CGA CUA UGA UUA..."

"But how much more of this is there?"

"AGG AUG GGG GUG CGG CUG UGG UUG...."

"About two more lines. Then we can enter." The android, a Two named Hagar, was not particularly surprised by Fressli's questions. Nusair had told him that this was a false android and that he was to be watched and, if need be, killed.

"AGC AUC GGC GUC CGC CUC UGC UUC

AGU AUU GGU GUU CGU CUU UGU UUU."

"Now we can all enter the Great Mother." Nusair turned and beckoned to Fressli. "I want you to have the honor of being the first through the opening, Two-Fress. You have earned that."

"I would much rather follow you, Nusair. After all, you are a Super, and you outrank me in the S.O.V." Fressli was sure he saw the gleam of a knife in Nusair's hand.

"Oh no, we are all equal in the Temple of Vat. Dr. Roarchik ordered it to be so. You will go down." Fressli felt Hagar shoving him inexorably forward.

"STOP WHERE YOU ARE OR FACE THE WRATH OF THE GODDESS!" The voice boomed out over the empty hall. "YOU WILL GO NO FURTHER IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIVES. A LASER CANNON IS TRAINED ON YOU AND CAN CUT ALL OF YOU DOWN IN SECONDS. YOU WILL NOT MOVE OR YOU WILL FEEL THE DISPLEASURE OF VAT!"

The larger than life voice of Vat was Drina, hidden in the control room of the Temple. She knew the warning would hold the androids for at least a few minutes while they thought about this development. Nusair, she knew, would quickly realize there could be no such weapon in an android-controlled building. The Confederation would not have allowed it, nor Roarchik agreed to have it installed.

Hastily, Drina slammed open the channel to the Nursery. "Run for it! Trouble in the Temple. Rush order!"

The Protectors had all been gathered together in the Nursery by Drina. She had not trusted Rodge or Chane, and had given standby orders to evacuate the Nursery if necessary. The area would be cleared by the time any of Nusair's men could find their way through the maze of tombs to the room where the babies were kept.

Drina eyed the group below. They were starting to thaw around the edges. There was the chatter of an alarm system at her elbow. Flipping on an infrared viewscreen, Drina could see Chane and Rodge with several of the loyal Sons of Vat in the entrance to the main hall.

One of the figures below made a break for the door. The others, realizing they had been tricked, gave chase and ran into the arms of Chane and his S.O.V.s coming in the door.

"CATCH HIM, CHANE, I THINK IT'S FRESSLI!" Drina yelled over the loudspeaker. It was impossible to tell one android from another from the

height of the control room, so Drina hurried down the narrow stairs of the ten-meter-high control room to the Temple floor below. She wanted Fressli, alive or dead.

* * *

THE field in Tegriss' tape looked quite different at night. The secondary moon was up, and the crumbling old monuments looked new and bright in the dim light. The tarnished lettering on the tombs took on a counterfeit luminosity. The cemetery was calm and beautiful in its empty stillness.

That calm was broken by the sounds of men stumbling across the field. There was an occasional curse as one of the Racers tripped over a half-buried tombstone.

The family mausoleum that should, according to the maps, hold the opening to the catacombs was at the top of a small mound. Its walls still stood, but it was roofless. The dirt of centuries clogged the floors of the tiny chapel section. Brass plates set into the floor had corroded away to a crumbling verdigris green dust. A scavenger bird had built a nest on what was probably an altar. There was no sign that the entrance existed, nor that anyone had been here in years. Fitzsimmons was sure that both impressions were deliberate. "Check every inch of this place; the floors, the lower walls, particularly that altar."

It took several minutes of prying at the brass plates, tapping on the altar and taking apart the bird nest to discover the block in front of the sacrificial table that hid a large rusting ring set into the floor. The ring-stone did not come up easily. It took three of the Racers to shift it up out of its slot. The opening had not been used for some time—and Andros was still somewhere below in the catacombs.

Fitzsimmons was the first to climb down into the opening and find the narrow flight of stairs leading downward. They were cobwebbed and thick with dust, but he paid no attention. He would endure any discomfort if the hunting was good.

* * *

THE Protectors had gone into instant action at the alarm call from Drina. The removal drill had been practiced many times, and twenty of

the Protectors were in the Tombs.

Lilith led the procession of androids carrying the babies out of the Nursery and down the hall toward the cemetery exit. There were hiding places set up in the ruins of old Bleydeaux and Mathler had made sure they were always well-stocked in case of an emergency. It would take three trips to get all of the children out. The toddlers could only be managed one at a time, but most of the smaller infants could be carried two to a Protector.

The emergency exit was well hidden, they thought, and none of the Protectors felt any premonitions of danger as they moved in an orderly progress down the corridors.

"I don't even see why we have to disturb them." Janna carried a child awkwardly, her body swollen by her own unborn baby. "There isn't a chance the S.O.V. can find the Nursery without knowing the wall codes; and even if they did find us, they wouldn't harm the babies. We could have put Andros in the fake crypt and saved ourselves a lot of trouble."

"Better safe than not. The Sons of Vat aren't supposed to know about the children. Dr. Roarchik would have wanted it that way." Lilith was managing to carry two babies, one under each arm as she moved with a clumsy shuffle toward the cemetery. "I know Dr. Roarchik told Bron about them, but the less the rest know the better I'll sleep. There's some nasty sorts in the S.O.V., and we wouldn't want anyone telling the Sleam where to find our darlings." Lilith gave the babies each a fierce, protective hug. "Don't you worry, my precious ones, Lilith will always be with you, my..."

"Look, there's a light ahead!" Silky flattened herself against the wall and the others quickly followed suit. They were close to the exit, but there should have been no lights at all.

"Put the babies down, everyone. Get them out of the way," Lilith said softly, placing her own charges in a tomb niche in the wall. "This might be bad. Get your knives out."

The Protectors huddled together, knives drawn; the children were as much out of the middle of the passage as possible. "It might be Mathler," whispered Silky, a knife in each hand.

"Or it may not," Lilith spoke from out of the dark.

The lights came around the bend in the passage, too bright to see who was carrying them. The only thing the Protectors could be sure of was that there were a lot of people ahead of them in the corridor, and that they were making no effort to conceal themselves.

Lilith, her one eye sharper than those of most people with two, had adjusted to the gloom. "Back, back!" she hissed, grabbing up her children. "They're Racers, I saw the chains."

The androids swarmed around in the narrow confines of the tunnel, some of them standing and facing the oncoming men, others racing back to the Nursery to warn Miranda. A baby wailed with fright at the sudden twisting and turning it was being forced to endure, and the sound was heard by the Racers. They ran toward the Protectors, rifling their lanterns higher in the air.

Then the Racers spotted the androids and yelled. Fitzsimmons cried a warning; he knew these androids generally came out armed. The light he was carrying whirled in circles, its beams reflecting off the walls, the androids...and Janna. He stopped, staring at her in horror.

"She's a Super! Look at her belly!" he screamed, pointing to her. "Kill her, kill them all. She and her kind will destroy everything." He ran into the surging mass of androids, babies and Racers. The Racers needed little encouragement to kill. The Protectors had struck out at them with their blades and were prepared to fight to the death if necessary. They would take as many Racers with them as they could, and the more bloody and mangled the better.

Fitzsimmons stumbled over something in the dark. Directing his flash lantern downward, he saw a small boy cowering against the wall. An android child. He reached down and grabbed it by its legs, pulling it up into the air head downward. Swinging the boy back and forth to gather momentum, he smashed it head first into the wall. The child's cries were cut off in midscream, its head crushed to a bloody pulp.

"Watch the floor," he said, dropping the body. "There're children down here and I don't want any of them left alive when we leave." He snatched up another baby and snapped its spine by bending it over his knee and jerking sharply on the child's arms and legs. He threw the broken infant away like a smashed toy, stomping as hard as he could on the baby's head to make sure the job had been thorough. He still wanted Andros, but this

haul was better than he had dreamed. This was where they had been hiding the Super infants he had not been able to destroy. He would finish all of them now, end the chance of an android-dominated Confederation, and add Andros' head to the top of the pile of battered infants. Roarchik's children would die, all of them.

"Follow those females, they'll lead us back to the rest of this spider's nest—after them!"

The passage was splashed with blood. Androids lay dead or dying, the dead babies among them. Lilith was a crushed pulp; several Racers, taking exception to her ugliness, had stomped her to death. Under her body were the two babies she had tried to save. The weight of the Racers' boots had driven Lilith onto them, snuffing out their brief lives. Two of the androids were still alive, hideously cut and bloody. Several of the Racers had stopped to rape what was left of them. The men stood waiting their turns with their trimslax down around their feet.

Fitzsimmons snarled at the Racers. "Come on, there's more important things. Sex can wait for now."

The Racers snickered, making lewd gestures at him. "Naw, nothin' more important than jumpin' anytime!" one of them answered. "You go kill some more babies if dat's your way of pleasuring we'll take ours right here." The Racer was next in line for Silky, or what was left of her. Ignoring Fitzsimmons, he fell on her, jabbing at her bleeding body. "Oh Vatsat, she's dead! Any of you want a dead one? I'm going after some live meat." He yanked up his trimslax and trotted off down the corridor.

Camet was first back to the Nursery, blood pouring from a wound on the side of her head. "Racers! In the tunnels, they're killing the babies!" She collapsed in a heap on the floor at Miranda's feet, her blood running in rivulets across the stone paving.

"Fitzsimmons! Nusair's done us in..." Miranda turned wildly to the other androids waiting to join the line of baby carriers. There were very few of them: four in good health and two very advanced in pregnancy.

"Block the doors, get the babies over to that wall. Andros, come with me." The androids leaped to her commands. The cribs were pushed across the room behind a row of sarcophagi, knives were drawn and ready, the Protectors lined up to defend the children. Taura, one of the pregnant

androids, moved toward the door to close it, but stopped as several of the Protectors from the passageway came running back into the room. Their children were hastily dumped into cribs with the other babies, and now there was the problem of whether to bar the door and save the children inside, or risk the children and androids still out in the passage.

"Almost everyone else is dead," said one of the girls who had been in the slaughter. She was barely fifteen, one of the youngest of the Protectors. "Bar the door, Miranda," she said. "Please—quickly, before we all die." Miranda nodded to Taura, who threw the switch activating the stone entranceway.

Once she was sure the door was secured, Miranda turned to Andros, taking him by the hand and dragging him toward the rack of shelves on one wall. "There's an empty tomb behind here that we rigged up as a *slik* in case we had to hide anything important, and now you're it."

She pushed a piece of trimming on the carved metal and part of the shelving swung outward, revealing a rectangular hole in the wall. "Now get in," she said, shoving at him.

"Give me some of the babies, there's room enough for me and two or three of them," Andros pleaded.

"No, they might cry. Andros, save yourself. You're the one they really want dead." She pushed at him, trying to force him into the tomb. "Trisla," she called to one young girl, "help me!" Between the two of them they managed to shove the protesting man into the hidinghole. Miranda slammed it shut behind him, locking the opening from the outside. Andros banged on the wall, demanding to be let out, but Miranda had moved back into line in front of the babies and was not listening to him.

Andros put his eye to the crack formed by the hinged side of the covering shelves and watched the room. The view was limited, he had only a sort of tunnel vision, but he could see most of the room.

Something hard hit the door, causing it to reverberate from the shock waves. Again there was a blow. The door, solid stone, held. Then silence. Andros could see the spot of red form on the door, then the tip of a blue-white flame from a laser cutting through the lock.

The lock gave way and the stone slid into the wall. Fitzsimmons' Racers

were plunging through the opening. They were soaked with blood and thirsty for more. Andros could dimly make out what he thought was Fitzsimmons standing in the passageway. He, too, was smeared with blood—android blood.

At first, it seemed the Protectors could hold the Racers at bay. The room, while large, was crowded with sarcophagi, cribs and shelving, and the androids had the advantage of knowing every inch of the area. But the Racers were numerically superior, with more of them pouring into the room by the minute. Several men, in what Andros recognized as the Roarchik guard's uniform, joined the Racers, killing their way across the floor. The Racers were dealing primarily with the Protectors, while the guards aimed for the babies.

The line protecting the cribs had broken. The room was too small for all the people in it. Andros could hear sounds of slaughter coming from the sleeping room as the girls were driven inexorably away from the sarcophagi and the cribs behind them. One of the guards had reached the edge of the row of cribs. With a yell of triumph he snatched a baby out of the first crib and slammed it against the edge of one of the hard stone coffins. There was a scream from one of the Protectors, and the carnage quickly accelerated.

Babies were ripped apart, their heads smashed in with clubs and chains. A Racer picked up a small girl and drowned her in the large stainless steel pot that held the next feeding's worth of formula. One guard had a baby held down on a sarcophagus and was attempting to saw its head off with his dull knife. It was neither a quick nor a painless death.

In the dark, Andros hammered on the door of his hiding place, screaming, "Kill me, I'm the one you want, kill me!" But there was too much noise in the Nursery, too many sounds of death for his voice to be heard. He collapsed against the door, sobbing bitterly as he watched the children he had learned to love killed before his eyes. No more games of catch for a little boy. No more Leander; his incubator had been thrown to the floor and the contents ground to a paste under the feet of the Racers and guards. Through tear-blinded eyes, Andros saw Fitzsimmons moving across the room. The Sleam was picking and choosing his victims with care. A pretty little girl-child in a crib was as yet untouched. Fitzsimmons slowly walked over to her bed and picked her up, cradling her in his arms. He smiled down at the child, and then abruptly tightened his fingers

around her tiny neck. His hands twisted as if he were decapitating a chicken. The child struggled and writhed and twitched with the pain of death. Her spinal cord was ripped and shattered. Fitzsimmons felt for a pulse and when he found none, he dropped the child and moved on to another crib.

Andros vomited, the green bile rising to burn his throat raw. The vomitus splattered down his clothing, but he took no notice of it. He heaved again and again until his stomach was empty, and still the heaving continued. He wanted to tear out his eyes, to die of a heart attack, anything to stop him from seeing what was going on in the nursery. But he had to watch; he could not keep his eye away from the narrow crack. He had to watch what was happening to the people he loved.

Miranda moved through the room slashing, clawing and killing Racers and guards alike. *She will not die*, Andros thought. *They will all go, but not Miranda*. "Vat, help her," he mumbled in the dark. "Vat, help her, Vat, Vat...let her live, Vat!"

But there was no answer from the walls of the tomb or the Temple above him.

Andros saw Taura fall, a swarm of Racers bent over her bulging body. They sliced open her womb and removed the wet, blood-stained foetus. Waving it in front of Taura's dying eyes, one of the Racers tore its throat open with his teeth and let the blood pour down into the android's eyes. It was the last thing she saw.

Miranda stood with her back to the shelving where Andros hid. She was holding off six Racers singlehanded with only a vibroblade. "Miranda! MIRANDA I LOVE YOU!" Andros screamed her name over and over, but she paid no attention. Her body tensed as she waited for the Racers to rush her.

There was a rumble of noise from the outer passageway, and jamming their way into the room were several of the Sons of Vat, led by Nusair. The Racers turned from Miranda to meet this new threat. The babies were dead, most of the Protectors were dead or dying, and here were fresh victims. The battle surged out of the Nursery and down the corridors. Andros breathed a prayer of thanks to Vat. Miranda was still alive.

"Where is he, witch?" Fitzsimmons stood in the doorway, a laser in one

hand and a communicator in the other—a communicator which was humming the steady bleep of a tracker band.

A bleeper! Andros knew too late now how Fitzsimmons had found the Nursery. Fitzsimmons had put a bleep in him when he had been in the Sleam's office. And now it had tracked him here.

Miranda stood tall and defiant. Andros could see one hand creeping slowly to the small of her back. An extra knife rested in a sheath on the back of her trimslax.

"Drop your blade," Fitzsimmons snarled, lifting the laser.

Miranda dropped the vibroblade that Fitzsimmons had seen in her hand, but he had very little chance to spot the knife flashing out from behind her. Her body obscured Andros' view of the knife's flight as she threw it across the room at Fitzsimmons. His reflexes were good; it buried itself tip deep in his shoulder instead of his heart. It would have been directly to the target but the flash of his laser blinded Miranda and affected her aim. Fitzsimmons' aim was much better. Miranda crumpled, the front of her shirt charring from the heat, exposing Miranda's burned and gaping chest.

Andros, the darkness rising around him, knew he would be next and didn't care. He sat numbly awaiting Fitzsimmons' figuring out how to open his hiding place and then his own death. Living did not matter very much now.

Fitzsimmons lifted the communicator and scanned the room, searching for Andros.

"Fitzsimmons! The nabs are comin', dey're comin' in from da graveyard and da Temple, too. You said dere wasn't gonna be no nabs." A large dirty Racer burst into the Nursery and yanked Fitzsimmons around by one arm. "You said no nabs an' de place is full o' dem. Let's get out o' dis place!" The Racer half-dragged the protesting Fitzsimmons out into the passageway and then the two men disappeared from view.

Andros didn't care. There was only numbness in the part of his brain which should have been registering the fact that he was still alive. He wasn't. He wished himself dead. Wished and prayed for death. There was no answer from anywhere, only darkness and then nothing.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Fitzsimmons shook off the Mac angrily. "You fool, I had Roarchik cornered in there; one more minute and he'd have been dead."

"Yeah? But we'd'a been dead, too. Dem nabs are usin' lasers on my men."

"Nonsense." Fitzsimmons shrugged his tunic neatly into place; if the Proctor were in the Tombs, it would be wise to look cool and in command. "Hylin wouldn't dare do anything without checking with me first. I have him well under my fist."

"No, Master Fitzsimmons, you do not." Hylin stood in the passageway, backed by a semicircle of well-armed riot nabs. "This is where it ends. I've been watching you and *your* Racers on my office viewscreen, thanks to an android who only identified himself as 'Thirty-Four.' He patched into my trunk lines, showed me what you were up to and asked for my help. He's getting it. I *told* you not to kill any androids, Fitzsimmons. I'm no longer taking your orders and getting nothing in return. You promised me you'd call off your Racers from in front of my offices. They're still there—at least, some of them are." Hylin glanced around the blood-splashed halls and at the stacks of bodies, both android and Racer.

"Well," Fitzsimmons spread his hands in an apologetic gesture, "I got a little busy with this android problem and I forgot to get back to..."

Hylin did not look at Fitzsimmons. He watched a trickle of blood slowly slide down the wall from a patch of congealed brain tissue and hair. "Women and children your new sport, Sleam?" Hylin's voice was cold and firm.

"You must understand, I'm under order to wipe out all resistance." Now it was Fitzsimmons' turn to plead.

"And so am I." Hylin turned to look at the man, or through him. "Your Racers are dead. I had them shot when they refused to leave the forecourt. I intend to make a full report to the Confederation on your handling of this problem; I don't think you'll be in charge of Roarchik's much longer." Fitzsimmons started to answer, but Hylin held up a hand to forestall him. "I know it may mean the end of my job, too, but it'll be worth it to see you

get what you deserve."

"You can't do that!" Fitzsimmons raised his laser, but before he could aim it he was shot down by Hylin's nabs. The Proctor looked down at the dead man for a few seconds, then drew back his foot and kicked him full in the face. Hylin had been wanting to do that for a long time.

"Let's get the rest of these Racers rounded up," he said. "And try not to hit too many of the androids. Remember, they're valuable property." The nabs moved purposefully down the narrow passages seeking out the Racers and leaving very few of them alive.

Rodge, Drina and Chane were left to cope with the androids. There was sporadic fighting with the few Racers left, but it was primarily a clean-up operation involving giving a "loyalty or death" oath to the former followers of Nusair. Garyl was very good at such persuasion, both because he was a Super and because he was carrying Rodge's laser.

Nusair's body was found in a tomb entrance. His head had been cut almost off his body, but the pile of guards and Racers surrounding him indicated he had gone down with lots of company. There was no sign of Fressli anywhere in the catacombs. Garyl insisted he personally would search every inch of Bleydeaux for the man.

"You won't find him; he's off-planet by now," Drina said to Chane. "Fressli is a survivor."

"Are we going to let him go?" Garyl knelt in the corridor, lifting first one child and then another, searching for some signs of life.

"Those are all dead," Drina shook her head and tried not to look at the babies scattered at her feet. "I could tell when I first saw them there was no use in examining them further. *Triage* is an old art to me, one I wish I didn't have." She bent to cover Silky's naked body with the tattered remnants of her clothing. "Fitzsimmons always was a thorough man, whatever he did."

"Except for knowing Hylin's breaking point, or that he was in communication with the Temple," Chane added. His hands waved the blessing of Vat over the dead girl.

"Fressli isn't our problem any more." Drina straightened painfully.

"Now I have two things to do—see if Andros is alive in this charnel house and then go thank someone for calling out the nabs."

"And if Roarchik is dead, he deserved it!" Garyl put down the dead baby he'd been holding and stared at Drina. "All this was because of him. He killed these children."

"No. Dr. Roarchik and I did this between us. Andros is the only thing left now to keep me alive. Dr. Roarchik is dead, my children are dead, and I'm too old to start it all over. I need Andros—alive." With slow steps Drina moved back toward the Nursery. She had become an old woman in the past hour; her shoulders sagged and the fire was gone out of her. If Andros was dead, she would use the small capsule Dr. Roarchik had given her as his parting gift and she would die beside the man she should have watched over and cared for much more than she had.

The Nursery was even worse than the passageways. The room was jammed with bodies, the air stank of death. Drina found Miranda only after turning over piles of dead babies, androids, guards and Racers. They were all the same in death, just so much waste. She sat beside Miranda for a long moment, cradling the girl's head in her arms. She had thought Miranda's would be the womb to carry on the next step in Roarchik's Master Plan. Now Miranda would never have Andros' child. Drina let go of the dead girl and started to do the blessing of Vat, then stopped in midmotion. There was no point now.

She had not found Andros in the room or the corridors. She glanced at the shelving, wondering whether Miranda had managed to get Andros into hiding. If she had, Drina could bet he had not gone willingly. There was no sound from behind the panel as Drina activated the lock and opened the tomb. For a second her heart sank. The crumpled, foul-smelling, blank-eyed thing inside the hidinghole bore little resemblance to Andros Roarchik. But she could see his chest rising and falling and the faint pulse at his throat. Tenderly she lifted him out of the tomb and carried him to an empty cot. The bed was soaked with blood and an android lay face downward on the floor next to it, but Drina's duty was to the living, not the dead. She wrapped Andros in the bloody blankets, stroked his face to get some response from him, and then found a tranquilizer hype that hadn't been smashed in the raid. He had to sleep and let his mind paint over the worst of what he had seen and make it more bearable. By the time he woke up, most of the carnage would be

cleared away, and she could do the rest to make him whole again. She smiled down at him. He was alive and so was she. "You and I, Roarchik, we have reasons to live."

It took two weeks to bring Andros back to a semblance of anything human. Drina kept him dragged most of the time, decreasing the dosages as she felt he was ready for larger chunks of reality. He screamed often in his sleep, repeating Miranda's name over and over. Drina held onto him during the worst of his attacks, cuddling him like a small child.

Her time was not devoted only to Andros. She worked at reorganizing the Protectors, and brought in a core group from one of the other nurseries to help her. These androids were all busy in Bleydeaux recruiting more of their kind for the Protectors. With Drina's grudging help, Thirty-Four was expanding his surveillance network to cover all the Tombs and the other nurseries on Mhalkeri. The destruction in the catacombs was slowly repaired. One of the old tombs was opened and used to bury the dead—all of them together, Drina insisted on that. Mathler wanted to give a funeral address and Drina was forced to agree to it. He tearfully named off the beloved dead and called them the new martyrs of a reborn race. Drina thought he was being a fool. Talk would raise no new babies. She asked Chane if he needed her help with the Sons of Vat and found that he had things well in hand. He was a better leader than Bron had been, and with Garyl to keep the rest of the Supers in line the S.O.V. could go on to be something worthwhile.

Drina now had only Andros to deal with. She had estimated the day she would take him off drugs with great care. She sat on his cot beside him, gently sponging his face with a damp cloth as she had the first time they had met.

He opened his eyes and looked up at her. "They killed Miranda." Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes, rolling down the sides of his face.

"Now stop that," Drina said, using a corner of the cloth to catch the tears before they could pool in his ears. "I want you to listen to me very carefully, Andros. Miranda is dead. But her Super-Matrix pattern is on record and there are some clone cells of hers in the freeze. If you'd like I can make you a new Miranda with almost all of her memories, depending on how up-to-date she kept her files, and I can program her to fall in love with you. She hadn't quite reached that stage, you know."

He sat up abruptly and shoved Drina away from him. "Shut up! Do you think there could ever be another Miranda? She was real, she had feelings—more than you ever will! You can't stamp out copies of her like a plastic doll. I'd rather live without her than with some obscene parody of her corpse."

"Roarchik, you are beginning to think." Drina got up off the cot and folded the wet cloth. She placed it on the corner of a table cluttered with bottles and flasks. Andros was reminded of the clutter of his father's office, and the memory stirred something inside him.

"There's only one way to do anything for Miranda, and that is for me to carry on my father's work. I will free the androids, and I won't be killed doing it. Father never went to the Academy, so he really didn't know how the Confederation works." Andros got shakily out of the bed. His legs felt like melted glue and his head was light as a bubble, but it still worked.

"Bron was right, poor slob—hit them in the underbelly. I'll put every android out on strike and show the Confederation what they can do without androids."

"There'll be trouble, more killings," Drina reminded him.

"I know." His face clouded as he thought of Miranda. "But I'll do it no matter how much time it takes and I'll come out on top. The androids and I will win."

"Won't you have to be a human to accomplish all that?"

Drina's back was to him; she was mixing something from the bottles on the table.

"It doesn't matter what I am. They're going to listen to me if I can make every clerical worker they've got suddenly walk off the job. They'll have to listen if there's no one to run their computers, no one to chart flight plans or keep the wheels of the Council greased. They'd listen to a Matrix-Four if he was the one in control, and I know I'm higher than a Four."

"Yes, much higher." Drina picked up the flask of darkish fluid she'd been working on, poured some of it onto a cloth and began rubbing her cheeks with it. "I'm quite proud of you, Master Roarchik. I wasn't at all sure you'd turn out worthwhile to me, but I think now you'll prove to be all

your father and I wanted you to be—that and more." Drina turned around to face him, her cheeks free of any trace of android markings. "Yes, I am proud of you, Andros, my son."

Andros' knees gave out from under him. Groping backwards he felt for the edge of the cot and slumped down on it. "So you're the one! You're the woman my father talked into helping make his wax dummy for the Supers!"

"Not too flattering, but true. The idea of creating a new race was a particularly interesting problem to spend my time with."

"But all these years you never came near me, never saw me—I needed you. I needed a mother."

"Did you need me as much as the Supers did? I think not. Look how well you've turned out." She picked up a packet of papers and an infocube off the table. "By the way, if you need proof that you're human, here are your birth papers I stole out of the Complex files. They're all signed and witnessed. But your name alone should have been proof enough for you."

"My name? I thought Father just picked it out of his computers like 'Bron' or 'Deros'; what's special about my name?"

"In one of the old tongues of Terra it means 'Behold, a man'; we picked it for that reason alone. I'm sorry you had to be kept from knowing this for so long, but I needed your help. If you had known for sure you were human or, more important, if the Confederation had known, you would never have come back to Mhalkeri. I had to steal these out of the records or you would have been lost to us by your silly dreams of wanting to be an astrogator. But you can try again for that now if you wish." She handed him the packet and the cube. He did not look at them or open the papers.

"No. That's all over for me. The Confederation can turn out lots of astrogators, but only you, you she-cat, can turn out a Roarchik—and I'm it."

"I was sure in time you'd see it that way. I had to have you here on Mhalkeri long enough to learn what being an android could mean. I had to make you understand what a hell it is for those born in the V.A.T." She looked down at her hands, cracked and sore from cleaning the catacombs. "I'm only sorry it had to be by so bloody a means. Some people need to be

hit harder by life than others to make them understand it. You and I are such people. You know this is only the beginning, both for and against the androids. There will be more innocent blood spilt before we're through with the Confederation."

"Is that all Miranda's death is going to mean, just one more battle on the way to android equality? I won't have it! She deserved more than that."

"Oh, she'll get more, and how she would have laughed at it. We'll publish this to the entire universe. We'll make Fitzsimmons the blackest villain in history and Miranda the purest of saints. Every cause needs a good hero and a good tyrant. We now have both. I would not have deliberately set it up this way, but I will take advantage of it while I can."

"Yes, she would have laughed." Andros smiled, remembering the sound of Miranda's laughter the day she had shown him the Complex. He glanced slyly at Drina. "You think you're very clever, don't you? So many things could have gone wrong with your plan. I might not have cared so much about Miranda or I might have found Dr. Kumuda, and you would have lost me right there. You took too many risks, Drina; no wonder you needed me to run your war."

"No on both counts. Miranda was designed for you. Your father had it planned that you two would be together, and as for Dr. Kumuda, if you will look at those papers I gave you, they make it quite clear that Alejandrina Kumuda, doctor, and Drina Kumuda, certified as your mother, are one and the same person. I would have gotten you one way or another. I planned it that way."

Andros stared up at her, his mouth open. "You!" he managed to sputter. "No wonder my father picked a scheming, conniving sneak like you for my mother. You're two of a kind! Two more self-centered, selfish people I never met in my life." He sat on the bed fuming to himself while Drina laughed.

"True, oh, how true," she chuckled. "But you'll find it's the selfish ones that manage to get things done in this universe."

"I suppose you have *our* next steps all planned out?" His voice was chilly with sarcasm.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. You will fight for android independence and I will rebuild the nurseries. Motherhood does seem to be my true vocation, after all, and there's no purpose to your gaining freedom for a new race if I haven't got a new race for you to free, is there?"

Andros fell back on the cot, staring up at the rock ceiling. "The Great Mother! That's what you've wanted to be all along, isn't it? I think I'll have the double helix in the Temple replaced by a durasteel replica of you for the Threes and Fours to slobber over. The irony of it appeals to me."

"Not a bad idea. Erik always said he had me in mind when he created Vat, but I think it would be best to leave religion out of this. Let our children make up their own. If they want to worship either of us, that's their fault, not ours."

Andros threw a pillow at her and turned over on the cot. He had a lot of thinking to do.

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