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THE EYES OF BOLSK

Robert Lory



Was he puppet or
sword-arm for a world's
unseen master?

Jared Kane thought of himself as a secret agent doing the dirty work that governments usually do not like to admit they must do. But in the midst of an especially difficult sabotage assignment, he found his role had changed.

For no longer was he on Earth and no longer was he involved in the devious politics of cloak-and-dagger. Rather, he was now called on to assume the role of a sword-and-sorcery expert on a world where medievalism competed with something that hinted strongly of either magic or super-science.

However, if there was one characteristic that Jared had in great quantity it was the ability to keep his wits in any surroundings. And when he was confronted with the supreme enigma of THE EYES OF BOLSK, he found that still a third role confronted him—a role that just might be called “world saver.”

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second complete novel



THE EYES OF BOLSK

Robert Lory

AN ACE BOOK

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ONE

Boredom—We include a special subheading on this psychological state, which you may well experience during your term of service. Because environmental conditions here at headquarters render you relatively static in terms of your normal aging process, and time as you have known it passes in hardly traceable movements, the “time” you may spend in any given staff assignment may appear to you to be exceedingly lengthy. During your off-work hours you may therefore wish to use the facilities of the Sports, Hobbies and Entertainment Center. It is also recommended that upon mastery of your current assignment, you work out with your supervisor a program of further study to prepare yourself for advancement, which, though not as rapidly as one might desire, does come to the patient and willing worker.

While keen interest in the events under your cognition is heartily encouraged as a means of tedium relief, the temptation to view these events in any other than a strictly objective and detached attitude is strongly discouraged. “Helpful” assistance or any kind of tampering in affairs under an employee’s scrutiny—unless by express order from higher authority—will be cause for immediate dismissal.

—from the employee handbook
“Welcome to Committee Service”

Area subsection staff advisor Abr-Dorrek’s silver palms sweated, and his three round eyes blinked rapidly as his supervisor scanned the report.

“Hastily prepared,” was the verdict. “Your conclusions and recommendations are unwarranted and impractical, respectively. Committee approval would have to be obtained for such action. I would not deign to bother them with what to me is obviously a local matter.”

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Abr-Dorrek's one silver ear, at the top of his elliptical head, twitched. He did not especially like his supervisor, who, being a Spidran five-legger, was ugly to look upon. But cooperation and appreciation for cultural differences were watchwords among those—the somewhat fewer than 30,000 chosen—who worked for the Committee of Nine. And the subsection staff advisor would not have the Spidran for a boss forever. If he could prove himself, perhaps through this crisis . . .

"But it is a crisis situation," Abr-Dorrek insisted, his voice still respectful, though louder. "Look here—and here."

"Local. A local matter," repeated the Spidran. "Contained as it is, there is no chance of disturbing any balance of major significance."

"May I remind you that the species mentioned in the report is *Homo sapiens IV*." Abr-Dorrek said tautly.

The Spidran shrugged. "I am familiar with the species. However—"

"And familiar with the Restrictions the Committee has imposed on the species?"

"Quite so. It is my job to be familiar with these matters," the supervisor snapped. "But the Restrictions are of such a nature that this so-called crisis situation you've invented does not endanger them. Several cultures—some with the same Restrictions as *Homo sapiens IV*—have been allowed to discover and use the swirls. In their own locality, that is. And this, I repeat, is local."

Abr-Dorrek rose from his desk, drawing himself up to his full height. The effectiveness of his gesture was lost somewhat because the Spidran was four times as tall as he, but his decisive manner in punching the report dial did work toward irritating the supervisor.

"Now look here—" the Spidran began.

"No, you look—here," was the subsection staff advisor's reply.

The supervisor looked at the small screen. Moments later, his shaggy black head nodded. "This particular *Homo sapiens*—this Chez Ebec person—is it possible he might succeed?"

Abr-Dorrek sighed. "It's all in the report. But yes, it's more than possible."

They were the Committee. They were nine, so it was said. Supposedly closeted in a great hall in the center of the forty-

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ninth level of the massive structure that housed the many staffs at their disposal, the nine were seen by no one. Abr-Dorrek wondered often what species they were, whether all were of the same species or whether they were mixed. He, like the other members of the staffs, had argued that they were of his race, but somehow he—as well, he suspected, as the others—were certain deep down that they were not.

Now he sat and the Spidran squatted, waiting for the decision. They waited in the anteroom of the Hall, the sanctum of the nine. Though he'd never been even this close to them before, he'd been brought this time, thereby elevating his status among his peers, in the event the Committee had questions—or worse. It was, Abr-Dorrek knew, not the Spidran's intent to honor him by this action. No, it was clear to the three-eyed staffer that he was here as a scapegoat in case anything in the report displeased the Committee.

Local matter—hands off!

These were the words Abr-Dorrek expected. These were the words that so many staffers found on their returned reports in their *in* baskets. Local matter. The “matter” might well involve half a galaxy—Abr-Dorrek-knew of one situation that spanned three galaxies—and still it might be called local. His report, however, though on the surface local indeed, dealt with one of the Restrictions. And though often they concerned matters that might seem to the untrained of mind as insignificant, the Restrictions were taken very seriously. In his report he'd made much of the fact that the species under observation was *Homo sapiens IV*. His conclusion, carefully couched in the words of the applicable Restriction, was warranted, he reflected. His recommendation—

His thoughts stopped with the swing of the anteroom door. The red bodied Cumum, blind and deaf and dumb, handed Abr-Dorrek's report to his supervisor.

Peering over the Spidran's hip, Abr-Dorrek joyfully read the words: “Implement. Destroy link in first phase.”

First phase.

The silver sheathed staffer, now back in his own cubicle, pondered the words. First? There are two sides to every Lith coin, but which side is the first? And first in what respect? Appearance? Priority? Causality? Danger?

The species member Chez Ebec was first in priority and causality and danger. But . . .

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Abr-Dorrek locked into place on his viewer the link itself. Two sides. Two phases. *Destroy*. Simple enough—were it not for the Restrictions, which also restricted the actions staffers might take. But . . .

He spoke into the desk speaker. "Request an Imparter."

"Specify species and culture, please," the speaker responded.

"Homo sapiens IV."

"You've gotta be kidding," the speaker came back. "Levity over interoffice communications devices is not appreciated."

"All right. Homo sapiens anything—but dignified in appearance." Turning to his viewer, he considered his approach. The Ebec side, yes. There was no doubt about what the Committee meant. He touched a dial, then another. A form of a Homo sapiens type came into the viewer. He was reminded of the red bodied Cumum, although the figure in the screen was not red bodied. He nodded to himself.

But there was still the other side of the link. It would be best to attack the destruction problem from both ends, but in light of his instructions. he'd be putting his own position on the line. Especially if he failed. Or if anyone found out about it.

If he chose his foil wisely . . .

But the species local to the "other" side could not cope with the problem, unfortunately. Though maybe it was fortunate, really. A wise choice would not be local at all, even if there was a candidate worthy to the task.

He touched another dial and another. Then still another. He had manipulated the mechanism for what seemed an eternity, when onto the screen flashed a tridi scene, which he studied. It was night. A Homo sapiens IV moved carefully and silently toward a brightly lighted structure. The place-spot was right. The time curve element was obscure enough. The species member itself would do. He was weaponed. He seemed secure.

He would, of course, be unauthorized, but he would not know that. If he was unsuccessful, no harm done, since the attack was dual sided. If he was successful, however, it would mean laurels for Abr-Dorrek, maybe even a promotion.

He'd just made his decision, when the hall door opened.

"You requested an Imparter?" asked the golden haired Homo sapiens II.

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TWO

Because he is charged with such great responsibility, the agent must be chosen with maximum care. The qualities necessary to the optimum agent are always deduced from the nature of the problem for which he is being recruited. Thus it is axiomatic that staff analysis of the problem and all its component particulars must be complete and accurate, else an inappropriate agent may be assigned to it.

In addition to the above considerations, there are two fundamentals to be observed in the recruitment of an agent:

1. His selection to accomplish a particular task may in no way run counter to any Restriction as set on record. (It is advised that a potential agent be checked against the Index by species, specific planet, system, general continuum locality and individual personal name, the last of which, it has been shown, has disqualified a surprising number of otherwise acceptable agent-candidates.)

2. His consent to serve as an agent must be given strictly voluntarily.

—from Committee Regulation AG-49e,
“The Proper Use of Agents in
Furthering Committee Ends”

Forming no contrast to the dark night outside the brightly lighted generating station, the lean man dressed in black slacks, black sweatshirt and black dyed tennis shoes crouched in the window he'd jimmied open moments before. He listened intently for footfalls on the highly polished floor that, fifteen feet below, extended in three directions the length of a football field. A minute passed, then another. Three minutes he let go by; then he was ready. His left hand tightly gripping a black gym bag, he dropped down, lightly landing on the balls of his feet, his knees springing silently to cushion the descent of his 170 pounds.

Jared Kane froze, his hawklike face tensing. He listened now for any indication that his arrival had been heard. There was none. Releasing the strap that held his .357 Magnum securely in its hip holster, he moved low and swiftly across the floor around two recently blue painted generating units to a glass partitioned section of the plant. Inside, on

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the other side of the glass, he could see the sparkling clean banks of computers that collectively formed the brain of the huge complex.

This brain was the target. Set the timer on the explosive in his black bag, then beat a path out of there. Job done, he thought. After the bright explosion, the little east European village and most of the countryside around it would plunge into darkness. That was his job—a small but necessary one. Tonight a very important espionage agent was going to get him; a permanent removal of a gadfly who'd been playing double agent too long and too profitably. Tonight in the dark the marked one would enter his personal but eternal darkness. Jared Kane had no idea who would be pulling the trigger. He wasn't even sure a trigger, *per se*, would be pulled.

That wasn't his business. His business was merely to provide the darkness that would facilitate both the execution and the escape of the executioner.

He wished for darkness now inside the plant. There was too much light for the stealth that was his stock in trade. But ideal working conditions had never been his lot, not when he was a lowly records clerk in the Service and certainly not since his promotion three years ago.

At thirty-four, Jared Kane was his Control's number one demolition man. In his five major assignments to date he'd been overwhelmingly successful. The Service counted their people's successes in a manner similar to the computing of baseball batting averages. Kane's current average was 1,000. If he was unsuccessful tonight he'd drop to 822, a more than respectable number in baseball but not in Kane's work. Not that he'd suffer any ignomy by the failure. He'd be too dead.

It made a man nervous. And cautious.

He checked the door separating the computer room from the main plant. There was no sign of an alarm system, which would have slowed him up. He'd skirted three such systems already in getting this far. Easing the glass door open, he crossed catlike to the machine cabinets and knelt. He weighed the percentages and decided to face the door through which he'd just come, even though there was the possibility of being taken by surprise through a small utility door to the rear of the computer banks.

Defly Kane opened the black gym bag. Reaching inside, he toyed for a moment with the electrical connections. As-

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sureing himself they were all in place, he inserted a small jack into its waiting receiver.

That was all there was to it. The bomb was activated. There was no way to deactivate it. In ten minutes the interior of the generating station would be rubble.

Ten minutes. He had that much time to get out and away.

He was on his feet moving toward the door, when a voice from the other side of the glass partition stopped him in his tracks. It was more than a voice, it was a call of some kind. For help? Had he been discovered? He listened as footsteps pounded their way across the highly polished floor outside. The steps were getting louder, coming closer. A single pair of boots, Kane's trained ear told him. One man, walking swiftly. Maybe he hadn't been located. If he had, though . . .

He checked his hand's movement toward the Magnum. The gun's big bang would draw the entire force guarding the plant. Lifting his right trouser leg, he unclasped the short double edged throwing knife strapped to his calf. His watch told him he had nine minutes to spare. Nine minutes to oblivion.

He had just cocked back his throwing arm, when the utility door to his rear creaked. This was unexpected. The footfalls were still sounding to his front. He was trapped. Fortunately, they didn't know he knew he was trapped.

Pivoting, Kane heaved his knife expertly at the widening crack the opening utility door was making. There was a soft thump of sharp steel entering flesh and bone, followed by the crash of the heavy brown uniformed guard who fell face first into the room.

Then came the single click to Kane's rear. It was a small sound but ear shattering in its cold sweat implications. It was the hammer of a pistol being cocked.

Instantly Kane whirled, his right hand diving downward to his Magnum. He didn't hear the sound of the explosion, but staring into the flash-filled barrel in the hand of the tall, gangly man fifteen feet in front of him, he knew. The gun had just fired.

Then something strange happened.

The instant he steeled himself for passed. The bullet that should have sent him spinning to the floor never touched him.

Another instant passed.

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Missed! thought Kane, who was immediately struck by an important fact—he hadn't heard the gun go off.

And the tall guard who had blasted him . . . just stood there. As if he were frozen. A statue. A vacantly staring, motionless statue.

Kane's mind clicked rapidly. He holstered the Magnum. His adversary couldn't harm him, he decided, and there was no reason to sound the alarm by an unnecessary shot. His only concern now was to get out before the entire place made one big bang. Before moving to the door, he checked his watch.

He had nine minutes to go.

Nine?

He saw the bullet then.

It was a foot and a half away from his face, on a direct line from the guard's revolver. It was just hanging there, frozen in space. Just as he found, when he now tried to move, his body was frozen in place—at least, his feet were.

"You may move your head, hands and torso. From the waist up you are free, Mr. Kane."

As Kane's head jerked to his rear, the speaker stepped into his field of vision. The man looked like an ancient Roman, dressed as he was in a purple toga that reached the floor. No, not Roman. Long blond hair hanging shoulder length canceled that impression. And Kane's second appraisal determined the man to be anything but ancient. Not young, either, though the body and face showed the strength of youth. But the eyes—they held the confidence of advanced age. No, not young—"unblemished" was the word.

"Jared Kane, we must talk of important matters."

"Why can't I move my lower body?" Kane asked. Hearing his own voice lowered the level of the panic that had begun to rise within him. Nerve gas? he asked himself. No. Nerve gas of whatever kind couldn't freeze a bullet in place or stop a watch. Whatever the explanation, he might as well cool down. He was caught. His average—

"It need not at all detract from the perfect 1,000 you are so proud of," said the man in the toga. To Kane's searching expression he added, "Yes, I have some mind reading powers, as you might call them. In answer to your spoken question, I have frozen the bullet and everything around you except that portion of your essence which I must leave free for communication. Actually, *frozen* is not precisely correct ter-

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minology, but in terms of this metaphor, I have frozen time on this world. A better way of saying it would be that I have taken you from your timelock, which is why your wrist timepiece shows no progress."

"Impossible," Kane said.

"Not so. Not to those who have the power, and I have been given such power for a time. Time in which you and I must come to an agreement of sorts."

"Of what sorts?"

The young man in the toga bowed. "I am Aylan. My office is Imparter for the Committee. I speak to you on the behalf of and upon instructions from the Committee, which arranges all and watches over all. The Committee has a task that must be accomplished for the good of all. We are therefore contacting you in the hope that you will undertake this task freely of your own choice."

Kane began to understand. "To be a turncoat. To work for your people instead of mine."

The man in the toga smiled. "You need not become a traitor to your cause by undertaking the Committee's assignment. There will be no conflict of interest, as the Committee's cause is the cause of all."

Sure, thought Kane. Usual line. The brainwash begins. "Workers, throw down your chains," Kane mocked. "How's that for a start?"

The man called Aylan smiled again. "I'm sorry. I completely forgot what the word "Committee" might mean to you. We are not the committee that forms your political opposition. Think, Mr. Kane. Could that committee stop time?"

You never know, Kane thought, but . . . "I suppose not. In which case, where *are* you from?"

"To tell you precisely where wouldn't enlighten you much. Suffice it to say that we are not of your world."

It was Kane's turn to smile. "Spacemen?"

"In a way, yes. Some of your better physicists, those who've had some training in the psychology of perception, would be in a better position to understand. But the term "spacemen" will do for now. However, we're wasting time."

Kane snorted. "How's that possible? You stopped it, or so you said."

Aylan's face turned serious. "Good point, Mr. Kane. We are in fact not wasting time here in this zone. But time in

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the absolute still moves, and things happening within it necessitate our speed."

"Spacemen. You're the flying saucer people?"

"No. We have never had occasion to visit this world before—during its period of recorded history, at least. The Committee never intereferes unless faced with a crisis situation."

"Well, assuming you are what you say you are, you've picked the right time. This Earth may destroy itself at any moment."

"Possibly," Aylan said. "But the fact that your planet might nova out has no interest for the Committee. Your world—indeed, your entire system—could disappear completely, and in the totality of things would not be missed. The Committee intervenes only when the crisis threatens the balance of universal existence. We have such a crisis developing, which is why I have been sent to you. You must perform an act of destruction that will ensure the maintenance of balance."

"Act of destruction?"

Aylan nodded.

"But why me? Why not one of your superhuman, all powerful Committee?"

"The Committee or none of its staff members may perform an act of violence. It is as simple as that."

"But you can hire someone to do it. In our law, a man who hires a murderer is as guilty of the act as the man who pulls the trigger."

"That is the way of your law. Ours is somewhat different—as long as you volunteer and as long as we make no payment of any kind to you."

"With those inducements, suppose I should refuse?"

"Then," said Aylan, gesturing toward the bullet eighteen inches from Kane's face, "I simply turn time back on."

Kane glanced briefly at the hovering piece of lead. "I volunteer," he said without gusto.

Aylan stepped to Kane's side. "To make your task easier, I'm giving you two things. The first I'm now inserting in your left ear. A small device used in several cultures, it will allow you to understand and communicate in tongues alien to you. The element can be extracted by tugging on the little golden ring affixed to your earlobe."

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When the device was in place, Aylan came around to Kane's front and placed a silver colored chain over his head. Hanging from the chain was a flat blue metal disc the size of a silver dollar. The disc was covered with strange decorative markings, and in the center of one side there was a small, smooth black bubble.

"This amulet is your means of passage to and from the world where your task is to be accomplished. Merely press the bubble inward and you will be transported to a spot near your target. When the job is completed, press the bubble again, and you'll be back here. One caution, however—do not try to return before the job is done. You shall not be allowed to do so."

Kane fingered the ring on his earlobe and inspected the amulet hanging from his neck. *Decked out like a Gypsy*, he thought. What he said was, "You've mentioned a target. Just what is my assignment?"

Aylan looked at him steadily. "You are to put out a pair of eyes."

"Eyes," Kane repeated. "Eyes of a man?"

"A man, yes."

"And how do I accomplish the job? What method do I use?"

"The Committee cares not how you do it. You may use any means at your disposal."

Kane thought of his gun and his knives, of which one was buried in the guard's chest behind him. All right, he had the means, but . . . "After I kill this man and put out his eyes, you say I can then return here. Here to this exact place?"

"To this exact place and time, which will then begin to flow for you again."

"But then that bullet there . . ."

Aylan smiled. "I'll leave that problem to your ingenuity. As for the man, you won't be required to kill him."

Kane said grimly. "Committee ruling, I suppose."

"Not at all. There's no Committee ruling which says you can't kill the man. But that doesn't change the fact of the matter. You cannot kill Bolsk. He's already dead."

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THREE

The Imparter, because he is the instrument by which the Committee gains the agent's consent, should therefore:

1. Be of the same race as or, if not possible, a race similar to the potential agent.
2. Be open and considerate in his manner.
3. Use terms and concepts familiar with and acceptable to the agent. . . .

—from Committee Regulation
AF-49e, "The Proper Use of
Agents in Furthering Committee
Ends"

. . . By the nineteenth century (local designation), the majority of educated Homo sapiens IV on the planet thought the concepts of magic and the supernatural absurd.

—from "A Short History
of Intelligent Life on
DLM-363"

The planet's name was Trovo, Aylan said—a sparsely inhabited world with large areas untouched and untamed.

(Kane now sat at the desk in the time stilled computer room. The Imparter's voice resembled that of a history teacher Kane had disliked many years ago. But the history he was hearing now was not boring. He would play student now, and earnestly. His life might depend on it.)

There was on Trovo's main continent a local ruler named Bolsk who had two things in abundance—wealth and misanthropy. His hatred lashed out in every direction until all but a few favorites kept far from him. Bolsk the Butcher, he was called by the people he ruled by force of arms. But this title was earned not so much for his general disposition as for the specific slaughtering of his eleven illegitimate children. Proclaiming that he could not bear the existence of these "slutsons" he was not content merely to have the babies done away with quietly, but he insisted on hacking them to bits himself, making his mistress-mothers watch the proceedings and in some cases making them assist. For he hated his women as well as their children, using them only as convenient receptacles for his base biological urges.

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There were two exceptions to Bolsk's general hatred. The first was his son Doyak, the only legitimate child of his loins. The second was a mistress named Randil, who, through some means perhaps not even understood by herself, had exerted an invincible power over the man for many long years. Unfortunately for all, Randil's beauty was matched by her greed, and as she saw the ruler failing in health through age, she sought to ensure that his wealth, when he passed on, would come to her. There was but one roadblock. Doyak, though he'd not lived in the house of his father for ten years or more, could not be put aside from his inheritance. Randil's solution was simple, and her approach to Bolsk direct.

"We must kill him," she said. "You've done away with your other children. Why not Doyak?"

"The question is, *why* Doyak?" countered the old man. "Not only is he almost full grown to manhood, which alone would make murdering him much more difficult than the deaths of my other offspring, but he has been loyal to me all these years, defending my name whenever others presumed to taint it with untruths, half truths, and even truths. Why should he not inherit my wealth?"

"Defense of a name is an easy chore, especially if that defense need not go beyond verbal blows or struggles in logic," Randil replied. "I say give his loyalty to you a real test and let the outcome decide whether your wealth will go to this whelp of a coward or to Randil, whose love for you has never changed with tide or season."

"You have a specific test in mind?" Bolsk asked.

She did not, she said. "But send for the lad. He lives as a merchant some way to the south. By the time he sits before you I shall have chosen a suitable test."

The next day in the heat of afternoon, the woman Randil stood before a row of tri-tents in the crowded marketplace in the village below Castle Bolsk. Perplexed as to which tent was the one she sought, she hesitated to enter any. Considering her problem, she did not hear the footsteps behind her and jumped at the voice.

"My lady, the tent you seek is the one to the far left."

Turning, she saw a deformed beggar. Rather, she saw his back, since he was already padding away from her, going toward the tent he'd said was the one she sought. "How—how did you know . . . ?" she began, but the beggar had entered the tent. She had no recourse but to follow. Hur-

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riedly she crossed the space between and pulled the visitor cord. A bell rang inside.

"The lady Randil seeks the Philosopher Rai," stated a deep voice from behind the tent curtain. "The Philosopher awaits. Enter, Randil, a woman friend of the mighty Bolsk."

She drew the curtain aside and stepped into the tent. She was surprised to see but one man in the small enclosure. Tall and fine bearded, dressed in excellent cloth, he sat on cushions before a low blackstone table. "How did you know who I am?" she challenged. "And where is the man who came in here just before me?"

The man with the beard—black like his eyes—said amiably, "A philosopher knows things. Some philosophers know more than others. The Philosopher knows more than they. About the beggar, why trouble your mind about such a one?"

"But he couldn't have left here," Randil insisted. "There is no other entrance or exit than the one through which I entered."

In truth, of course, there was another exit, cleverly hidden by the folds of the tenth cloth. Clever was the word for Rai, who, though he sported the title "the Philosopher," was more a magician of the crude mechanical kind, his success due more to careful planning than to wisdom or lore.

In the present case, for example, one of the many spies he employed in Castle Bolsk had informed him that the lady Randil had inquired about the whereabouts of a certain Philosopher Rai. The remainder was simple but effective showmanship, which created a helpful and always expensive amount of awe in his visitors.

To the present awe filled visitor he smiled knowingly. "You did not come here to discuss current design practices in tent-making, but something more urgent. No, do not tell me what brings you. My ears, which are tuned in on other, higher frequencies, have already learned the reason." His ears, in fact, had been tuned in to the message of another spy who had eavesdropped on the conversation between the lady and her master the day before.

"You know?" Randil said.

"Rai knows. Tell me but one thing. It has been rumored that the aging Bolsk's eyesight is failing him. Is there truth in this story?"

Randil laughed sharply. "Failing? The old pinch penny's eyes are as sharp as an eagle's, especially where his jewels

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and coins are concerned. I have not heard this rumor you speak of."

Rai's smile grew broad. "You shall. In fact, you shall help spread this rumor—with Bolsk's knowledge and aid, of course. It is part of the solution to your problem." Rai's voice suddenly became ominous. "There is, in a land far to the east, a giant lizard known as Feak the Ferocious. . . ."

"Far to the east, my son, lives a giant lizard known as Feak the Ferocious," Bolsk said slowly, his voice hinting of danger.

The hint was not lost upon Doyak, who had wondered why, after all these long years, he had been summoned before his father and his crafty mistress. Standing below Bolsk's elevated golden chair, hat in one hand, the other close to his sword if treachery should supply the need, he now pondered what a lizard called Feak had to do with him or his father, who it was said was becoming sightless. He had a suspicion that whatever it had to do with them would not be pleasant.

"Dwelling in high mountained Spenethras, the Feak is not a pleasant beast," Bolsk said, confirming Doyak's suspicion. "But his gizzard contains a certain chemical which, when distilled from the boiled juices and mixed with the powder of the grubbus plant, which grows only on Siren Island, and the shell of the poisonous bleb turtle, is a curative elixir. One which, when blessed by the Hag of Overnon, the wise say, will cure blindness."

"This elixir your father wishes you to obtain for him. He is blind," Randil added.

"For which I grieve," responded Doyak. "But to obtain the Feak's gizzard, one would first have to slay the Feak, who no doubt is called the Ferocious with good reason."

"That is true, my son," said Bolsk. "Both assumptions."

"And the grubbus plant. To obtain that, one would actually have to step bodily on Siren Island, from which no man has been known to leave."

Bolsk nodded. "Such would also appear to be true."

"And a bleb turtle shell can be obtained only by capturing a poisonous bleb turtle, which to my knowledge has never yet been accomplished."

"This too is true," Bolsk admitted.

"And it is said that those who seek a boon from the Hag

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of Overnon more often than otherwise find themselves afflicted with a terrible curse for their efforts."

"So it is said, my son."

Randil interrupted. "Are you saying you think the simple request of your father to give him back his sight is too great a test for his only son?"

Doyak's confusion showed itself. "Father, I must allow the task to be a most worthy one. Sight is precious, and an elixir which would restore sight must be precious also. Obviously this is the case, since the required actions to gain this elixir are difficult to the degree of being insurmountable. Discounting for a moment the ferocity of the Feak, the dangers of landing on Siren Island, the deadly bite of the bleb turtle and the known malevolence of the Hag of Overnon, the distances between these places are such as to tax the funds of no mean expeditionary force. While I have some small funds available for such an expedition, my treasures would be depleted long before the quest was accomplished."

"So!" Randil said derisively. "Not only does Bolsk's sole son and heir lack backbone, but also the willingness to loosen his purse strings for the father he has dared to call beloved."

Doyak drew himself to his full height. "I lack nothing in courage nor in proper spirit of sonship!" he shouted.

"In that case, I bid you good travel," Bolsk said. "You shall begin your quest immediately in the knowledge that my blind eyes eagerly await your return."

There was nothing more to be said. Doyak's search was officially underway.

Eleven years did he travel. In Spenethras he killed the ferocious Feak by silently spray coating the beast's tail with wax, dousing its mountain top lair with flammable liquids and setting it afire. Half of Doyak's wealth was depleted outfitting the expedition to Spenethras, and half his face was burned to blackness in the holocaust he caused. But when he left the mountain in its shambles, he carried in his knapsack the Feak's foul gizzard.

Traveling thence to Siren Island, he found himself bound in slavery for three years, finally escaping with the grubbus plant in hand. The three years had taken their toll upon him, however. A month before his escape the siren wenches, displeased at his performance during the bed-feasts (though anywhere else his endurance would have been deemed quite

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satisfactory, indeed worthy of the highest admiration), severed his genitalia in a religious ceremony.

Returning to his homeland long enough to outfit a second expedition (all men and equipment had been lost in the previous sally), he spent his every cent to reach Amdhar, home of the bleb turtle. He did not have long to search for one of the species, but before he'd succeeded in killing one, his body was filled with the treacherous poisons with which this animal protected itself. Doyak's left side was partially paralyzed, the flesh of this side of his body from the waist up being discolored to a disgusting and foul smelling purple, constantly flaking off.

"Repugnant example of a less than man!" he was addressed by the Hag of Overnon, a desert kingdom on the world's other side. "My blessing you shall have, but it shall bear a heavy price." The price was five years' service as her personal assassin, and for this period he settled personal grudges for her with his sword, killing political officials and merchants on Trovo in such numbers that he stopped counting the heads that rolled after they reached the hundred mark.

But the day came finally when Bolsk, sitting with Randil in their royal-like throne chairs, heard the hall door crash inward and saw a horrible two legged creature hobble toward them.

"Guards!" screamed Randil, now eleven years older but kept in beauty by potions sold to her by the Philosopher Rai. "Who is this thing who approaches our presence?"

Bolsk's eyes stood out in terror. "The face—my soul! Doyak? Is it Doyak you are, foul being?"

Doyak, clutching the treasured elixir in an earthen jar between his useless left arm and his purple breast, trembled with rage. "You *see*, Father! *You can see!*"

Randil screamed. Guards came crashing in. They were seconds too late.

Doyak had already limped across the room and his right arm wielding his heavy sword in one horizontal swish, lopped off Bolsk's white haired head. "False old man!" he howled. "You wished your sight restored. Now you see not. Now your eyes are dead. Now you have need of the magic I've brought. Now see, old man, *now see!*" And as a guard's sword rent his own heart, Doyak thrust the contents of the earthen jar into the eyes of the severed head on the floor.

Falling in pain next to the head, Doyak laughed hyster-

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ically, outsounding Randil's continuous screams. Before the life drained from his body he croaked, "See, Father—tell us what you see. Your eyes see now, don't they, Father?" And the eyes saw.

FOUR

Among the more important characteristics of *Homo sapiens* IV in his relatively advanced stages of civilization is his preoccupation with conflict. Though it stems from, and is therefore related to, his earlier savage state, this contest syndrome should not be confused with the primitive's tendency toward violence, which is a more easily understood response to a life of continual threat to survival.

Far from being a response to protect oneself, the contest syndrome in the civilized individual (which adjective, in this sense, is admittedly open to question) is closely aligned with an inner urge to accomplish one's own extinction. The urge manifests itself in a variety of actions, each, however, containing the common factor of exposing oneself to danger. Thus the phrase "I love a good scrap" and its underlying psychology is applied to such diverse activities as climbing a mountain ("because it's there") and diplomatic haggling, as well as physical violence.

Whatever the particular manifestation, however, it is considered sound theory that the contest syndrome would in all individuals of the species express itself in actual physical violence if all individuals were in proper physical condition thus to engage themselves. It is therefore paradoxically fortunate for their survival that so many of the species who achieve relatively high standards of civilization lose through nonuse the very physical characteristics upon which, in earlier stages, their survival depended and without which civilization would not have been achievable.

—from *Homo Sapiens* IV, reference
file "Intelligent Life Under
Committee Scrutiny"

"They still see," Aylan said.

"But Bolsk—you said he died."

"That is correct, but the eyes see, nonetheless. It is not easy to explain, but let me try. On any given continuum of

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the many that form the mechanics of what you know as the universe, there are links—touching points through which motion flows. Such a point is like the doorway that connects this room to the next. Its purpose is to direct the flow of motion. To continue with the same analogy, it is obvious that it is architecturally unsound to connect certain rooms by doorways. Doors are not built sometimes for the reason that, were one to be cut, the separating wall might be weakened to the point where the entire structure would fall.

"While in the totality of things, there are many doorways—and windows—which are needed, there are also places where no doorway or window can be tolerated. Between Trovo and a certain elsewhere a window has existed since long before the death of Bolsk. Since his death, however, the window has widened. That window is the eyes, which are not yet a door but which may become so. It is only a matter of time. That is why the eyes must be put out."

"By me," Kane said.

"By you."

"Why me? This I can't understand," Kane said. "After all, you people—your Committee—must have many worlds to draw from. Why Jared Kane? I can't possibly be the best qualified for the job. Or am I wrong, and you really don't have that many worlds to choose from?"

The Imparter smiled. "We have every world to draw upon; yet we've chosen you. There were others we might have chosen, others who might be better qualified in some ways. But you, Jared Kane, were in the right place at the right time. You possess the disposition and skills necessary for a task of this nature, as well. We think you stand a good chance of success. And there is one other point."

"Which is?"

"Which is, Mr. Kane, that many of those we might have contacted for this job might have turned us down. You, I submit, are hardly in a position to do that."

"No argument."

Aylan stepped to the body of the guard near the utility door. Removing the knife from the guard's chest, he extended it to Kane. "Time moves on. You have your knife and gun. Do you require any other weapon?"

"I have a second knife strapped to my leg and another six bullets. That should be enough, providing such mundane weapons will do the trick."

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"We may hope so," Aylan said pleasantly. "Press the bubble on the disc now, if you please."

The Imparter for the Committee may or may not have understood the choice two word bit of profanity Jared Kane hurled at him just before pushing the little black bubble.

There were a flash that was not lightning and a blackness that was more than darkness. There was a rush of air that stung his face but was not wind. Jared Kane closed his eyes and a millisecond later felt the sharpness of rock beneath his canvas shod feet. He opened his eyes to the bright afternoon.

And immediately dived for the side of the road he'd been standing on.

The orange suited rider on the small odd shaped horse thundered past the spot Kane had a moment before occupied. Somewhat belatedly both rider and horse reacted to the sudden appearance of the black clad man. "Whoa, Bounty—whoa there!" roared the rider, a short, pudgy, flat nosed man in his early fifties, Kane judged, as he looked up from the bushes into which he'd hurled himself. "Whoa, you uncooperative beast," the rider shouted, pulling back hard on the reins. "I say, *whooooaaaahh!*"

The final shout punctuated the rider's leaving the suddenly raised hind end of the horse. The shout was followed by the clang of the rider's broadsword upon rock and the crash of the rider himself to the middle of the road.

The little man sat like a Buddha with outstretched legs, his face reddening with fury under a Robin Hood hat topped by a brilliant orange feather, which was bent in half by the wearer's impact.

"*Black dressed varlet!*" he roared at Kane. "You are the cause of my inhospitable coming together with Father Ground. Be you sorcerer or slave, beggar or baron, sophist or simpleton, prepare you to receive justice from Aufcash, Hag-gaday of the Hodgepoker."

Kane rose. "I demand no more than justice, sir. But reflect upon my claim. If I caused your meeting with Father Ground, you certainly were the cause of my embrace with Mother Thorns, who would have remained in her bushes here had it not been for your swift approach."

He stopped his speech, marveling at his facility in the

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local idiom. Meanwhile the stout little man had struggled to his feet and was brushing the dust of the road from his uniform. Three wanderers along the road had paused to view the spectacle, and to one the little man shouted, "Secure my mount whilst I make ready to deal honorably and swiftly with this fellow."

Taking off his Robin Hood hat, he straightened the feather, then replaced the hat on his round head. He scowled at Kane.

"You compound your offense, churl. First you unseat from his steed one who not only wears the Hodgepoker's orange but one who, it being obvious by his insignia"—he tapped a white woven circle on his left sleeve—"bears the rank and title of Haggaday. Second, after being made aware of this rank by words in ears as well as sight in eyes, you choose to smartly answer him who bears it. Third, you have the audacity to try and place the blame on this overlarge insult to myself upon myself. You do this—you who, like a wizard, appear from nowhere."

Kane noticed that the three people who had been looking on had now multiplied into nine or ten. The road upon which he and the rider argued appeared to be on the side of a sloping hill. People were approaching from above and below, all no doubt smelling a good fight about to start. This, Kane decided, was no way to begin a mission that rightly demanded secrecy.

"Begging your pardon, sir," he said, bowing slightly. "I wish no quarrel with a person of your status. I failed to recognize your status and worthy only because I come from a far country where neither your orange uniform nor the white oval it bears is known. As for this unfortunate accident, I accept the blame and beg your pardon."

"Accidents are easily forgiven," the little man said. "Indignities, however, demand sword satisfaction. And though I now should be riding full pace in my beloved Hodgepoker's service, I shall pause—regretfully but necessarily—to deal with you. Arm yourself to ward off your coming doom. I, Aufcash, attack!"

The lunge was not well timed, but Kane had respect for the double edges of the broadsword that spearheaded the thrust. Pivoting on his left foot, he swung his right foot clockwise in a half circle until he had turned a full 180 degrees, by which time the lunge had fully passed him. It was a move

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Kane had learned in *aikido* training. At its completion he added a fist bottom strike to the back of his attacker's head, which sent its bearer into the thorns of the roselike bushes from which Kane had extricated himself moments before.

"You—you varlet!" sputtered the little man, who hastily tore himself from the thorns. "Now to your offenses you add the striking of an official of the Hodgepoker. This has indeed become a serious matter."

Kane turned his head slightly and saw that the twenty to thirty watchers were nodding agreement, though still as silent as they had been. "Listen, sir—er, Aufcash, if that's your name. I *repeat* that I want no quarrel with you. All I want—"

"*Charge!*" bellowed Aufcash. And he charged, blade high and swinging downward. Kane stepped forward to receive the attacker's forearm with his own in a swift rising block. Curling his arm back along the little man's, Kane locked their elbows, pushed his shoulder into the other's chest, and, stepping forward again with his left foot, swung his right leg back hard against Aufcash's calves. The leg to leg contact completely broke the little man's balance, and he crashed to the road surface. He stared open mouthed at Kane, who had now picked up the broadsword.

"B-before you kill me," the little man said, quaking, "tell me by what name you go, sorcerer."

Kane stepped over him and grabbed his sleeve. Raising him brusquely to his feet, he said evenly, "I have no reason to kill you and therefore don't see why I should. But I do want your word that you won't try to kill me again. Do I have it

The little man nodded uncertainly. "You . . . you have it."

Kane extended the sword handle first. "Then I return your weapon, Aufcash."

"Sir!" the little man exploded. "My name is to be used only by those equal to me. Inferiors address me by my title, Haggaday."

"Am I not your equal, Haggaday?"

The little man seemed taken aback. Looking at the dust still on his uniform, he blushed. "The name is Aufcash," he said weakly.

Both men suddenly roared with laughter. As Kane introduced himself he looked around to see if the spectators

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had appreciated the good humor that had ended the conflict. But there were no spectators.

"Gone," commented Aufcash. "The people care to linger only where there is excitement now—as spectators only do they enjoy excitement. When the show is gone, so are they. Off to their homes to squabble with their ugly wives or off to the taverns to fill themselves with sense dulling brew."

Kane now remembered that it had been almost a full eight hours since he'd eaten on Earth. "Taverns, did you say?"

Aufcash winked. "I know of an especially hospitable one where the drink won't eat out your gullet and the food won't make you retch. It happens I have this evening free, so if I might make myself available as a guide to Jared Kane, I am at your service.

Kane looked at the little man in wonder. "You have the evening free? Then why in blazes were you tearing up the road as you were?"

"I forgot!" cried Aufcash. "The message! I'm supposed to be delivering a message from the Hodgepoker."

"Is it all that important?" Kane asked.

"Beyond important," was the answer. "It's to the Philosopher Rai."

FIVE

Love (See also attraction; customs of courtship; devotion; ego projection; emotion; reproduction of species).

A clever fiction created by a variety of societies to explain feelings normally excluded, for reasons of personal embarrassment or general notions of taste, from overt reference by those societies. . . .

—from Committee Medium HB-12,
"A Handy Reference to Mind"

"You will ride with me to Castle Bolsk?" Aufcash asked. "It's not far from here. Then, after my message is delivered, we may have our evening together."

The little man's earlier mention of the Philosopher Rai had brought Kane's thoughts back to his own mission. The Imparter had said he'd arrive near the eyes, and now

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Aufcash had mentioned Bolsk's castle. "This castle of Bolsk—does the Philosopher Rai live there?" he asked.

"The Philosopher Rai makes Castle Bolsk his home, yes." Aufcash replied. "The Hodgepoker's message being a written one, there will be no need for us to tarry after we have delivered it to his Deputy of the Hold. Even if Rai wishes to reply, he will do so in his own way, by his own messenger. He delights in confounding the Hodgepoker by secreting one of his own agents into the throne room and leaving his missives in the Hodgepoker's Seat of Justice. Guard it as the Haggadays may, the messages still appear. But say you'll accompany me."

"But I have no mount," Kane replied.

Aufcash whistled. "My mighty steed will be sufficient for both. Here, Bounty. Bend yourself to receive the Haggaday and his noble guest."

Both Kane and Bounty were unsure of the horse's ability to carry the double load, but both acquiesced. As the animal plodded along the road, Kane took the opportunity to learn more of this place he found himself in.

"A Haggaday is a guard of the Manse, charged with the security of the Hodgepoker's dwelling place and the safety of the Hodgepoker."

"The Hodgepoker being your ruler, like a king," interpreted Kane.

Aufcash shook his head. "Not a king. There have been no kings in all the countries of Trovo for many years. Not since the Philosopher Rai came to his power and deposed them all." The Hodgepoker, Aufcash said, was more of a governor or mayor, elected by the people he governed.

"Earlier in his career, Rai ruled all of Trovo personally," the little man continued. "In those days his lieutenants took care of all the administrative details, but the orders were his. Then, some forty or fifty years ago, the Philosopher seems to have lost interest in such things, except for the levying of taxes. Many of the communities then began to elect public administrators to intercede with Rai on their behalf. The current Hodgepoker is the second man to be so elected in Balik Trovo, most bountiful of all Trovo's lands and named after our first Hodgepoker. You pass over Balik land now, as you will when we reach Castle Bolsk."

Aufcash eyed Kane closely, turning in his saddle to do so. "But how is it that you know not of these things? Surely

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there is no corner of Trovo so dark that the light of the two moons shines not upon it?"

"Two moons?"

The little man's eyes rolled in disbelief. "Of course two moons. Or do your eyes see more when you drink too much of the grape?"

Two moons, Kane thought. Well, why not two moons? After all, he had no idea what or where Trovo was. It was just that everything else looked so . . . Earthlike. The blue skies, the clouds floating freely in the sky, the warm afternoon sun, even the green countryside through which they were now passing. More rugged looking than Earth, perhaps, but familiar. But, again, why not? Human life needed a certain type of environment in order to flourish, he supposed. Trovo and Earth might be expected to be much alike. The presence of two moons merely meant he'd traveled far. And yet . . .

As strange as the customs of the country might prove, Aufcash wasn't as strange as he might have suspected an alien would be.

Kane had experienced a similar feeling once before. It was the first time he was sent on an overseas assignment, the job necessitating his working in Great Britain. He had experienced a feeling of similarity that defied his logical knowledge that he was in a different country. The language was probably at the base of it. In both cases that was probably true. Here in Trovo, with the device planted in his ear, Kane could converse, communicate. Was that all there was to a feeling of being at home—to understand and to be understood?

"Aufcash, tell me something. Do you believe there may be human life on planets other than Trovo?"

The little man thought a moment. "There is much in the cosmos that I do not understand. There are some things that are best left unknown to small people like myself. But this I will say about you—I believe you to be a sorcerer, whom I will serve willingly as a friend until you do anything which must, by my overriding allegiance to my Hodgepoker and people, align me against you. Where you come from is no concern of mine, and knowledge of how you sprang suddenly in the middle of an empty road would serve only to confuse my simple brain. It is enough that I owe you my

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life and that I happen to like personally what you seem to be."

Kane grinned. "In my country, friend, we think ourselves skilled in the diplomatic arts, but we could learn much from you. Yet although there are things you do not wish to learn, there are things I need knowledge of. The eyes of Bolsk, for instance."

If Kane had expected a startled reaction from the little man, he was disappointed. "Bolsk? Bolsk is dead for at least eighty years. What about his eyes?"

"What do you know of the circumstances of Bolsk's death?"

"His son murdered him, it is said. Doyak, that was the son's name. After killing the old man, who some say deserved the death he received, the son is reported to have thrown himself upon his own sword. He had lost all his money and his health on some preposterous venture he'd undertaken. It was after this that the Philosopher Rai took over the castle, marking the beginning of his rise to power."

"And what of the woman? The mistress of Bolsk—Randil. What happened to her?"

Aufcash chuckled. "Most say that Rai took over her, also. She was supposed to have been very fair to look upon, but inside she had an ugly heart. At least, that is what people say, if you place much faith in what people say. I know nothing about these things, so I withhold judgment."

"And Rai—in what does his power lie? How was he able to depose the kings?"

"Jared Kane, let me make another observation. From the questions you ask, it is plain that you expect to have dealings with the Philosopher. You know much more, I'm certain, about his history than I. But whatever power it is that Rai has, I would suggest that you do not place yourself directly against it. Your sorcery may or may not be of great strength, but there has never been a wizard with the power of Rai. What this power is I know not, but no man has withstood his wrath, that I do know."

"I will try not to arouse it," Kane said simply.

"A good oath, and at a proper juncture. Behold—Castle Bolsk."

The two men on the buckling steed had rounded a part of the hill that opened up onto a wide view of the countryside. Below them was a town or village composed for the most part of wooden houses and cloth tents arranged in con-

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centric half circles around the bottom of a huge upjutting rock that rose nearly to the clouds. At the top of the rock, looking as if they might be carved from the original stone, were the gray walls of a great stone structure, capped by what appeared to be a glass domed tower.

Castle Bolsk.

"It still is quite a ride up the mountain," Kane observed.

"Happily, we will not have to go the full distance. The Hodgepoker's message can be left with the Deputy of the Hold, whose lodge of reception is at the bottom of the rock. That being accomplished, we may then wine and dine."

They rode silently, only the clip-clop of Bounty's shoes upon the road punctuating their thoughts. They were passing through what appeared to be the town marketplace, when Aufcash spoke.

"Here in one of these tents, or one like them, is where the Philosopher Rai began. It is said that Rai studied hard under the shadow of the rock's greatness and that the main lesson he learned was that his own aspirations to greatness would be accomplished not through hard study but through other means. In the official histories it is written that one day Rai found himself in the company of the Oracle of Trovo, whose location today is unknown. The histories say it was the Oracle who told Rai he was predestined for greatness."

"Official histories. Written under Rai's direction?"

Aufcash chuckled. "Yes. The official books make no mention of the Oracle's warning, which may or may not be a true part of the tale. The story goes that the Oracle told Rai he would rule many worlds but that Rai was not satisfied with this prediction. He wanted to know more—namely, how his death would be accomplished. Naturally, Rai's idea was to avoid whatever circumstances the Oracle detailed."

"And what was he told?"

"The Oracle said that Rai's life would span centuries, but finally he would die in a strange land by the hand of a foreigner using a device strange to our country."

Kane felt the weight of the Magnum on his hip. He pulled it from his holster. "Aufcash, do you know what this is?"

"It is a strange device, my friend," Aufcash answered matter-of-factly. "It is a weapon of some kind, I have no doubt, since you wear it as one would wear a broadsword—

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and since you feel no need to carry a blade in its stead. I have not missed the further point that you are also a stranger, a foreigner. But beware, Jared Kane. Rai knows how to prepare himself against the Oracle's prediction. He has not yet lived for centuries, but the stipulation that he die in a strange land—this he carefully guards himself against. Rai has not left Balik Trovo since moving into Castle Bolsk. Of late he seems not to have left the confines of the castle itself. And no person not of Rai's employ, let alone a foreigner, is permitted unbidden into the stronghold, which I might add is in every way invincible to unwelcome entry. You won't get inside very easily. There—we are coming to the Deputy's Hold."

The sun was low in the sky to their rear as they approached what appeared to be a roof of rock built out from the side of the mountain. About ten to fifteen feet above the ground, the roof extended some ten yards forward and some fifty yards along the mountain rock that formed its back wall. The face of the structure was broken only by one heavy door in the wall's center plus three slit windows on each side of the door.

"You've already demonstrated your lack of knowledge of our etiquette," Aufcash said as he and Kane swung down from the saddle. "Simply walk behind me and say nothing."

But thoughts of things other than etiquette were running through Kane's mind. From the top of the mountain to the bottom of the Hold, it was an easy place to defend, he thought. Aufcash was right, it seemed—this was a difficult, virtually invincible target to storm. There seemed to be no way up the mountainside. No road, no path—and Kane doubted that even the most skilled cat-climber, certainly not an amateur like himself, could manage scaling it. There was no doubt a passage inside the mountain, the Hold guarding the external entrance, but even the Hold seemed impervious to a forced entry.

"You are late, Haggaday of Balik," came the brusque words that broke off Kane's thoughts. Kane turned to face a tall, lean, purple uniformed figure. The man, hand on the hilt of his broadsword, pleasurefully sported cold black squinting eyes and a thin black beard.

"Late?" Aufcash said with surprise. "How, Grand Deputy, could this humble person possibly be late for an appoint-

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ment that depends for its fulfillment only upon my actual arrival?"

The Deputy sneered. "I know when you left the Manse of the Hodgepoker. No doubt your estimated arrival time took no account of your somewhat humorous altercation with the man who now accompanies you."

To Aufcash's astonished look, the Deputy answered, "Naturally, we hear. The ears of the Philosopher hear everything of interest."

"The spies of the Philosopher, you mean!" Aufcash snapped.

The Deputy shrugged. "The choice of terminology I leave to you, Haggaday. The important thing is that you come here later than you were expected. Which means you shall have to return tomorrow midmorning. The Philosopher is occupied at present, and he wishes that you deliver your message in person to himself."

"In person?" Aufcash repeated. "But normally—"

"It is the Philosopher's wish," the Deputy said flatly. "You claim not to know, I gather, what the message contains?"

Aufcash stared straight ahead.

"It says either yes, Balik will increase its tax assessment as the Philosopher has asked, or no, Balik will not. In which case—if the answer is no—the Philosopher wants to deliver *his* answer to you personally. Do you understand my meaning, *humble* Haggaday?"

Aufcash looked down at his own boot tops. "Rai knows then. About me."

"He knows, lordlike one," the Deputy said with a note of sarcasm. "Your disguise may fool the scum of the road, but not the power of Rai. Until the midmorning, then, I bid goodfeast to you and your companion, to whom I also bid goodtravel, as I do not expect to be seeing him again."

Kane's eyes turned cold. "It shall be my keen disappointment," he said.

Twenty minutes later the patient Bounty was carefully choosing his footing along a highway that led from the village under the mountain. Aufcash shook off his deep reverie and turned back to Kane.

"Well my friend, it appears we shall be eating sooner than we expected. The inn I mentioned is not too much farther along this road. There the food is filling, the wine good and the companionship compatible."

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"You're the Hodgepoker," was Kane's reply. Aufcash grinned. "Yes, but that's a secret."

It was a stone built inn at which Kane found himself. And Aufcash had been right about it. The food—a thick stew into which they dunked huge portions of rich black bread—excellent. The wine, too, rolled over his tongue. It tasted the way he thought the ambrosia of myth must have tasted to the gods on Olympus. And as far as companionship went, he recognized that Aufcash had as good an eye for women as he had a good set of taste buds for food.

"Do you find her attractive?" the Hodgepoker asked over the pleasant sound of the accordion music played by two elderly villagers on a kind of makeshift bandstand.

Kane surveyed the girl, who blushed as she filled his wine goblet. In her late twenties—or so she'd be on Earth—she displayed fair auburn hair, blue eyes, full bust and hips and a tiny waist. It was a female form that on his own planet had gone out of style, much to his own planet's detriment.

"Very attractive," Kane answered.

The blush grew deeper.

"Nomi is her name. Nomi, this is my friend Jared Kane."

Her eyes twinkled brightly. "I am pleased to meet the friend of my lord the Hodgepoker and pleased to learn his name. The reputation of the man in black who defeated my lord's Haggaday in battle has preceded your arrival. If, that is, what passing travelers report is truly so."

Aufcash nodded. "The Haggaday in question was not one of our best. He is no longer in our service, having been discharged."

Nomi's eyes suddenly widened. "My lord! Is not that the uniform of a Haggaday you are wearing?"

"It is!" Aufcash snapped. "Naturally, I stripped the bounder of the uniform he disgraced. Somewhere tonight he wanders under the stars, the cold on his naked skin a reminder of his failure. Now, child, begone and ask no more questions."

When she had disappeared into the kitchen, Aufcash shook his head. "I really must learn how to do battle more effectively. In all honesty, my Haggadays are much better trained. I suppose it's because they exercise more than I do."

Kane said, "Tell me, you seem in every way to be a very gentle kind of person. Why is it you were in such a hurry to run me through back there on the road this afternoon?"

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"Run you through? Not at all. My intention was to defeat you and then graciously spare your life. As you recall, we had an audience, small, but still an audience. These are the people I rule—or better said, these are the people Rai rules through me. Good people, but docile dunces every one of them. I and my household grasp at every opportunity to show these people two things. One, they should be charitable. Two, they should be strong. How else can we ever expect to defeat Rai? At this very moment, Jared Kane, I have the households of five governors ready and willing to storm Castle Bolsk. But we cannot. The reason is that we would get little support from the people themselves. Surely they'd like to see Rai overthrown, but not at any risk to themselves.

"This afternoon with you, my display of righteous wrath, courage, ability and finally charity was supposed to help kindle the spirit of determination among my flock. Things just didn't work out that way. Do you find the wine to your liking?"

"I like it fine. But how would you take Castle Bolsk, even supposing you had the manpower? You'd have to take the castle if, as you say, Rai never leaves it."

"I've not given it that much thought."

Kane expressed his own view on the difficulty of an open attack, reminding Aufcash that he himself had called the stronghold "invincible." The Hodgepoker shrugged. "But who knows? I shall be inside the place tomorrow. That will give me an opportunity for study—provided I can get back out, that is," he said.

"That's why you came with the message—to reconnoiter the castle?"

"Not exactly. But I was not surprised too much that the messenger would find himself in the presence of Rai."

"The message says no, I take it, to the tax increase."

Aufcash's face darkened. "It does. If my people are as docile as they can be, they are also as strained by taxation as they can be. I am not all that wise or good a ruler, Jared Kane. While some rulers' pride would have dictated a resounding shout that they will not pay more, my answer does not stem from pride. The good powers know I've swallowed enough in my time. The answer I carry represents only a refusal to see my fellow citizens pushed into early graves through starvation. Foreseeing the possible wrath this answer might incur in Rai, I could hardly allow some un-

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suspecting messenger in my service to deliver it. That simply left me."

Aufcash pushed his chair away from the table. "And for tonight I now leave you. I must sleep. The day has been long. No, don't get up, stay and have more wine. I shall arrange for your room and awake you before we part in the morning. Goodrest, Jared Kane."

Kane watched the Hodgepoker as he moved heavily across the room. At the bottom of the stairs leading to the rooms above, he stopped to exchange a few words with the girl Nomi. Both looked at Kane for a moment before Aufcash climbed upward and out of sight.

"More stew, my lord?" she asked.

"No more, thank you. No, no wine, either." He stood. "My head is light enough already from the wine. What I need most is a bit of the cold air, the kind that naked Haggadays run around in."

He bowed slightly to the again blushing Nomi.

Outside in the darkness, with the happy music now on the other side of the door, he raised his arms over his head and stretched his weary muscles to their full length. Then he noticed the two objects in the sky that shed light upon the Trovo of night. Only ten to fifteen stars shone through the overcast sky, but the moons were clearly visible. They both looked about the same size as Earth's moon but were in different sections of the sky. In different phases, also. One was almost full, and the other was at three-quarters or so.

Odd, he thought. If the full one wasn't there—or if the other wasn't—he would almost swear that he was not on some distant world called Trovo, but on the familiar soil of Earth.

He walked to a lone rugged tree some fifty yards from the tavern door. Here he had a good view of the dark mountain that loomed up from the horizon into the gray and white sky. As the accordians inside turned to a softer and slower theme he sat and watched.

In the mountain—rather, in the castle that sat at its crown—were the eyes that had to be put out. Tomorrow at mid-morning Aufcash would be going inside. Kane would try to accompany him, he decided, not only because of the eyes, but also because of Aufcash. What was there about the little man that attracted Kane to him? He'd never cared about the

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fate of other men. Why now? The man's bravery probably had something to do with it, but there was something more. Aufcash had an openness, an honesty, a simplicity, a directness that the men of Kane's world did not have, that Kane recognized he himself did not have.

There was a simplicity inherent in all he'd seen so far of Trovo. The land was young and rugged, the people honest and uncomplicated, their problems real and their solutions direct. What Trovo seemed to lack was the spirit of conspiracy that one could not help but sense everywhere on Earth. In Kane's line of work—but not only in his—there were no right and wrong, no good and evil. There was only expediency. But here on Trovo—

"You gaze as if dreaming," she said.

He had not heard her steps, had not noticed her sit beside him. He did not turn now but kept his eyes turned toward the castle on the mountain.

"You are lonely for your home?" she asked.

"No."

Evidently he was "more abrupt sounding than he'd intended." "Do I intrude?" she asked.

"No, but what could you know of my home?" was his answer. This time he spoke directly to her, and his eyes were arrested by her face. Bathed in the dual moonlight, it had a silvery quality. The hair of auburn sparkled under the heaven sent beams. When her lips parted, her teeth shone like—all right, so it was a cliché—pearls.

"I know nothing of your home, my lord. It is said only that you come from afar. A stranger and a wizard, said the ones stopping here earlier today. A man dressed in black clothes. Black to us symbolizes death. A man dressed in black, they said, perhaps come to Balik to rid us of the burden of the Philosopher's rule."

"I am a stranger but hardly a wizard. And I haven't come to release you from Rai."

"Yet you study the castle. It has been suggested you might be the one of whom the Oracle spoke. It is possible you might be the one without now knowing it."

"I seek only the eyes of Bolsk. What do you know of them?"

"Eyes, my lord?"

"Eyes. And call me Jared. I am not your lord."

"The Hodgepoker, who is my lord, treats you as an equal."

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"Jared is my name."

"Jared, then. I know of no eyes. Bolsk I know of only in legend as the builder of the castle and ruler of this country for many—" Her voice halted abruptly. Her eyes grew wide as she pointed to the mountain. "Look there! There is the power by which it is said Rai holds his rule."

He saw it before she finished. At the top of the mountain, at the highest point in the castle tower where earlier he had seen the glass dome glinting in the sunlight, a light now beamed. It was bright, its shaft flashing outward sporadically like a beacon at an airfield on Earth. The flashes lasted for only a few seconds each; then they stopped. Then the glow in the dome diminished altogether, and all on the mountain top was dark.

"That is the power?" he asked. "What causes the light?"

"I do not know. Some kind of magic, surely, but I have no idea as to its nature. No one knows that but Rai, my lord."

"Jared."

"Jared. My apologies. I do not intend to displease."

The words were said softly, in a manner that made him turn to her. The warmth of the gaze she sent back to him held its own message—a very clear message. Kane felt something stir within him. What her whole being was saying, it was saying simply, directly, just like this entire world. His response, deep within him, had been direct as well. Then he said, "Did Aufcash suggest you come to me?"

Her eyes turned downward. "You are the friend of my lord. I only wish to serve by giving you whatever pleasure I can."

Kane rose. "I am appreciative. But I am a man first and a friend of your lord second. I need no intercessor in my dealings with a woman."

She still had her face turned to the ground when he entered the inn.

He lay on his back, naked on the comfortable bed. He thought of Nomi, comparing her to the women he had known on earth. There had been many, all of them except perhaps the one or two of his hot blooded youth taken with no more than an urge to prove his virility. On Earth men spoke of the "biological urge," but it had hardly ever been purely biological with Kane.

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He let his right hand drop to the floor and felt the handle of the Magnum resting at the ready where it always lay when he slept. Was this gun, this steel tube of destruction, another kind of assurance that proved his manliness? He was troubled tonight by thoughts that had never touched him before. He had always thought about sex in a way he'd supposed every man thought about it. But now, experiencing an entirely different feeling in response to a Trovo tavern girl, he wondered.

For maybe the first time in his adult life he wanted a particular woman. Not to prove anything; he just wanted her. Directly, simply, honestly. But if Aufcash had asked her, had set it up . . .

The door opened and closed quietly.

"Jared," she whispered softly. "I won't tell if you don't."

SIX

At first evaluation, it would appear that only the elimination of the single individual Ebec would be warranted. Though, to our most thorough knowledge, he has communicated his real purposes to no other individual, still we conclude otherwise in that he has surrounded himself with persons of an ilk similar to his. Many of these are aware of the visit of the travelers from DSL-116, and many share his feelings concerning the opportunities lost in that visit's result. It is therefore concluded that if recommended action were limited to the elimination of Ebec, another of like ambitions would rise, and another, et cetera, saddling this section with the continual elimination of potential Regulation breakers.

While it may seem that the recommendation we make here is perhaps circumlocative in its approach, it is respectfully submitted that the action recommended will be final and complete in result, if approved.

—from Abr-Dorrek's original report,
"Concerning a Potential Danger
to the System as Established"

He was alone when he awoke. In the warm light of the sun streaming through the window of his room, he got quickly into his clothes, which he found had been washed and

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pressed. He smiled at Nomi's thoughtfulness as he washed his face in the basin of water left on a table for that purpose.

Aufcash had already finished his breakfast when Kane came down to the eating room. As he sat down at the Hodgepoker's table a girl, not Nomi but almost as pretty, served him a plate full of a grit or oatmeal kind of substance, chewy but good, and a hot cup of a thick green drink. It tasted something like pea soup but sweeter and was obviously the local version of coffee. It was refreshing.

"Where do you travel from here, Jared Kane?" Aufcash asked.

"With you to Castle Bolsk," Kane replied, swallowing the last of his drink. "That is, if you see fit to take me."

"I'll not question the sanity of your request. I'll instead concentrate on the pleasure your company will give me. Are you ready to ride?"

Kane looked around the room.

Aufcash said, "Nomi rests now. She would have liked to say goodtravel to you, but I persuaded her not to."

"The Hodgepoker seems to have much authority in many quarters," Kane observed.

Aufcash smiled. "Not as much as I'd like. Especially if you're referring to Nomi, the Hodgepoker has less authority than you might think. Only that of a father, I'm afraid."

Kane's mouth opened.

"In some lands," Aufcash said, "I understand that fathers choose their daughters' mates. This is not the way things are in Balik Trovo or in the surrounding provinces. Even if it were so, I would meet with little success forcing my choice upon my child. With her mother dead for many years, perhaps I've spoiled her. Do you think so?"

The question remained unanswered.

In the morning brightness, the countryside looked more rugged than before. Less ominous, too, with the one exception of the mountain toward which they rode. Aufcash had procured a second mount called Dice for Kane, and not riding double, they made good time along the highway that led into the village and to the Hold at the mountain's bottom.

They had no sooner stepped down from their saddles, than they found themselves surrounded by five purple uniformed spearmen.

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"Welcome again to Castle Bolsk, lordly Hodgepoker," the Deputy said smugly. "It pleases me that you had company on your ride from the inn. I trust you both had goodrest." He looked straight at Kane. "My information is that you especially rested well. But as things are, one dressed in black, there is no need for your continued presence here. Unless you have specific business to detain you, I bid you farewell. Be on your way at once; else you may not fare well at all."

"He is both friend and guest of Balik Trovo," Aufcash interceded. "He shall wait for me here."

"That may prove to be a long wait," the Deputy replied. "But you may wait here outside, I suppose, till you rot. It is no business of mine or the Philosopher's if you choose to occupy this space, unless, of course, you interfere with normal commerce coming to my door. Then I should have to deal with you personally. I assure you I should enjoy doing so. You won't find me as easy an opponent as this bumbler."

"You speak a good fight," Kane said, his voice hardening. "But perhaps you should tell the Philosopher Rai that Jared Kane is here. His desire to see me may outweigh even his desire to see the Hodgepoker. He's been waiting longer for me."

"The Philosopher has said nothing of the arrival of a Jared Kane, if that is your name," the Deputy said. But he didn't sound very sure of himself.

Kane weighed his odds. It might work, and again it might not. He was fairly certain that people rarely asked for an interview with the Deputy's boss.

"Rai has said nothing of me?" His tone grew bored. "He has said nothing of the man the Oracle of Trovo named as his nemesis?"

The reaction was more than Kane had bargained for. The Deputy's hand, like lightning, was filled with the handle of his broadsword. In the small of Kane's back he felt the tip of a sharp object. Turning slowly he saw its cause. Only one of the five spears actually touched his body, but the others were ready, waiting only for a word from the Deputy.

"I should kill you now," the Deputy said, "but the Philosopher may indeed wish to have words with the man who claims to be his destroyer. I shall ask." He turned to pass through the stone door, then turned back and addressed

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his men. "Guard them well or your entrails will burn in the sun of this afternoon."

"Well," Aufcash said after the heavy door clanged shut behind the Deputy, "you've certainly done it now."

Kane laughed but not as easily as he'd intended. "I seem to have, if luck holds out. I'll at least prove you wrong on one point."

"Which is?"

"That a stranger like myself couldn't get inside Castle Bolsk."

"What I said was, a stranger couldn't get in *easily*. We have yet to discover how easy things will go for you." He sighed. "And, for that matter, for me. Flies in a trap, the two of us."

The stone door opened. The Deputy marched swiftly to the two prisoners, carrying two thick scarves. "The Philosopher will see both of you," he said eagerly. "But you shall be taken into the Hold blindfolded. Do not take this as an admission of fear on the Philosopher's part. He is prudent in all things. Which is why he and he alone rules."

The blindfolds were affixed, and Kane felt himself being led forward. He concentrated on the sensations he felt, sure that those who led him would be either sloppy through overconfidence or amateurish in the skills of deception. The manner in which he was being led confirmed his belief. They were walking him in a straight line to the entrance of the Hold. A professional would have spun them around.

Or possibly, that would happen once they were inside.

It didn't. Kane's fingertips lightly but cognizantly brushed the rocky doorway as they entered. He counted four steps downward and knew by slipping his right sneakered foot along the floor that it was composed of a highly polished ceramic surface.

"In the name of the Philosopher, open the gates," the Deputy said in the blackness. The request—or, as Kane guessed, the password—was followed by the almost silent swing of metal hinges, two sets of them off to Kane's right front. He visualized the swinging doors of the old West as he was prodded toward the direction he figured the sounds had come from. He had taken eleven more steps forward when his toe stubbed hard against an upraised but flat slab of either metal or stone, he couldn't tell which.

"Close it up," he heard from the rear, and felt the flat

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of a hand shove him into close contact with two other people.

There was a whirring sound, more like the rushing of air, Kane thought, and suddenly his hair began blowing as if in a severe wind. He felt his body moving as if on an elevator or a ramp, but there was no actual clue to the direction in which he was moving. Kane stuck his tongue out and felt the top of it grow cool.

He was moving up.

The movement ceased. "In the name of the Philosopher, open the gates," someone, not the Deputy, said again, and as before there was the sound of metal moving on hinges. He was pushed to his left and, seventeen paces later, was halted and turned to his right. The blindfold was torn from his eyes without ceremony.

"Welcome to Castle Bolsk, gentlemen," said the Philosopher Rai.

The man before them could be no other. Aylan had described him briefly, but the man who sat in the golden chair on the dais did not match the description. Black skin, polished like ebony, on a lean but hard muscled frame of over six feet six inches; bright red eyes, set deep in a smooth, unfurrowed face, under which a neatly trimmed gold beard shot straight out and up, almost forming a crescent with the oversized aquiline nose; head topped by golden hair cropped Earth military style. He wore a gold tunic that, picking up in its tones the reflection of the black skin, seemed tainted with the pure evil of the man. In a land where good and evil were sharply defined, thought Kane, this man had to be the zenith—or nadir—of the latter.

A panther, Kane thought. A powerful, prey thirsty, devil eyed panther was the Philosopher Rai.

"Guards, leave us," the black man ordered flatly. As they exited from somewhere behind the golden chair, Rai spoke to Kane. "I need not warn the good Hodgepoker not to attempt anything violent, but in all fairness I should point out to you, a stranger, that to do so would be fatal. Look around this room."

Kane did so. The room was circular, the diameter being some seventy-five feet across a mosaic floor patterned with gold and black representations of a giant bird with a lizard-like head—a modernistic pterodactyl? Above them a gold ceiling domed upward to meet around a two foot wide plastic or glass tube that extended straight down the fifty yards

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to the floor, ending at the right hand of Rai's golden chair. The walls seemed to have no visible openings, and looking sharply to his right, Kane noticed no doorway. He knew he had come through that wall. He knew approximately where. But there was no evidence of a door of any type there or anywhere around the room.

"You will note," Rai said, as if following Kane's thoughts, "that there is no way out of this room, at least visible to the eye. Yet the opening is there, controlled by a panel of buttons I have on the arm of this chair. There are also openings in various places in the floor, also controlled from this panel. For the rash of mind, my stone birds of sweet death fly apart. Those who live after the great fall are devoured by several interesting kinds of beasts, of which tigers and graks are among the more familiar and pleasant."

"I take it," Kane said, "that at this very moment we stand over such an opening."

Rai nodded, smiling. "No beasts are below you, however. Merely skeleton ridden stalagmites, long and sharp as razor edges."

While the Philosopher spoke, Kane was estimating his chances of rushing the throne. He and Aufcash stood about twenty-five feet from the goal. With luck, they might reach Rai before the floor opened up beneath them. As he was calculating the time spans involved, Rai suddenly stood and stared across the expanse at Aufcash.

"First to deal with the Hodgepoker's business. I understand that you have come to tell me that you refuse to pay the increased taxed I have ordered."

Kane could feel the little man steeling himself for whatever was to come. "Your spies in my household have told you correctly. My people cannot pay more."

Rai said nothing, his eyes glowering.

And then Kane heard himself speaking. "Why more taxes? You seem to have ample luxury here. From what I hear, you fear no attack from any other ruler, so you don't need funds to build a large military force. Nor have I heard it said that the Philosopher Rai is a greedy man."

Rai reluctantly turned his red eyes to Kane. "Greed takes many forms, outlander. I have need for more money; thus, taxes have been increased. While I have no desire for wealth more than I can use, I do have greed for two things, magical power and long life."

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"It is said you have both, already," Kane replied.

"And it is said correctly. But there is always the quest for more. Specifically, I require funds for two projects. The first is an everlasting, recurring expedition to far flung places from which I gather the ingredients which make up the oil of life. It is this oil which has kept my body young and strong. It is this oil which has turned my skin from fair to onyx, my hair from black to gold. Whether the changes in coloration are for good or bad, I know not and care not. The extension of my youth has been the important factor."

"The second project?"

Rai smiled. "We have a saying here about curiosity and cats, but I don't mind explaining my aims to you. The second project is to create in my laboratories a less expensive synthesis which will accomplish the same end as the hard to obtain oil. But enough of that." His eyes hardened as they again turned to Aufcash.

"Hodgepoker, you say you cannot raise the additional tax money, and no doubt at this moment you are fearing for your life. You need not so fear. Killing you would be meaningless, and Rai does nothing simply as a valueless gesture. No, a levy shall be made that Balik Trovo can meet. You have no shortage of people, and these I shall levy. Hear my decree, Hodgepoker. Until such time as the additional taxes are forthcoming, I shall take from your villages two citizens every seven days. These will be sold into slavery, the price money going toward my necessary projects."

Aufcash's teeth began to chatter. "That is inhuman!"

Rai laughed shortly. "It is nonetheless my decree. And I intend to enforce it. Now, outlander, we come to you and your claim to be the one mentioned by the Oracle. Where is it you are from?"

"A place known to us as Earth," Kane answered.

"Earth," Rai murmured. "A location strange to me. That would fulfill part of the Oracle's designation. But not enough. I was also told that I would die in a strange land and by an unfamiliar weapon. Obviously you cannot fulfill the soothsay by killing me here, but what about the weapon? Do you have such an implement?"

"Here," Kane said, releasing the catch on his holster and pulling out the Magnum. He held it level to Rai's belly.

"When activated it fires a small projectile with great force.

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I could kill you here before you could touch one of those buttons."

Rai moved uneasily on his throne, but his calm returned in an instant. "Perhaps, but then again, perhaps not, in which case you and the hapless Hodgepoker would meet your doom below." He stared smilingly at Kane.

Kane considered. "That's true. Shall we say stalemate, then?"

"Stalemate?" Rai laughed. "Not at all. Not until you at least demonstrate that what you hold in your hand can actually do the preposterous thing you claim. Fire a small killing projectile, indeed!"

"All right, then, watch!" Kane shouted and, taking aim to the right of Rai—obviously, so the Philosopher wouldn't think the shots were aimed at himself—Kane zeroed in on a pushbutton at the base of the glass transparent column that rose to the ceiling. The Magnum exploded four times.

Rai's head jerked downward as the heavy slug smashed into the black pushbutton. A whirring sound, like that Kane had heard earlier when they'd been rising in the elevator, began. Rai's face became taut with terror.

"The eyes! *You've brought the eyes!*" he howled, and leaped to the left side of the golden throne

"*Now!*" Kane shouted to Aufcash.

In five bounding steps he had crossed the expanse, Aufcash directly behind him. Reaching Rai's side, into which he thrust the barrel of the Magnum, Kane saw that the Philosopher fiddled with a hand operated unit resembling a small transistor radio. The Philosopher paid no heed to the weapon Kane held.

"It's jammed," Rai said, approaching a state of panic. "You've jammed the master control."

"I'd be more concerned for your life than for your controls," Kane suggested, pushing the nose of the gun deep into Rai's ribcage.

"Don't be stupid. If I can't get the eyes reversed back up there, it could be all our lives. *Guards!*"

"Eyes—of Bolsk?" Kane shouted. "Where?"

"There!" Rai pointed, ducking lower under the arm of the throne chair. He banged the control device against the floor. Suddenly sections of the mosaic began to slide, revealing the pits below. Rai had not been bluffing, Kane realized. Then his thoughts stopped.

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He saw the eyes.

They were—*it was*—ghastly. Inching down the transparent tube was a large brown black leather tanned looking head, severed raggedly at midneck point. There seemed to be no points of connection to the head with anything else, but down it came, sinister and silent except for the small whirring sound. The hair on the top of the head seemed to be clustered in dark green patches. The mouth was twisted out of normal shape into an expression of excruciating pain. But Kane noticed these features only fleetingly. His attention was glued to the two large yellow orbs that were the eyes of the decapitated Bolsk.

"Pray to the heavens!" Aufcash blurted out.

"Guards!" repeated Rai. Then, seeing Kane taking careful aim with the Magnum, he screamed, "*No!*"

But it was too late. The Magnum spat out two shots in quick succession, both of which bounced harmlessly off the glass cylinder directly in front of the staring yellow eyes.

"Get down!" Rai ordered. "The panel opens automatically when the eyes reach man height level."

Kane grimaced. "What's the matter?" Why can't you control them?"

"You, you blasted fool." Rai spat out. "You jammed the main control. Get down!"

Kane and Aufcash did as directed. But before ducking his head behind the throne, Kane saw part of the transparent tube slide away in front of the head. The eyes were exposed.

"Target's up!" Kane said through his teeth and, swinging up the Magnum, twice again triggered the weapon. But nothing happened.

The gun was empty.

"Dolt! You'll anger them," Rai wailed, just as three castle guards crashed into the room. "Guards—use your spears on the tube control," Rai ordered.

"Omigosh!" Aufcash exclaimed.

A beam of light had shot out from the tube to one of the guards who had been poised with his spear. The guard's body lit up phosphorescently, and then . . . it was gone. He'd disappeared completely.

"What happened?" Kane demanded.

Rai scowled. "The eyes are angry. They're consuming us. We have only one chance. Guards! Alert all the guards!"

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he shouted. Then reaching quickly toward Aufcash, he hurled the little man across the throne smack into the tube. Before Kane could react, Rai's foot was in Aufcash's belly and a powerful shove sent him sprawling to the floor inches away from one of the yawning pits.

Decoys! Kane thought. *The son of a bitch is using us to protect himself!*

The eyes had begun to turn toward the frozen Aufcash, when six more castle guards rushed into the room. Kane heard the whirring sound of the elevator, and another wall section opened to another three guards wielding bows and arrows and short swords.

The eyes changed direction. Beams of light—lasers? Kane wondered—shot out in all directions. Guards screamed with pain, some disappearing after direct hits, others falling with cries into the pits, to meet the horrors that waited below.

"Aufcash—the elevator!" Kane yelled.

They ran zigzagging across the floor. The eyes seemed not to notice or care, intent on destroying the purple uniformed targets trying to destroy them. The lightbeams flashed to the right and left, and screams pounded in Kane's ears as he and Aufcash dived through the opening in the curved wall and landed on the elevator platform.

"That lever," Aufcash panted. "Push it down."

Kane's swift hand depressed the lever Aufcash indicated. The platform began to descend. "How did you know how the thing works?" he asked.

Aufcash said almost cheerfully. "When one's nose is as large as mine, blindfolds never completely blind. When we hit the bottom, move directly to the right."

In spite of the tension in his stomach, Kane laughed. "Aufcash, you amaze me!"

"I suggest you try making your weapon usable again, if you wish to be amazed by me ever again. We still have to fight our way out of here."

SEVEN

Life is prized by the Committee. In whatever form it appears it is to be regarded by all employees as having high value. It is therefore axiomatic that the extinction of life should be limited to incidents of absolute necessity. Staff

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members responsible for the recruiting of agents must make this abundantly clear before the assignment is offered, as the staff members will be held accountable for contrary action.

Exception to the above general attitude may be made only in a case regarding protection of a Restriction, the governing rules of which are included in section II, paragraph 3, of the Preamble to the "Index of Current Committee Restrictions."

—from Committee Regulation
AG-49e, furthering "The
Proper Use of Agents in
Enforcing Committee Ends."

"In the name of the Philosopher, open the gates," Kane called toward the smooth wall after the elevator had stopped. When the hinges had swung sufficiently, Kane's reloaded Magnum spat into the opening once, and metal clanged heavily to the floor on the other side. Aufcash, sword in hand, rushed through the opening, Kane following.

The guard had taken the bullet just over the right eye, Kane saw. He picked up the broadsword the fallen soldier had dropped. He had to conserve bullets, he reminded himself. He'd need them later when he was back with the eyes in that room upstairs. But when would that be? If he escaped now, if he left the Hold, how would he manage to get back in? He needed a plan—any plan—but right now was no time for cool calculation of future strategy.

Now there was time only to fight.

"Get them!" cried a guard, and everywhere, it seemed, the purple uniforms slashed at them with spears and swords. Kane hacked blindly, putting all his power into every swing of his weapon. His arm and shoulder cried painfully for mercy in the bloodbath that was his first onslaught. Looking quickly to his side, he saw that Aufcash had done creditable work also, his blade as crimson as Jared's own.

Kane was about to charge after two guards who were fleeing through a side passage, when the Hodgepoker caught his arm. "We go this way," the little man shouted, pointing with his sword to their front. "There's nothing between us and the exit but a dead run—around this corridor to the right!"

As their feet pounded along the mosaic tiles in the direction

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Aufcash had indicated, other feet behind them sounded in hot pursuit. Panting, Kane said to his companion, "Go while the going's good. My job remains here. Here I stay until it's complete."

"You stay—I stay too," Aufcash replied.

"No, not now. They must think we're both out of the Hold. That's the only way I can accomplish my task."

"As you say, Jared Kane, but I will come back—with the forces of the five Hodgepokers. The Philosopher's reign is ending, I vow. If first I can get out of here."

They rounded the bend and stopped dead.

Eight guards stood solidly in their way, the Deputy of the Hold heading them.

"So, Jared Kane, we shall indeed do battle together," the Deputy sneered. He brandished his sword and stepped boldly forward.

"I truly wish, Deputy, that I had time to accommodate you," Kane said heavily. His hand flashed to his side, and a split second later the Magnum barked, the force of the slug sending the dead Deputy into the guards behind.

Letting him slide to the pterodactyls on the mosaic floor, the guards backed away from Kane's weapon. There was a clatter behind Kane, and he turned, to see the guards who had been chasing them spreading out for attack.

The new threat was ominous. Between ten and fifteen sword bearing soldiers stood at the ready, warily forming a half circle around Kane and Aufcash, who, his own sword at chest height, threatened the guards before the door. As the group surrounding Kane advanced, his Magnum exploded once more, dropping the guard nearest him.

"All of you—over to the door with the others," Kane snarled as the object lesson of their fallen comrade took hold. "The door I want opened, and fast. I also want every single one of you out of it as fast as your feet can travel. Understand that there is a new ruler in Castle Bolsk and that if ever I see or hear of your coming back to this place, the magic of my booming tube will blast out instant death to you as it has to your leader and to one of your number already. Am I quite clear in my meaning?"

The guards nodded their trembling heads.

"Then go."

As the guards fumbled to open the huge stone door, Aufcash said admiringly, "Truly that is a marvelous weapon."

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When Kane showed no response, Aufcash added, "You are still resolved to remain?"

"I have to."

"Then keep yourself from harm. I swear I'll be returning to clear the evil from this place. Unfortunately, marshaling the necessary forces will take time. Too much time, I'm afraid, to be of assistance to you."

The door had opened. "Hold it," Kane commanded. Pointing to the nearest guard, he said, "You shall remain with me. The rest of you leave. *Now.*"

There was a rush of feet, and the doorway stood empty but for the lone shaking guard. Kane extended his hand to Aufcash.

"Goodbye, friend. And good luck to you," he said.

Aufcash looked at him steadily. "It is you who shall need good luck. I shall remember you, Jared Kane. For I fear much time will pass before we look upon each other again, if ever we shall do so."

They held each other's gaze for a flicker of a moment. Then the Hodgepoker was gone.

The magic Magnum was firm in the guard's back as he and Kane approached the bottom level of the lift. "How many more soldiers are here in the castle?" he asked his nervous prisoner.

"There is another entire shift—asleep now," was the reply.

Kane considered. The direct and perhaps best thing to do was to go immediately upward and complete his mission. On the other hand, he might do so, only to find that his escape route was cut off.

"That's all? Everybody who's left here is asleep?"

"Yes, sire, all."

Kane directed the guard to lead him to the sleeping quarters. The route was along darkened passages like those he and Aufcash had already traveled. There was, he discovered, one major difference. Actually, *three* major and horrible differences.

The guard was not startled by the birds.

They were, Kane saw when his composure returned, caged. Thank the stars, they were caged. Three times the size and more times the weight of a man, the three were the deadliest looking flying machines he'd ever encountered. Like the pterodactyls that decorated the mosaic floors of

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the castle, these had razor sharp beaks and talons. Unlike their lifeless stone counterparts, the cage cramped birds were brilliantly golden.

"Dorpal hawks," explained the guard at Kane's prodding. "The Philosopher uses them as messengers and . . . other things."

"He uses them as messengers of death," Kane supplied.

"Only when necessary. The Philosopher does not like to kill. But sometimes, when obedience must be taught to a recalcitrant in a faraway land . . ."

Kane's thoughts had meantime been racing ahead. "You don't seem to be afraid of the birds. Is it because they are instructed not to hurt you?"

"Would that they were! But they are locked in their cage, you can see that," replied the guard.

Kane replied that he could indeed see that, then asked how one reached the guards' quarters from here. When his prisoner told him that the passageway just beyond a door to the right led to the sleeping hall, Kane grinned. "All right, how does one go about opening the hawks' cage?"

Horror grew over the guard's face. A wave of the magic Magnum added to the intensity of that horror, but he explained.

Not much time was wasted in gaining the key from the Deputy's unoccupied apartment. Not much more was wasted in opening the door to the passageway that led to the mass sleeping quarters. When the cage was rolled to the open door, Kane ordered. "Open it. Open the cage."

As the cage door swung free, Kane helped the guard quickly slam the opening to the open doorway. He had no intention of losing his prisoner now. He might need him.

Not long after the cage was emptied, the screams of men interrupted in their sleep issued from somewhere down the passageway.

"I want desks, tables, rocks, anything you can lift. I want this doorway blocked so those birds can never get out. Now move!"

The magic revolver was again firm in the guard's back when, sometime later, the lift stopped its upward movement. They stepped off at the level of Rai's throne room high in the castle.

From the destroyed wall in front of them Kane peered into the room. The view told him nothing. From his vantage

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point he could see neither the golden chair nor the transparent tube that held the head of Bolsk.

"Step inside, close to the wall," Kane whispered. "Move suddenly and you're dead, understand?" The guard by this time understood quite well and took up the position Kane directed him to. No sooner had he done so, than he made a sound as if he were choking and slid back into the elevator room. He had just begun a scream, when Kane sent a forceful palm heel into his windpipe and downed him. Quietly, he thought. But apparently not quietly enough.

"Who is there?"

The voice from inside was weak. Pitched high, it seemed to crackle. It could not belong to Rai, Kane decided. But if not Rai, who?"

"Who's there, I say?"

Bracing the Magnum at chest height, Kane stepped into the room. He was not prepared for what he saw.

The first thing his eyes focused on was Rai. There between two still open pits the Philosopher lay. Very still and, judging from the dagger hilt protruding from his back, very dead.

"He deserved death," cackled the old woman who stood behind the fallen wizard. "Do what you will with me, but first, young man, gaze upon my beauty."

Kane stared at the crone uncomprehendingly. Beauty? She was eighty or ninety or more if she was a day. What may once have been flesh and blood had long dried into a water starved vellum type of covering stretched over a five foot framework of thin bones. The woman's deeply lined face featured deeper sunken eyes of a pale tan, over which thatches of yellow white hair grew irregularly, matching the color of the old Greek type toga she wore.

He had no sooner completed his survey of her form, than the change began.

It was like those old monster movies, Kane thought as he watched, spellbound. Like in the last scene, where Mr. Hyde changes back by stages to Dr. Jekyll, or when the Campus Werewolf turns back into Dr. Somebody-else. The woman's features, her entire form, seemed to shed their age. Her hair was growing longer and fuller, the skin taking on more of the tones of natural flesh. When the process was complete. Kane still could not take his eyes from the woman.

She was indeed a woman.

"I am called Randil," she said, her voice soothing. Her

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eyes, now a fiery reddish brown, moved caressingly over Kane's body, her hands reaching up to caress her golden hair, which rolled from her elegantly formed shoulders to below her tiny waist. Kane's attention snapped back when a glass beaker she had been holding crashed to the stone floor at her feet.

"The oil of life," she said huskily. "The dark Rai withheld it from me all these years. Only he took it, denying me what he promised. There will be no more partaking of it now, this being the last. Not enough to make my beauty everlasting in ebony, but enough to restore my youth this one final time. The bedeviled Rai's reign is over."

She noticed Kane's still staring amazement. "You are not pleased he's dead? You, the outlander who came to kill him yourself?"

Kane found his voice. "I did not come to kill."

Randil laughed lightly, sensuously. "Ah, but you did. I heard the message you had delivered to the once mighty Rai. The now fallen was filled with dread. Only one thing filled with more dread—the eyes."

The eyes. Kane swiftly directed his sight and weapon to the tube. The head was gone.

"Yes, the eyes," repeated Randil. "The poor fool was transfixed with fear trying to get them back to their cage above. He was successful, but his concentration was what gave me my chance. See how he still clutches his controls." She bent over and took the device from Rai's dead hand, displaying a beautifully proportioned calf as she did so. Kane shook off the notion he was entertaining. He tried to think of Nomi.

"The eyes were Rai's favorite method of destroying his wavering subjects," Randil said.

Kane nodded. "I've seen them in action. But Rai couldn't control them."

She smiled. "You fixed that. This little box, coupled with the main switch you jammed, controls the descent and turning of the head. It cost Rai much to develop the mechanics. But of what the eyes can do you've seen only a part."

"I've seen them kill."

"The guards? Yes, but that was through the glass, which, as you know, is strong. The power of the eyes with the glass removed is much stronger."

"Oh?" Evidently she hadn't seen all that had happened.

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If he played it right, she might be tempted to demonstrate. And if so . . . He tightened his grip on the Magnum.

Her smile twisted evilly. "I shall demonstrate. The eyes shall take Rai as before they took my lover Bolsk and his foolish son. Do you object?" Her voice was cheerful as she touched a button on the control device.

Again the panel in the tube opened. Kane felt his trigger finger quiver. Here was his chance. "I don't mind in the least," he said.

He recognized the whirring sound when it began. Looking to the top of the tube he saw the horrible head descending, its eyes facing the wall to the rear. Slowly it came, like something from the depths of hell, except it came down, not up. "The undead" were the words that came to Kane, and the whirring noise, like a rush of wind through eerie willows, made him think again of scenes in the many horror films he'd seen. If he ever got back to his world, he'd treat himself to a steady diet of musical comedies, he vowed silently.

"There is no need to fear. I control the angle of the eyes precisely," Randil purred. "After we dispose of the creature before us, you and I can dispose of the night in any way you wish."

Her eyes were hotly devouring him. There was no doubt of what she meant.

"It has been a long time," she said.

Kane smiled. There was a saying on his world about old women in bed. Here, in Randil, he had the best of the two extremes. An old woman in a young body. Again he tried to shake off the feeling, but he heard himself say, "I am entirely at your disposal, my lady."

"And I am at yours. I am mistress of this house now. And I have the power of the eyes."

The eyes. They were down now, and Randil moved the head around on its invisible neck until the glowing orbs were directly pointed toward the body of the huge black man.

"The light doesn't come," Kane said. He still wasn't lined up properly for an accurate shot. He edged to his left to place him at a better advantage.

"It will. I cannot control that, nor could Rai. But it will come. It always does, eventually."

It did. The beams from the eyes seared in a blinding flash to where Rai's body lay. Intense, hot, blue white like the

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flame of an acetylene torch, they slammed into the dead man. Like the guards Kane had seen "consumed" earlier, Rai's form glowed brightly and then was gone.

Gone. Gone where?

The question pounded into Kane's brain the very moment his finger squeezed off two shots toward the column. The jar dealt to his mind had affected too many of his nerves—the shots went wild. He grasped his wrist with his left hand to prepare for another shaking try, but just then Randil screamed. *"No, you idiot! The eyes are mine. I'll kill you for this!"*

And she meant to; Kane could see it in her face. He shouldn't have looked at her—he realized that immediately after accomplishing it. He should instead have been concentrating on the eyes—which were now swinging toward him with a grisly vengeance.

But Randil had made a mistake. She herself stood on the arc between Rai's former location and where Kane now crouched. It happened in a moment's flicker. The beams "took" her in their unbroken movement toward him. He watched her vanish just before the heat and light crashed together somewhere inside his head. He felt his fingers lose their hold on the Magnum.

And then he felt nothing.

EIGHT

TO: Area subsection staff member Abr-Dorrek

FROM: Imparter section staff Supervisor Clav lo Yre
Your memorandum 567-32 to Imparter Third Class Aylan Rodens has been presented to me in protest. I am taking the liberty to respond as a result of discussions with this staff member, whose record is without blemish, as is the record of my entire section.

Your allegation that Imparter Rodens failed in a certain respect in his mission regarding your area—to wit, that he did not specifically inform your Agent Number Two that an Agent Number One existed—is contested. Imparter Rodens argues that you, as project coordinator, did not charge him with relating the disputed information to Agent Number Two. Nor, he alleges, did you charge him with pointing out to Agent Number One that another would be working

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with him. His argument is convincing to me, in light of his spotless record, mentioned above, and his recording of his conversation with yourself. If, however, you wish to issue a formal complaint in this matter, I will be happy to take our differences to the next higher level.

C.I.Y.

[On separate note:]

It occurs to me that since two agents assigned to the same task is a situation quite extraordinary in my memory (which takes in a long period of service), you might not wish to carry this issue further than ourselves. If I am correct in this thought, I will expect to receive back from you the attached memo initialed by yourself, at which time I will destroy it, plus all carbons, which at this moment I am addressing to your supervisor, his supervisor and my supervisor. As you see, the memo is not numbered and so may disappear conveniently. Also I trust you will recognize that should I need a similar favor in the future—to retain my spotless record—you will oblige in similar manner.

C.I.Y.

The smell of fried eggs and bacon.

Emerging from the blackness of wherever his mind had been, that was the first sense impression he was conscious of.

"You should be hungry," she said.

He opened his eyes and found he was lying on a kind of Danish modern couch, except that it was more comfortable than those he was familiar with. The room, small and low ceilinged, was well lighted, and somebody had made an attempt to make it look cheerful with bright colored paints. There was one door and no windows. It reminded him of a doctor's waiting room.

But first things first.

Before him on a blue metal tray was a plate of eggs and a baconlike, but thicker meat. Hungrily he wolfed down the food, while Randil watched appreciatively. When he'd finished, his senses had returned enough for him to feel something wrong. It was his left wrist—his watch was gone. He reached down along his body until his hands came to his calves. His knives and their sheaths had also been taken. His

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right hand shot to this throat. The amulet still hung from the chain around his neck.

"What happened to us?" he asked.

Randil shrugged her shoulders slightly. "They took us. The eyes."

"Took us." Kane repeated. "Took us where?"

"The place name is Uin," came the answer, voiced from the now open doorway. Kane had to crane his neck to see the speaker. He was in for a surprise.

"They needed me," Rai said, stepping into the room. "So they restored me. They can do things like that."

"They?"

"They being the rulers of this world. If you have nourished yourself enough, we are scheduled for an audience with the man they call the Chairman." Turning toward the door, he called cheerfully, "Warden!"

The figure who appeared at the call was grotesque. Wearing only a strangely styled breechcloth, the man was built like a Japanese Sumo wrestler. His skin was ash gray, his hairless head bulleted down to facial features contorted into an empty grin. The total impression he made was one of walking destruction, which made the needle shaped device—some sort of gun, Kane decided—he carried seem superfluous.

"We shall be accompanied by my friend here," Rai said. "He's been my constant companion since my revival. For some unaccountable reason, the leaders of this world don't yet have complete faith in my character."

As the Sumo herded them through the halls and corridors of the building, Kane marveled at the barrenness of the place.

"You'll notice," Rai said, "that there are no windows anywhere here. I'm told that this structure is far below the surface of the ground. Life exists on the surface, but the rulers choose to inhabit this place, though I cannot say why. The warden here cannot say either. He has not the ability to speak, being a mute."

But Kane was hardly listening. What fascinated him about the place was not its appearance. He'd seen places like it before. Sterile, expensively constructed, the endless seeming maze of corridors with their knobless doors spelled high security. Whoever built the structure had done so because

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there was something here to be protected—people, implements or information. If they were in fact underground, this would fit.

What still fascinated Kane was his being here. There was the question of how. And the overriding question: If he had been brought here so easily, would it be as easy to get back to Trovo? That's where the eyes were. That's where his task remained. An impossible task, it seemed, now more than ever.

The gray hulk touched a spot on an unmarked door to their right. It swung open to a scene Kane immediately compared with something from a space opera movie.

On the farthest wall was a screen about half the size of a theater screen. Lights pulsed on it in a variety of patterns—at least, Kane surmised there were patterns. Before the screen were a young man and a young woman, both uniformed, both sitting at what looked like small computer consoles. In the middle of the room, about fifteen yards from the screen, was a chest high chromium tripod upon which rested a long horizontal device that from the rear resembled a television tube. At the point nearest the screen, the implement came to a needle nose adorned with a bright yellow ball. Kane realized that the weapon held by the Sumolike mute featured a similar ball at its front, this one red.

Two curved divans, each large enough to accommodate two people, fanned out from each side of the tripod forming a half-circle with the screen as the diagonal. The geometry suddenly changed, however, when the couches turned on hidden swivels to face the group that had just entered the room.

The contrast of the two men, one on each of the couches, was startling. Both appeared to be in their sixties, but that was the only similarity. One looked kindly, with a white haired saintliness Kane compared to a mental picture of a bust of Aristotle he'd once seen. Adorned in a flowing white robe, he appraised the three visitors with an air of gentlemanly curiosity.

The other man's face reflected unhidden malice. He was a misshapen dwarf, and his dress looked military, yet was not a uniform in the ski suit fashion of the man and woman who attended the consoles. The outfit was made of a tough leathery kind of green material and was composed of two pieces, a vest and a kiltlike skirt through which protruded powerfully thick arms and legs. Upon a thigh high neck sat

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a huge head topped with full, close cropped red hair. Looking into this face, Kane recalled that he'd first thought of Rai as an embodiment of pure evil. Next to the dwarf, Rai looked like a caricature of a bumbling Satan drawn by a cartoonist who didn't believe in devils.

It was the kindly looking man who spoke. He spoke to Kane.

"You have been unconscious longer than the others. No doubt you are confused as to where you are and why you're here. You yourself are a confusion to us, but let us dispel your curiosity first."

He gestured to the screen behind him. "You have, of course, seen the windows—the eyes—from the other side, from the world known as Balik Trovo."

"Trovo," Rai corrected. "Balik Trovo is but one province."

The man in leather glared at Rai. The speaker nodded acceptance of the correction. "Trovo, then. You've seen the eyes there. Here, in this room—that screen, to be exact—is the other side. We are the seers who use the eyes of Trovo as windows to that world."

Windows, Kane thought. Aylan had spoken of windows.

"We have much to learn of Trovo," the speaker continued. Till now we have not had a good source of information, but the Philosopher Rai has consented to be our guide. We brought him here with that intent in mind. That is why he lives—to help us in our vital work, to teach us to manipulate the eyes with more control. The woman Randil was brought here because she held the device that the Philosopher tells us controls the movement. She lives at Rai's request."

"My sweet love," Rai said with a bow to Randil.

"You, Jared Kane, live for two reasons. The first is that you are a mystery to us. You are not of Trovo, and you seemed bent on destroying the eyes. You are a soldier of some type, we imagine, judging from the knives we removed from your legs—a precaution—and from the strange weapon you attempted to use against the eyes. A pity you dropped it before we could rematerialize you here. I would have liked to have Weaponer Chez Ebec"—he gestured toward the dwarf on the other couch—"examine it more closely."

Kane noticed a grin on the dwarf's face. It did not look pleasant.

"For information purposes, my name is Incony Venytys," said the speaker. "It is the custom here that I be addressed

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only as Honored Chairman. You are called Jared Kane, I am told by the wizard from Trovo. More than that he cannot tell, except that he believed you to be a fulfillment of a prophecy. This explanation leaves us nowhere, since prophecy and magic are things in which we place absolutely no trust."

"It was I who fulfilled the prophecy, Honored Chairman," Randil said softly.

Rai scowled. "But I live, my love. Therefore, the prophecy is not yet fulfilled. I shall, however, long remember your try. I trust you shall also." He smiled.

Incony Venytys raised a hand. "Quarrel among yourselves when you are among yourselves. In the present moment, I wish information from Jared Kane. First you will tell me of your world. Is it different from Trovo?"

Kane considered. "Not very. Trovo has one more moon than my planet, which in our language is called Earth."

The simple statement had an unusual effect upon the Chairman. His head jerked to the side, showing a disturbed expression to the Weaponer.

"A trick of the language translation devices, Honored Chairman," Chez Ebec said quickly. Kane now noticed that all of them—Rai and Randil included—wore the little earplugs like his, each with their little golden rings. No, not all. The mute wore no translator.

"Jared Kane," Chez Ebec continued, "this word 'earth.' Is it not also the word you apply to the ground? Does it not also mean dirt and soil?"

Kane nodded, still focusing on the questioning face of the Chairman. "It's also used in that meaning, yes."

The Chairman looked satisfied with the answer, but not entirely. "Jared Kane, I will not continue this interrogation until I have thought more about what you've said already. For the present, you may recall that earlier I told you that you were alive because of two reasons. The first is that you are a curiosity. The second derives from that fact. Because your presence in Trovo is difficult for us to assimilate, and because what technical knowledge your world may have may be of use to us, we offer you an opportunity to work with us."

"I know nothing of your work," Kane said.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. In any event, you must make your choice now."

"And if I choose no?" Kane asked.

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Incony Venytys shrugged. "We do not have an overabundance of rations here. Unhappily, therefore, dungeon and death await your refusal."

It sounded familiar to Kane somehow. Long ago—long, long ago—there had been a bullet fired at him. . . .

"I accept your offer. Heartily," he said, not heartily.

"See that you keep your word," said the Chairman. "In the event that you do not, I have assigned Gron here"—he gestured toward the mute—"to stay by your side in order to report your transgression. He would first, of course, have to halt that transgression in any manner which occurred to him. Which might prove unpleasant."

Kane reflected that it might indeed.

The Chairman rose. "Now I have business elsewhere. I leave your further orientation to the trustworthy hands of Chez Ebec, who will explain to you our work and mission here." The Chairman turned on his heel and left. All but Kane and Randil bowed until the door had closed behind him.

"Sit," Chez Ebec directed.

Randil and Kane sat on the couch Incony Venytys had just vacated, while Rai joined the Weaponer. A hidden control became operative, and the couches swung 180 degrees, to face the screen again. Chez Ebec quietly gave the man and woman at the consoles orders to begin activation, then nodded to Gron, the mute, who left his position behind Kane and walked to a panel in the wall to their left. He grunted, and the panel swung open.

Randil screamed. Rai gasped. Kane was incredulous as whatever it was strode into the room.

"Two of you have met the lord Bolsk before," Chez Ebec said in introduction.

What might once have been a man stepped heavily to a place between the two couches. The body looked sick, withered, but the horror was where there should have been a head. A head was there—but not a human head. It was a brass colored metal of some kind, Kane decided, egg shaped and positioned vertically as if the bottom part of the egg was resting deep within the shoulders. There were no facial features, just a large circular lens, the outer edges of which converged on two three inch protrusions whose functions were not clear by their position.

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Bolsk it might be, Kane thought, but what the thing looked like was a hideous space age Humpty Dumpty.

"The dead, headless body of Bolsk was the first thing to rematerialize on this side of the screen," Chez Ebec said. "Luckily, most of the equipment was already here as you see it. We were trying to force our own breakthrough when, miraculously it seemed, it was given us through the ever-seeing eyes."

"Breakthrough?" Kane repeated.

Chez Ebec explained. Uin's theories of the universe contained the notion of dimensional warp. The words struck a bell with Kane. Had Aylan used them? "The lengths and widths of time and space are fluid," the Weaponer continued, "emanating one from another in patterns difficult to trace except through higher mathematics. Visually, one normally does not become aware of such phenomena. On this planet we know of only one area where a flow from somewhere else travels through, though there may be others. The place is here, where you see that screen."

Chez Ebec went on to explain that the spot might never have been discovered had it not been for a war. "Uin Two, which is a civilization on our moon, declared its independence from Uin more than a hundred years ago. Uin Two was a colony, and naturally the government of Uin could not allow such a move. War resulted, which caused our government to seek safehaven below the surface of the planet. Deep in the earth new headquarters were constructed and strongly fortified. Shortly after the final phases of building, the warp spot was noticed."

Things began appearing from nowhere, Chez Ebec said. At least, it seemed that way. Strange artifacts were suddenly seen lying in this room, which had originally been slated to be a supply processing center. Finally a day round watch was put on the area, and when the next item came through, the spot was marked and a wall moved to accommodate the screen. Things continued to come through, but until Bolsk arrived, work to make the screen a viewer was to no avail. But upon Bolsk's coming, the reception screen suddenly flickered with images from Trovo. A light cannon rematerializer was installed so that things could be brought through at will.

"We still, however, lacked control over the movement of the eyes," Chez Ebec said. "We had hoped that the re-

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vitalized Bolsk might provide this—with some mechanical additions to his physical form. While we've not yet been successful with this approach, the work will continue. Another avenue of control—and one that offers much more hope of success—is the hand device brought here by the charming ex-mistress of Bolsk." He turned to the metal headed figure. "Greet the lovely lady, noble Bolsk!"

The robotic Bolsk moved toward Randil.

"No—keep him away from me!" Randil pleaded.

"Halt, Bolsk," commanded Chez Ebec. As the robot responded, the Weaponer smiled. "It appears the lord Bolsk no longer holds you in high regard after all these years. Somewhat unjustly, perhaps, he may blame you for his fate. But no harm will come to you, my lady, as long as the Philosopher Rai remains your sponsor."

"My sweet love," said Rai.

That day and the next Kane did not see the screen room, nor did he see anything of Rai and Randil. His companion for the most part—besides the nonspeaking Gron, who had now become a constant in his existence, even sleeping at night between Kane and the door to his room—was Chez Ebec, who insisted on showing Kane through the underground fortifications and pointing out its strengths in some detail. The Weaponer, though he seemed pleasant enough, appeared to be preoccupied with something.

Kane found out what that something was the night of the second day. That was the night Kane accompanied Chez Ebec to the surface of Uin.

At a number of locations the underground headquarters of the planet's government were connected with topside by metal tubes. Those cleared to ascend could use one of several pedestrian tubes for the purpose, or if they desired to travel some distance after they reached the top, they could use one of the three roomier tubes that accommodated the two man vehicles Chez Ebec referred to as aircars.

"I have two reasons for taking you up," the Weaponer said as their aircar rose through its tube. "The first is that the surface is the only place I can question you without the presence of the mute. Since he is not cleared for top secret information, he does not and cannot have access to the knowledge of how the surface is reached."

"He can't but I can?" Kane asked.

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"You accompany the Weaponer. If I say you can, you can."

"And the second reason? You mentioned two."

Chez Ebec nodded. "There's something I want you to see. Ah—the exit. You are about to enter Heilem, chiefest of Uin's cities."

The city in night. City. That's what the dwarf had called it, but it was a city like none Kane had ever seen before or imagined before.

Tall, needlelike spires jutted up for miles in every direction. How high they were Kane couldn't estimate, for as their aircar shot upward several of the needles continued to rise with them, their highest points not visible to the eye.

Below them, surface cars moved swiftly along crowded ramps that connected the spire structures at many levels. On both sides of the car ramps, smaller flanking belts moved pedestrian traffic to destinations inside the great buildings. Lighting seemed to come from a variety of unidentifiable sources that combined to give the city a daylightlike brightness. Above the lights, however, hung a strange, totally black sky. The total effect was of a thousand clean looking Cape Kennedy launching pads jammed together, in which and in between which a giant ant colony moved in the light of a bright campfire shrouded by a blanket of black.

As the car continued its upward journey, Kane could look down upon the tops of all but two spires, which were still lost in the blackness above. There was a weirdness up here. No evidence of stars, no moon. It might be that no stars were visible from the planet surface, but Chez Ebec had talked about a moon or, as it was called, Uin Two.

"I'll explain in a moment," the Weaponer said, anticipating Kane's question.

The aircar had reached the level just below the tip of one of the two tall towers. Chez Ebec guided the vehicle to a platform extending horizontally outward from the spire. "We leave the car here. There's no way to reach the top-most except by ramp."

The ramp, a continually recycling band of plasticlike material, moved them up to the level area that formed the top of the structure. "If you're not comfortable with heights, don't look down," the dwarf cautioned. Kane judged that the advice was sound. The thin extruded guard rail around the roof edge would be of little help in preventing a dizzy

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fall. He concentrated his attention on the device before them.

That the thing on the center of the roof was a weapon of some kind was obvious. It was no larger than an American Civil War cannon. In shape it resembled the TV tube type "rematerializer" he'd seen in the screen room below the ground. It featured the same type of red ball at its point, which was aimed upward at a forty-five degree angle into the blackness. Two men, uniformed like those in the underground fortress, manned the weapon. Upon recognizing Chez Ebec, they saluted smartly, placing clenched right fists upon left shoulders.

The Weaponer returned the salutes, and the two returned to their business.

"What you see above is the night sky of Uin protected by a force shield from the beams of our enemy colony. This shield and others like it protect our cities—and those of Uin Two, unfortunately—from attack. That is why Heilem and our major centers show no scars of war, which has been reduced therefore to the levels of espionage and sabotage."

"I'm impressed," Kane said. He wasn't exaggerating.

"But this is not what I wanted you here to see. Beamer," he called to one of the men at the weapon. "Open the firing area."

The beamer saluted again and turned to a control panel on the side of the cannon. There was a cracking sound. And then Kane saw the sky open up.

Just a slit. And he understood, really, that it wasn't the sky that was opening. But the effect was the same. There in the blackness of the shield a crack had formed. Within the cleared area above the cannon was a large, bright spot and several little ones.

It was Uin Two surrounded by the stars of a cloudless night. The stars . . .

"Tell me, Jared Kane. Or shall I tell you?" Chez Ebec said.

Kane's eyes were transfixed on the stars and the shapes they formed in constellation. He recognized only one, but that was enough.

"The Big Dipper," he said hesitantly. "I'm on Earth."

"Earth . . . Uin as it is called now," the dwarf said. "Your moon is now the world of Uin Two, a synthetic world under glass with a manufactured atmosphere. In your time—probably eighteen centuries after your important prophet

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—there were no thoughts of travel to your moon. Behold, your world's future."

Kane stared upward, then downward, and felt the dizziness of extreme height. Or was the dizziness caused by the mind staggering reality before him? The future of Earth! "How future?" he asked shakily.

At the dwarf's command, the crack in the shield was re-closed. "We are more than fifteen thousand years from your time."

"Which is the twentieth century, not the eighteenth. But your guess was pretty good."

Chez Ebec smiled. "Guess? Not at all. There were indications. Such as your weapon—a six-spitter, I believe it was called."

"Six-shooter," Kane corrected. "But if you know so much about me, why is the Chairman mystified?"

"Weapons are my hobby, as well as my livelihood. From your age not very much has survived, but there are some records. As for the Chairman, he won't be mystified very much longer. Venytys's thinker group is actively working on the problem right now, and they'll come up with the answers shortly. Very shortly. Although my suggestion to them that you might be one of those who came may gain me the time I need."

"Those who came?"

Chez Ebec scowled. "They came from far away. From the outer rim of the galaxy. They had the gift of extended space travel. We did not. Centuries later, we still do not. We shall probably never be able to fathom its secrets through our own technologies."

"But you've established a colony . . ."

"On the moon, yes. And we've reached the nearer planets in our system. That's as far as our ability can take us. They—*those who came*—could have told us, but they chose not to. They said we were too warlike in nature to be allowed to spread from our confines. We—those of our forebears who were told this—should have taken the secret from them, through torture if necessary. Next time . . ."

"There will be a next time?" Kane asked.

Chez Ebec smiled. "Most assuredly, Jared Kane, if my plan works out there will be a next time. And that time is not far off."

"They will return here?"

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"They will not have to. We have a saying here: If the spire will not go to the Chairman, then the Chairman must go to the spire." His voice hardened, his one good eye narrowing at Kane. "But this is a concern for the future. At the present I must know how you got to Trovo. How did you, a primitive twentieth century man of earth, cross that span? And why? Surely it was no accident."

Kane felt the weight of the amulet hanging from his neck. Did they know about it? he wondered. Probably not. No doubt they thought it to be a talisman of some kind. The Chairman had said they didn't believe in prophecy and magic. They'd taken his knives and his watch but disregarded the amulet. No, they would have no reason to think it was anything other than foolish superstition.

"My questions, Jared Kane?"

Better to stick to the truth where he could afford it, Kane decided. "I was working when it happened," he said. "My work, my job, is, as Venytys gathered, as a kind of soldier. I was on an assignment. I had to destroy an important building, and then it happened. Suddenly there I was, in Balik Trovo."

"Trovo, you mean." Chez Ebec said sourly.

"Balik Trovo," Kane repeated. "I arrived in the province of the Hodgepoker Aufcash."

"And accompanied him to Rai. I know. But you insist your arrival was accidental? And that you have no idea where Trovo is or how you got there?"

Kane looked at him blankly. "I have no explanation other than that I've given you."

They were underground, moving steadily down the tube in the aircar, before Chez Ebec spoke next.

"Perhaps you speak the truth," he said, weighing each word. "It is possible that you unknowingly became involved in a dimensional warp which connects Trovo to Earth." Then he was silent again, his brow furrowing.

Not until they had left the stall area where the aircar had been berthed did the Weaponer next break silence. "On the other side of the coin, you specifically tried to destroy the windows. Twice. If it had been just once—that first time in the presence of Rai—the attempt could be laid to fright, a fear reaction to the unknown. But the second time, when Randil controlled them and you had nothing at all to fear—no, that would seem to be a deliberate attempt. As if

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it was a specific mission you were trying to accomplish."

They had been walking down a corridor that looked familiar. Chez Ebec touched a door and stood aside as Kane entered the room opened to him. There, in a hammocklike chair rested the Chairman, Incony Venytys. To his right stood the mute Gron. Kane's inner reflexes told him what was coming. But too late. "He's a spy," the Weaponer said solemnly. "He's here to destroy the project."

Kane turned on the ball of his left foot and drove his right knee into the dwarf's solar plexus. Before his foot was back on the floor he felt Gron's heavy hands on his shoulders. There was a sensation of flight just before Kane crashed into the wall on the far side of the room.

NINE

There is, unfortunately, a critical juncture prior to which action must be taken. The forces against which Uin battles, namely, the rulers of Uin Two, are not above enlisting their enemy's Weaponer to their cause and would no doubt succeed in attaining a position of leadership among his former foes. See psy-charts of principals. Attachment "C.")

Therefore, the critical juncture is delineated as DLM-363-13074.2, which as the continuum charts show is slightly less than 29 Uin days prior to the recommended recruitment of the Uin Two agent.

—from Abr-Dorrek's original
report, "Concerning a
Potential Danger to the
System as Established"

His eyes met only darkness when they opened. His feet were bound to one wide steel band connected by a rugged chain to a second band that pinned his wrists together behind him. He was seated, and somewhere to his rear the chain was fixed to the ragged wall of cold, damp rock he leaned against. There was a little play in the chain, he learned as he tried to move his buttocks forward on what his extended fingers told him was a chipped floor of stone. He was trussed like a pig for market.

He stopped breathing abruptly. There was someone or

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something else nearby. Whatever it was, it was alive, that he knew. There had been echoes to his breathing, and now the echoes continued after Kane's inhales and exhales had stopped.

"Who's here with me?" he demanded to the blackness.

The voice that answered sounded near but weak. "You are awake. Thank the Oracle! Who are you?"

"The name is Kane. And you?"

"I am Doyak."

"Bolsk's son Doyak?"

"Speak not that bedeviled name!" The voice suddenly sounded less weak. "Are you of Uin or of Trovo?"

Kane considered the question. "Of neither, really. But why are you here, and where are we?"

Doyak laughed bitterly. "This is a dungeon, which should be obvious. I am here for the same reason you are, no doubt. They'd like to do away with me; yet they think I might prove to be of value in whatever evil they are trying to accomplish. It was the man Ebec who caused me to be brought hither. Ebec the traitor!"

"Traitor?"

"The so wise Venytys," Doyak said with scorn. "He has little idea that while he plans his strategies of war with the place called Uin Two, within his own high command Ebec strategizes against him. Not only has the sage Venytys made the traitor a member of his inner council, but he has appointed him over all of his realm's armories. a fitting place if ever one could be found for a spy."

"You know that he spies for Uin Two?"

"What else? Why else would he approach me to help him? When he did, and when I knew nothing that might be of help, he cast me here. I, who have fought the ferocious Feak, known the wrath of Siren Isle, felt the poisons of the bleb turtle and killed unmercifully in the service of the Hag of Overnon—I, Doyak, am to die here, in this foul-smelling dungeon, through the schemes of a loutish traitor."

"Perhaps not," Kane said.

"Perhaps not indeed, Jared Kane," came an unfamiliar voice from across the room.

A dim light flickered vertically along what Kane saw was a door cut into the sharp hewn wall of rock. The area of light widened as the door opened, and a figure stepped lightly into

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the room. The light caught a circular ring of gold at ear level on the figure—a translation device.

The muscular figure holding the small hand torch was Gron the mute, who was obviously no longer mute.

"I hope you were not seriously damaged in our brief encounter," Gron said as he knelt beside Kane. Shining the beam of the torch to Kane's left, he said, "You have already met the son of the eyes."

Kane's stomach turned in involuntary disgust at the sight of the misshapen figure who, like himself, was chained to the wall. "As with myself," Gron said, "he is not pretty to look upon, but he may be of aid to us in our mission."

"*Our* mission?" Kane said.

Gron touched the chain around Kane's neck. "I noticed this shortly after your arrival." He undid a fold of his breechcloth. An amulet hung there. It looked exactly like the one Kane wore. "I was not told someone was trying to stop them from the Trovo end of the continuum. Together, we may have better luck on this end."

The big gray man inserted his thumbs under the steel that bound Kane's legs. As muscles strained, Kane watched the veins stand out in Gron's skull. The metal snapped.

Gron had brought food, strips of what tasted like dried beef and a flask of an alcohol based fluid. While the two freed prisoners ate, he talked.

"I was due for retirement from the sports stage, being of the age when one's strength and speed begin to fail. But foolishly I chose not to retire. Instead I entered the World Title finals in heavyweight grappling. It is a dangerous sport, Jared Kane, one in which a man fights with no rules binding him."

Kane swallowed a thick strip of the meat. "A sport at which you are no doubt good." He still could feel soreness in the shoulders Gron had gripped.

"Good but not good enough. In my last contest my back was broken. True, it's mended now. The man from the Committee fixed that—while everyone in the arena sat frozen, even my opponent knelt over me in a ridiculously unbalanced position, accepting an ovation from his now silent audience. This man from the Committee—the Imparter, he called himself—gave me the choice. Do this job or die from a broken back."

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After a mouthful of the winelike fluid, Kane sketched his own story. "My choice was similar to yours. No choice at all. But where are you from?"

Gron frowned. "If what Chez Ebec says is true, you are from long ago. Me, I am from the future, I suppose you'd say. But not far away. I was sent back in time barely a month."

"A month? But how can you be so sure?"

"My home is Uin Two. That's where I was fighting. I was instructed by the Imparter merely to present myself here to the captain of the guards as a deserter. Of course, I was well known on Uin, as well as on my own sphere."

"If you're so well-known, how is it everyone here thinks you're a mute?"

Gron smiled for the first time. "Showmanship, Jared Kane. I billed myself as the Ghastly Gray Ghost of Silent Sirene. Finish eating, both of you. And drink all of the liquid. You'll need whatever strength it can give. But we must hurry."

Kane still sat, thinking. "One thing's been bothering me. Suppose you or I get ourselves killed here? What would happen to us in that time in which we're stopped frozen? Would we be there any more or not?"

Gron answered, "I am no scholar or tempophysicist, but the Imparter made it quite clear that if I failed in my task, the entire arena would be obliterated completely. I assume he meant by a force beam from Uin—or sabotage, since we have sufficient shielding against the enemy's beams—but regardless of method such obliteration would do away with any problem my death might pose here."

Kane rose. "It would do so nicely. And in my case an exploding generating station would do about the same thing. So let's get to it. But where—and why the hurry?"

"The where is the screen. The why centers on the fact that according to the news flashes we received on Uin Two, sometime today—in the late afternoon—this highly secure installation is going to be penetrated by saboteurs and destroyed." To Kane's questioning face Gron answered, "No, the names of Venytys and Ebec will not be on the lists of those dead or captured. We can assume they will be in the screen room during the attack, which means they may complete their project while the destruction is in progress or

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later. We cannot rely on the saboteurs to do our work for us."

"And the project—what precisely are they trying to do?"

Gron hesitated. "It's confusing, somewhat. Before today, I was certain all Venytys had in mind was trying to penetrate to the other side, the world of Trovo. But today—you've been here a full day—he seems to have had a change in plan. Instead of the rematerializer, he has installed a full power force beam before the screen. He means to destroy something on Trovo, that much is obvious. But what?"

"And faced with the war against Uin Two, why?" asked Kane.

"Installation of the weapon followed intensive questioning of the man Rai and the woman Randil," Gron said.

Doyak sprang to his feet. "*Randil?* The very bitch herself, here? Even in this Oracle forsaken land, the fates give me my fervent wish. I shall squeeze her throat with my thumbs until her nose runs bile!"

"Silence," Gron ordered. He whispered to Kane, "Do you hear anything?"

Kane listened. "A slight hiss. Why?"

"Gas! Out of here—quick!"

There was no sign of any gas seeping in, but even in Kane's day invisible odorless gases had been developed. If Gron said they were being gassed, Kane decided he knew best.

The door through which Gron had entered was closed. Gron put out his torch and grasped the handle. "If I'm right and they are trying to kill you, there will be at least two soldiers just to the right of this door outside. There is a vent there. We shall have to dispose of them."

Kane gripped the big man's shoulder. "Let's go."

They burst through the door and were on the four soldiers like lightning. In the first rush Kane blindly—literally, since his eyes were not accustomed to the bright light of the corridor—drove the side of his right foot into the windpipe of one of the men, who crumpled to the floor. Gron reached down and grasped the ankles of another. Turning swiftly and yanking up his arms, he swung the soldier's body in a wide arc that ended in a bloody streak across the rock carved wall of the corridor.

"Assassin!" Doyak screamed madly as the third trooper threw a paperboard carton of lime colored cubes at his

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head. Before the carton made its harmless glancing contact, Gron's doubled fist had turned the soldier's face to mush. The soldier slumped over the writhing form of the fourth soldier, whose groin had been the target of Kane's swift knee.

Gron bent down and picked up one of the green cubes. "An effective poison. The idea was certainly to kill both of you," he said.

Kane fingered one of the innocent looking cubes. "Chez Ebec?"

"Possibly," Gron answered. "Or the Philosopher. Or the woman."

Doyak's eyes narrowed. "The bitch Randil," he sneered.

Kane said, "What about these men? We can't just leave them here." Kneeling, he inspected the fallen troopers. He lifted the half head of the one Gron had scraped along the wall and watched the face of the one he'd kicked in the throat. "These two are dead, but what about the others who're alive?"

Gron lifted the two unconscious men easily, cradling one under each arm. "Open the door. We'll leave them to the fate they intended for you." He looked sharply at Kane, who showed signs of objecting. "They intended it for you," he repeated. "You two bring the others. Don't inhale once you're inside."

Kane opened the door. As Gron stepped inside with the two live men, Kane gripped the heels of one of the dead men who remained. He motioned Doyak to take the other. Doyak stood still, looking at Kane blankly.

Kane shrugged and dragged his man through the opening, careful not to breathe. When he and Gron came out of the dungeon room seconds later, the fourth soldier lay in his original position on the floor.

Doyak was gone.

Gron looked questioningly at Kane.

"The bitch Randil," Kane said evenly. "He's after her."

Gron sputtered something unintelligible to Kane. "You take care of this one. I'll try to stop him before he alerts everyone to the fact that he—and you—are alive and free. Now listen carefully. This dungeon is the lowest level of the underground complex. Down this corridor there is another that turns to the left. At the end of that you'll see new excavation work begun. You'll come to passageways running

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to the right and to the left. Take the one to the left. When you reach the second door on your right, open it and you'll be in an elevator. Press the button marked A. When the elevator stops you'll be in the antefoyer to the screen room. I'll try to be there when you arrive. As soon as you do, in we go to destroy that screen. Understand?"

Kane repeated his instructions as Gron took a needle gun from the fallen trooper's belt.

"Good. Now remember. We don't have much time, two or three hours, perhaps, until the saboteurs are here, and then it may be too late."

And, Kane thought as Gron stalked off hurriedly, *whoever wanted me dead won't be long in checking up on the job.* He took the heels of the last trooper and dragged him inside the cell. When he emerged he too carried a needle gun in his hand. As he started down the hall in the direction Gron had gone, he realized that he had no idea how the weapon was triggered. It had a handle and a barrel and two rings around its top, but no trigger. Impossible, he thought. The thing had to have some kind of trigger. He stopped walking and examined the weapon closely in the light that filled the hall. No trigger anywhere.

Kane made a face and gently placed the weapon on the floor against the wall. Better he be without it than to have it go off accidentally when it was pointed toward himself. He gave it a goodbye look and rushed toward the end of the corridor.

He had taken eight steps, when the floor suddenly turned itself over and his back smashed against the wall to his right.

As he scrambled to his feet and tried to regain his balance, he heard shouts from far to his left. He couldn't make them all out, but two he understood. "*The enemy!*" was one. The second was, "*Blowing up the place!*"

TEN

They are negative even in affirmation, destructive even in advancement. The underlying trait extends to their mode of limited space travel, for example. It depends entirely on the fist thrust (term is their own and revealing, symbolizing as it does a folded and tightened hand which in this con-

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figuration is utilized solely for the striking of another member of the species of material against material.

Appalled by their ways, we departed secretly and in haste, not daring to leave with them our methods. The prospect of this species' spreading throughout the stars is a vision of nightmarish proportion.

from the log of Captain
W'pe, quoted in "Assess-
ment of DLM-363-1157 by
DSL-116 Travelers" and
marked Important Sub-
stantiation in *Homo Sapiens*
IV, reference file "Intelli-
gent Life Under Committee
Scrutiny"

At the end of the first corridor, he stopped and flattened upright against the left wall. Listening intently, he heard voices, but they seemed to be moving away from him. *Hurry*, he thought, and, tensed for what he might meet, he eased into the corridor running to the left.

It was empty. Kane reached its end at a dead run, the soft padding sounds of his tennis shoes sounding to him as if he were wearing steel horseshoes. Again he stopped and listened. No sound at all, only his own breathing. He turned the corner and moved down the third corridor, following Gron's directions. The second door on the right wall was some fifteen yards away now. He was moving quietly past the first door, when it opened abruptly.

Both Kane and the soldier were frozen in surprise as their eyes locked. But Kane had at least been psychologically prepared for such a meeting, and his response was faster. Stepping forward with his right foot, he shifted his weight fully onto it and brought up his right fist in a swinging arc. The back surface of his clenched fist moved deftly through the trooper's beginning defense and smashed thickly into his nose. As the other overended into the room from which he'd come, Kane dived for the door that led to the elevator.

He didn't make it. The corridor again became a topsy turvy world, and not until Kane heard the single explosion did he know the reason. By that time, however, he had crashed into a section of wall behind him to find that it gave way under the impact. He felt himself falling, suddenly

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in the dark. There was light above him, it seemed to Kane, just before he hit bottom.

Bottom? Gron had said the dungeons were on the lowest level of the complex, Kane recalled as he rubbed what he knew were bad bruises on his arms. He had not liked the hours and hours of practice falling he'd suffered through in judo clases, but now he was grateful for the rote *ukemi* that made his body react spontaneously in the absence of equilibrium.

He'd fallen about twenty-five feet, he guessed, judging from the light source above him, no doubt the bright corridor he'd been standing in before the blast.

As his eyes became better accustomed to his surroundings, he still could not make out precisely what kind of place he now found himself in. It was a room of sorts, with a low ceiling and, like the dungeon, walls roughly carved from rock. A natural cavern, perhaps. The floor seemed to come to sharp points in places. No, it was not natural, he decided as he felt the floor with his hands. Broken up, but too smooth to be natural.

Luckily the walls were carved from actual rock—luckily because the rough edges gave Kane footholds to use in climbing up. And that was his job now. Gron would be waiting for him—at least, he would if the saboteurs from Uin Two hadn't got to the anteroom yet.

The climb was easy. Kane had scaled easier walls in his service training. In a matter of a few minutes his reaching hands pulled him eye level with the floor above.

The room, which now had no door but a hole leading to the corridor, had been some kind of planning facility. Three broken designing boards, they looked like, lay in various places on the curled up floor. Three human bodies, dressed in the ski suit uniforms of Uin's soldiery, lay mangled among the debris. The room and the corridor were as silent as death.

Kane was about to climb from the hole, when he heard the footfalls. Ducking back down, he analyzed them as a single pair of boots, judging by their steady and precise clack. One soldier, probably. But one soldier might be enough to keep him from the elevator across the hall—which Kane hoped might still be working.

The footfalls stopped.

Then started again. Irregularly.

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Louder.

Which meant they were coming into the blasted room.

Kane pulled himself down further. His position was precarious. If he leaned another inch backward, he would again drop to the bottom. *Go*, he mentally commanded the man in the room above. But the footsteps stopped again, and Kane could hear whoever it was rummaging around in the wreckage. His mental powers proving ineffective, Kane knew only one other way.

A piece of sharp stone had been jabbing him under his ribs. This Kane silently loosened. Its sharpness would give him a weapon of a kind, although not very effective against a needle gun, he supposed. Nonetheless, a weapon—any weapon—is better than none, if you know how to use it. He mentally crossed his fingers and, holding his breath, eased himself upward.

The soldier was facing the opposite direction, kneeling. Kane was waist high into the room, when he must have made some small sound. The soldier never completed the turn he began. Scrambling out of the hole, Kane brought the knife-like edge of the stone downward. In a sickening wet thud it split the top of the trooper's head in two.

Kane squatted beside the fallen soldier. He looked about eighteen or nineteen, a handsome youth with wavy brown hair. Kane stared at the hair and the oozing red river pumping from the cleavage. He couldn't take his eyes away.

It wasn't so much the boy or the way he had died. Kane was staring at the weapon buried in the youthful skull.

Now he knew.

He tore himself from the boy he'd just killed. He had to make the elevator.

The hall was empty as Kane cautiously opened the door to the lift. He stepped inside. It looked undamaged. He scanned the control panel, which was more complicated than those on the elevators he was familiar with. He found the button marked *A* and pressed it. The elevator car moved upward.

Now he knew.

He knew what Chez Ebec had somehow also learned. Venyty's knew too, obviously, which explained why a force beam had been installed in the screen room.

Sure.

But not so sure.

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There was something the Imparter had said to him. How had he put it? "Your world, indeed your whole system, could disappear completely and in the totality of things would not be missed. The Committee intervenes only when the crisis threatens the balance of universal existence. We have such a crisis developing now."

But it *wasn't* such a crisis, Kane thought. Or was his deduction all wrong?

His mental question was punctuated by the car's halting and the door's sliding open. Before him stood Gron, fists clenched at his sides. The big man nodded toward the door to the screen room.

Kane stepped from the elevator. "Now," he said determinedly.

"No. Definitely not now," came the answer.

The voice that filled the room was spoken by no one within it. The voice belonged to Chez Ebec.

Kane stood tensed, facing the screen room door.

"We know," Chez Ebec's voice continued, "that the mute Gron helped you escape. We know that he is your ally on your mission of sabotage. We might not have suspected the mute Gron at all if it were not for the fact that when we televised the mute Gron as he entered the anteroom he was wearing a translation device in his ear. None was issued to the mute Gron, and there would be only one reason why he might wish to acquire one. One even wonders, since the turncoat is not all else he appears to be, whether the mute Gron is really mute. But it doesn't make much difference. We shall find out if he can talk—or scream, perhaps—later. As for now, Jared Kane, I want you inside the screen room."

Kane glanced at Gron and nodded his head jerkily toward the door.

"No," Chez Ebec said. "Gron stays where he is. If he attempts to enter after you, a beam guarding the door will chop him to celery. A beam is directed on him right now. At the first sign of disturbance from him it will activate. Now, Jared Kane, enter."

The door swung inward. Kane stepped warily forward. Inside, Chez Ebec and the Chairman sat on their couches facing him. To the rear of Chez Ebec, Rai and Randil stood, both watching Kane with interest bordering on curiosity. At the computer consoles, the same young man and woman

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worked intently at their duties. In a chair between them sat the rigid bullet headed Bolsk.

But the device in the center of the room held Kane's attention. In form the same as the needle tipped force cannon he'd seen aboveground, it was at least twice as large. If the other had looked lethal, this weapon looked as if it could destroy the entire world.

Kane smiled grimly. Certain as he was of the weapon's purpose in this room, his thought had been rather on target.

Incony Venytys rose. "I saw no need to bring you here, Jared Kane, but my Weaponer thought it best. I yield to his superior knowledge of you and your mission. Let me point out, however, that I have no wish to destroy you." He suddenly looked tired. "I have no wish to destroy anyone or anything. But it appears there is no choice."

"None, my lord," the dwarf put in quickly. "And as I have suggested before, this man from Uin of long ago can aid us in identifying the proper target." He barked at the woman at the console, "Haven't you focused the screen yet?"

Flickering lights on the screen itself answered him. The lights that had been moving in rapid flight suddenly blended into a pattern of colors. Kane was amazed. He was looking into the throne room of Castle Bolsk. It appeared empty.

In front of him Rai stirred. He manipulated something in his hands. It was the hand control that moved the eyes. The screen now scanned the throne room. Kane realized that the eyes were turning on the neck of the transparent tube. Then the scanning stopped.

"Focus!" Rai ordered.

The girl looked questioningly at Chez Ebec. "Do as he says," the dwarf said. "Bring them into focus."

The *them* he referred to were human figures, blurred beyond recognition until the screen sharpened their features. Kane felt his insides thump when he saw.

The men were grouped around the throne itself. One sat in the golden chair. Aufcash, the Hodgepoker of Balik Trovo, was speaking. It was obvious from the gestures he made that he was in command. It was just as obvious from the faces of the others that the command wasn't resented. He directed. They listened respectfully, their lips moving now and then to make a short point. He nodded. Kane needed no

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audio to know that a new ruler reigned on Trovo—a new and just ruler.

Rai's icy voice broke off Kane's thoughts. "Kill them. Kill the scum who dare to divide my spoils."

After the short silence that hung in the room like death, it was Incony Venytys who spoke. "There is no need for innocent people to die. And there is no time for us to accomplish their deaths. Your spoils are lost to you forever, Philosopher of Trovo. Here you shall get whatever honors you justly deserve."

Randil snickered. Rai glared at her.

"Move the windows to the target," Chez Ebec commanded.

Reluctantly, Rai obeyed. The screen seemed to be moving upward. Kane exhaled in relief when Aufcash was no longer in sight.

Chez Ebec turned to Kane. "It may be difficult for you to understand what I'm about to say, but—"

"I know already," Kane interrupted. This satisfaction, at least, he could have. Knocking the wind out of the confident sails of this dwarf who thought himself so clever.

"You're after Uin Two," Kane said. "You're gunning for the moon."

"You know?" Incony Venytys raised his eyebrows. "How is it possible that you know?"

"What clinched it was finding a piece of stone—a piece of floor, actually. Part of the floor you just saw on the screen. Birds of death, the flying lizards were called by the dark wizard here. That clinched it, especially when added to Chez Ebec's great interest in knowing what I thought of Trovo. It was very Earthlike—I recognized that from the start. But Trovo had two moons. My Earth has but one. You have but one. It all fitted. Trovo is the Earth of the past, how long ago I have no idea. Before my time it somehow lost one of its moons."

Incony Venytys smiled. "Chez Ebec is a clever man, but he did not put all the pieces together as you have. He was in a state of disbelief when I myself convinced him of the facts. Yes, Trovo is your world and mine—some fifty thousand years before your time. But we would not have discovered this had it not been for you, Jared Kane. You were from Uin of long ago. Yet you came to us from Trovo, not from your Earth, it appeared. It figured that if it were possible for you to come through the warp between Trovo and Uin,

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you doubtless had earlier come through a warp between Earth and Trovo. Based on your conversation with Chez Ebec, it was reasonable to assume that Earth and Uin were the same. And if such were the case, any between them would be one not of space, but of *time*. Which would place Trovo in our past and in yours."

"Couldn't Trovo be a future world?" Kane asked.

"With two moons?" was Venytys's reply. "Two moons, both of which are uninhabited and show no signs of ever having borne civilizations? No. That alone would be enough to validate our hypothesis, but our geological people have thoroughly studied the bodies and their formations and have thus determined their age relative to us. It may also surprise you to learn that our archaeologists have turned up legends of Trovo from your own time. One legend, quite popular, called the world Atlantis."

"If you know so much, why do you need me?" Kane said.

Chez Ebec answered. "You will help us determine which moon of Trovo is your moon—which is today Uin Two. We have no way of recognizing it, since today it is covered with artificial formations. In your time it had not yet become a junkyard covered with spaceshot wreckages."

The Chairman stepped forward. "I still don't see the necessity of all this. All we have to do to ensure—"

His voice stopped. No one was listening. All eyes were turned toward the screen. The night sky of Trovo displayed its two moons for the inspection of all.

"Which?" demanded Chez Ebec.

Which? Kane stepped closer to the screen. He visualized himself on Earth, where he had never paid that much attention to the lunar sphere that hung overhead on clear nights. Clear nights were not the best working nights for a man in the service. *Which?*

The moons were as Kane remembered seeing them on Trovo. Long ago on Trovo. One was full, the other about three-quarters full. He looked at each. There was no clue. None. Unless . . .

The man in the moon.

When he was a kid, people used to talk of the man in the moon.

A face.

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If you looked hard enough you were supposed to see a face. But now . . .

"Are both in clear focus?" he asked.

For an answer the moons became sharper in detail, though no larger on the screen. One of them, the one in three-quarter phase, the moon to the left on the screen, seemed to . . .

Wink?

The other stared coldly down. Still . . .

"I can't be sure. There's not that much difference."

The words echoed in his brain. There wasn't any difference.

None at all, really. Not in the historical sense.

If only one moon were blasted, one would be left. In Trovo time—before man reached upward for the moon—it would make no difference which moon was left. In Kane's time, spacemen would aim toward *the* moon, whichever moon existed of the original two. It was simple.

Then why didn't everybody see how simple it was?

"You must try," Chez Ebec said impatiently. Kane now noticed the needle gun in the dwarf's hand. "Is it not that you know your moon is the moon on the right? Answer, man from Earth."

Kane shrugged. "It's as you say." After all, of the two, the one on the left looked more familiar. If he'd had to pick one out for them to blast, it would have been the one on the right. But Chez Ebec knew that. Or did he?

"Focus for slaying," the Weaponer ordered. He stepped behind the huge needle on the tripod, holstering his hand weapon. "With the Honored Chairman's permission, I shall do the honors myself."

Incony Venytys nodded absently as the moon on the right of the screen traveled to its center.

Kane watched intently as Chez Ebec turned a dial on the side of the force beam case. Then, hooking his fingers around two switches on the top of the needle's rear, Chez Ebec pulled both. There was a soft hum. And Chez Ebec relaxed.

"It will take a little time," he said, stepping away from the device.

Kane had seen no flash of light, nothing, in fact, to indicate that the weapon had been fired. Only a little hum that was over almost before it began. He was still looking at

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the weapon when the screen lit up with a brilliant, eye blinding glare.

"A hit!" cried Chez Ebec. "I've done it!"

The glare vanished immediately, and when the screen cleared, all that was visible was the black sky of Trovo with a few star windows shining through.

"Yes, it has been done." Incony Venytys said soberly. "We have destroyed a piece of the universe, and now we must take another part from it. Already we have meddled with history, but we must meddle again. Even if we have destroyed the particular moon which in fact became Uin Two, the other would serve as a substitute. To the first explorers any moon would be moon enough."

"No," Chez Ebec said roughly.

No? Kane thought. The Chairman was right. What was wrong with Ebec's thinking?

The dwarf smiled. "It is enough that we have slain one of the moons. In the annals of time it must have been ordained that we do so. We have done so. But now that I know, now that I can be sure of the forces that can be combined with the power of the eyes, why should I destroy a substantial part of my kingdom? Why should I diminish my own possessions?"

"Your kingdom? Your possessions?" Incony Venytys looked questioningly into Chez Ebec's defiant face. It was the last thing he ever saw.

"Goodbye, my lord," Chez Ebec said. The blast from his hand weapon hit the Chairman full force in the belly. Stepping across the old man's body, the dwarf smiled more broadly. He leveled his weapon at Kane's chest.

"The war is effectively concluded, Jared Kane. As our late and beloved Chairman realized, it mattered little which moon we destroyed. I, of course, had to be sure I could destroy Uin Two if I so willed. But I doubt I shall have to. A simple demonstration of my powers to one of the captured saboteurs will be enough. Naturally, we'll release him to tell his story back home. After which surrender will be immediate."

"Your kingdom," Kane said disinterestedly.

"The start of it, really. You see, once I realized the warp was one of time and not space, I formulated my plans. Probability would dictate that there are other warp spots. I shall find them. Our geological staffs have located two al-

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ready, I think. They, of course, have no idea of the significance of their findings. To them they've simply turned up sonic evidence of underground disturbances similar to those which led to our discovery of this warp. These will be further explored and exploited. I'll rule this world here until I can marshal the forces necessary to transmit as well as receive humans through the warps. As you've just now seen, some things we can already transmit—such as the force that destroyed Trovo's extra moon. By deputies I'll rule one world, then another, until I get control of the one I'm after."

"The time in which the spacemen came," Kane said.

Chez Ebec smiled again. "You have a good memory. Which is excellent, since you shall be our key to your own time. In the beginning, at least, we shall have to rely on already proven methods. The eyes of Bolsk are a primitive key to the world of Trovo, but until we can devise something better, they will do. Your world shall be entered through the eyes of Kane."

Kane looked at the figure that was now Bolsk and shivered. "You haven't mentioned how you'll get the eyes of Kane to be all seeing, let alone how you'll get them back to my century."

"Details, just details, Jared Kane. The oil of life will not be hard to synthesize. We are an age of science. As for getting you back to your own time, that will be easy. We shall learn the method from you. You did not come to Trovo by accident, of that I am sure. The correct method and amount of torture should get this secret from you. You shall be allowed to live until that time."

Aylan had been right, Kane thought. "The crisis threatens the balance of universal existence."

The Weaponer shook in evil delight as he turned to Randil. "And you, my darling. You too shall be allowed to exist. To help me rule."

"My darling?" Rai repeated.

Randil smiled coyly at the Philosopher. "After all, my love of late, you were a mighty man in Trovo but that, may I remind you, was thousands and thousands of years ago. There is a new king now. Chez, darling, do we really need this gold headed ape around any more?"

Chez Ebec chuckled. "Not at all, my dear." The needle gun moved toward Rai. "I have no belief in prophecy, wizard, but it does look as if your Oracle told the truth. You are

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indeed to die by a strange man in a strange world by a strange weapon. I have only to add that it has been most unpleasant knowing you as a person."

"No—you can't," Rai whimpered. "Please send me back to Trovo. I know the people there. I'll rule on your behalf. I'll serve as your deputy—please."

Kane enjoyed seeing the big man grovel. Chez Ebec seemed to enjoy it too. "Possibly," he considered. "You do, as you say, know conditions there. You might make a very suitable deputy."

Randil laughed coarsely. "He'd make a very *unsuitable* deputy. They hate him throughout all of Trovo. You'd be plagued by revolts."

"You bitch!" Rai bellowed.

"But no doubt correct, Philosopher," said Chez Ebec. "Very well, my dear, we'll dispose of him."

But before he could activate the hand weapon the door from the anteroom banged open and Doyak stormed across the threshold.

Almost.

What happened was, he stormed right into the force field, which hit him shoulder high.

Then all hell broke loose.

"Now or never!" came a shout from behind Doyak, and Gron dived head first into the room, careful to enter below the level of the force field. He hit the floor just as Kane flung himself toward the gun raised in the hand of Chez Ebec.

Randil screamed as Doyak staggered against her. "Let me go!" she wailed. "There—there's the one you want. Your father! There is the hateful Bolsk!"

Doyak followed her pointing finger and scrambled after the sitting figure, which had not moved during the entire proceedings.

"No!"

The cry came from Chez Ebec. "Bolsk must not be harmed. I need him!" With the strength of ten men and the determination of more, he flung Kane from his throat as if he were no heavier than a damp dishrag and cut down Doyak with a deadly spurt from his handgun.

Before he could swing the weapon back again, Kane had closed the space between them. Grasping the dwarf's gun hand high, he twisted the wrist in a swift semicircle. The

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rest of Chez Ebec followed the movement and crashed to the floor in a thud. There was a flash at the moment of impact, and a hole the size of a half dollar was centered in the ex-Weaponer's blood soaked forehead.

"Stop! I command you to stop!" The voice was Rai's. Kane turned to face him, then stopped.

The Philosopher stood behind the controls of the huge force cannon. The needle was aimed directly at Kane. Between them Randil lay sprawled on the floor where Doyak had flung her. Gron stood frozen at the computer console, the broken bodies of the man and woman operators twisted at his feet. Bolsk sat as before, unmoving, his dead son crumpled before him.

Rai laughed. "The tables are turned, Jared Kane. The Philosopher is once again supreme in his kingdom and ruler of the eyes once more. Death from the Oracle's pronouncement has once more been stayed. You, however, will all die here."

"All?" Randil asked. "But you are my hero now. The runty Chez Ebec—you do not for a moment believe that I should have . . . He made me become his lover, oh most desired Rai. It's always been you whom I've really wanted in my heart, in my dreams, in my bed."

Her eyes and face were at their emotion stirring best at the very moment Rai pulled the dual triggers. There was a flash, and she was gone. She and the wall and a good six feet of metal and rock behind it simply no longer existed.

"And now for you, Jared Kane." Rai's lips curled into a satisfied smile. He was watching for some sign of distress on Kane's part.

Kane fingered the amulet hanging from his neck. Maybe. The Imparter had said he could get back only when his mission was complete. But maybe—maybe during the fight the computers or the screen or something had been damaged. If so, Rai never would be able to fix it. . . .

Maybe Kane's mission *was* complete.

In any event, it was a chance. If it didn't return him to the power generating station, he'd lose nothing by trying. The station—where a bullet was waiting for him. A bullet.

Far better than what faced him now.

"Have nothing to say?" Rai asked.

"Just goodbye," was Kane's answer. He squatted low to

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avoid the station guard's bullet and pressed the amulet. As he did so, he sprang—ready to plunge into a man who had long ago shot a revolver at him.

The spring stopped short. He was not in the generating station. He was still in the screen room. But no one stood at the force cannon before him.

Rai was gone!

Kane exploded with a great laugh. Then, "All right, business now. Gron, move away from the screen and get ready to join your ring partner!" Locking his thumbs into position, he turned the cannon on its tripod toward the screen. An explosion sounded from outside the room.

"The saboteurs!" Gron cried. "Hurry!"

"Now!" Kane shouted. As he pulled the triggers, Gron crouched low, swinging his meaty right fist back to an angle that when released would no doubt flatten forever his surprised ring opponent. He disappeared at the precise moment the brightness crashed into the screen.

The last thing Kane saw before he again pressed his amulet was the bullet-headed figure of Bolsk, rising and walking purposefully into the softly humming needle point.

ELEVEN

Time Travel. This is another inaccurate notion which your own culture may have embodied in its beliefs. From what we have said above, you can see clearly that movement within time alone without some movement in space is impossible. However, though the actualities of the matter are grossly misunderstood, "time travel" is not difficult to achieve. Your own culture may be one in which the simple mechanics have been discovered and applied successfully.

—from Employee handbook "A
Reorientation to the
Cosmos"

The following Restrictions of movement apply to movement lengthwise along continua. They have no application to movement in depth. Therefore, should one of the species or area members listed below discover the means, through its own efforts, to enable individuals or groups to travel "in

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time," their doing so does not constitute an action counter to these Restrictions.

—from the introduction to
"Restrictions, Class III—on
Movement"

The guard didn't know what hit him. He stood transfixed by the golden caped figure sprawled out on the power station floor. He'd never seen a man with such black skin before. And as for the cropped hair of gold—impossible. Yet the guard had just shot such a man, though he would have sworn that seconds ago the man had been shorter, Caucasian and dressed in black clothes. Funny what the eyes will do sometimes, the guard was thinking, just before Kane smashed him in the neck from behind.

He picked up the guard's revolver from the floor. He had only minutes to get clear, he knew. He wondered if the margin was great enough. Then he stopped wondering and started running.

The shots spat at him from everywhere, it seemed. There was no sense in trying to keep hidden, no sense even in firing back. Any second now—

In the shock wave that hit him he seemed to float over and above and through the debris that moments before had been generating electricity for miles around.

It was dark when he awoke. He lay in a clump of bushes off to one side of a road that led, he knew, to the station at the top of the hill. It was still night, but much time had passed. Too much time. He'd missed his rendezvous with the agent whose job it was to get him out of the country. But hell, he was alive.

Now he was alive. But hours from now, what then? He'd be sure to be picked up, questioned. And then . . .

But he was alive.

And that was a miracle. He was alive and had not so much as a broken bone for all the abuse his body had taken. Had Aylan . . .

No, he said they never intervened unless . . . But maybe they felt they owed Kane something.

Maybe. But he *was* alive.

Alive in a world that didn't believe in miracles. Like Uin, his Earth didn't believe in them. Yet the Oracle had been

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right, at least about Rai's death. In Trovo, when the earth was young . . .

Atlantis? Who knew? Who really cared?

Trovo. And suddenly he longed for the companionship of Aufcash. And Nomi. He would like to be with the tavern girl right now.

Or just a tavern.

Foolish. What would *he* do in a place like Trovo? Well, he was a spy, a pretty good one. But would Trovo need spies? If not, he'd have to learn to be an ex-spy.

But here he was on Earth. Lying in a clump of scrubby bushes, his clothes torn, his body bruised and beaten, the only souvenir of his troubles hanging around his neck.

The amulet . . .

No, the Committee, whoever they were, wouldn't have allowed him to have it now if . . .

But . . .

Why not? It didn't look damaged. There was no reason to believe that since it had worked once, it wouldn't work again. Was there?

He closed his eyes and pressed the bubble.

He didn't open his eyes right away. He felt the ground under him and around him. Scrubby bushes were all he felt. His insides began to sink.

And then, from a distance, he heard the music. It sounded like tavern music. It was the sound of accordians.

Jared Kane grinned.

In another place time, a grin was growing on another pair of far differently shaped lips. Area subsection staff member Abr-Dorrek turned off his tridi viewer. Reaching to his inter-office communicator, he vigorously punched out the combination of symbols that would connect him with the office of his Spidran supervisor.

Supervisor right now, at least, he was thinking.

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