

Chapter One

Vik Kunzer winced at the sudden, stabbing, alarm pain in the tip of his middle finger, left hand.

He slid his big, powerful body away from the naked, white body of the young Princess Shirlee. He consciously damped the nerve response.

The pain was intrusive and important. It would flare again in a few seconds, but muted.

He shifted to the edge of the oval, spongy, purplish plant that had been genetically adapted to serve as a bed.

Princess Shirlee opened wide, gold-flecked brown eyes. "What's the matter?"

His fingertip pulsed again. It contained a micro receiver set in bone, connected to a nerve.

He padded, naked, across the golden carpet of fuzzy, intertwined hairlike tendrils that sprouted from the floor. Slipping on his white, leaf cloth toga, he positioned its two suckers in his armpits. The living cloth glowed with enhanced life.

He said, "I have something important to do. I'm sorry."

Shirlee sat up. Her heavy breasts swayed enticingly. "I arranged to be free for another two hours!" She glanced at the time candle burning in its glass. She was petulant, feeling cheated. Then she smiled the superior smile of the young and eager. "Are you feeling your age, Martin? Is twice your limit, now?"

Vik glanced at himself in the big wall mirror. His rugged face was lined. His long hair showed significant gray. It was convincing.

He lied, "Government business I just remembered." He picked up her garments from a gourd chair and took them to her. He leaned over and kissed her. His hand briefly fondled her deep flesh. He whispered, "Next time I'll wear your yoni smooth."

He meant it. Shirlee was his favorite type: slim, big-breasted, shameless and eager.

Vik straightened and smiled down at her. Power and sex and danger kept him going. It seemed that more and more of each was necessary as the generations of mortals rolled past.

She insisted on another kiss. Her small, soft hands reached under his toga, caressed his deep, well-muscled chest, his hard belly, his hard thighs. "Can't you be First Minister only during the day?" Her feather light touch trailed the length of his semi-rigid organ. "You're so young below the neck."

Vik controlled the natural surge of blood. He was tempted. But danger called.

He gently pulled Shirlee to her feet. She was small, five feet one, and he was a giant at six feet five. He said firmly, "Dress. I'll see you down the bole."

She slipped on her imported orange silk chemise, and then the furred, energy-hungry leaf cloth robe. She let the suckers hang free of her nipples; the pleasure was alluring as always, but she didn't want to glow while down in the tree grounds and as she rode her lion through the forest city to the gargantuan palace trees.

She followed him to the curving wall covered by striped moss drapery. She asked, "Martin, is it about the weather? And the northern tribes?"

"No." He pulled the drapery aside and pressed a spot in the smooth, living wood paneling. An oval door outlined and rustled open.

She said, "General Quinn said the ice would drive all the tribes south into our territory in the next few years."

"He's right." Vik led the way down into a narrow, curved, secret stairway that hugged the mottled, twenty-foot tree trunk. The stairwell was lit by glow leaves suckered to tiny veins of sap. Vik had to duck his head and move slightly sideways, step by step.

For the thousandth time he regretted not taking more care with the design and growing and building of this magnificent, 540-year-old estate tree. Shirlee wanted to ask for more information. Her pride was hurt by his abrupt cutting short their sex-time. She enjoyed his lovemaking more than she could admit, even to herself.

But she knew she could not question him too closely; there would emerge in him a cold ruthlessness, a frightening remoteness in his pale blue eyes. She avoided provoking that response.

When they reached the bottom of the stair passage, he asked, "Has Nodman changed toward you lately?"

She frowned. "I don't think so." Her beautiful face appeared sickly in the faint green leaf light. "He barely notices me anymore. I'm not important, down at the end of the family table. He's so old and sick... But at dinner last night he told us you're seventy-three years old! He's only sixty-eight...and everybody says he's dying. I hear it everywhere: 'The emperor is dying.'"

Shirlee's eyes dilated with anger. "He's bringing that yellow girl to the table now. That mouth girl. I've heard that she can take a man deep into her throat. They teach that in the East, on the other side of the world, from

when they're even younger than me.”

Vik nodded. “For hundred of years now. They're one of China's most valuable exports.”

“Father said---when he mentioned your age---are you *really* seventy-three, Martin?---that it isn't natural for a man your age to be so well preserved, even if you did come from the Whisper Hills where men grow so big.”

“He's jealous.”

“Maybe. But he values you. He said you were the most able of all his ministers because of your knowledge of history. No other man in the Empire knows as much about the world and its peoples as you.”

Vik reached past her and opened the secret exit door and let her out into the dark maze of groomed hedges that enclosed most of the base of the massive tree. He led her to his lion pen nearby within the tree grounds.

The vast lower branches overhead swept out and out for hundreds of feet. All land under a tree's branches belonged to the owner of the tree. A large Junto tree was an estate.

Princess Shirlee joined her waiting palace servant in the shadows, an older woman she trusted totally.

Vik personally led their saddled lions to them.

A moment later the great cats glided away with their riders.

The night guards at the gate would let them pass without question. The great Martin's sexual exploits were known by his servants and by a few of his tree force. They did not know the identities of the robed and hooded riders.

Vik moved quickly back to the door to the not-so-secret stairwell. His private one knew of it, and he presumed many others who worked in the tree also knew. But there were other secrets no one but he knew.

Within, after he pulled the outer door shut, he pressed another, unobtrusive spot five times in the living wood paneling, below a glow leaf.

The wall hummed and a thick, heavier, oval section clicked inward an inch. The door was iron, faced with living wood.

Vik pushed the oval door open and stepped into a second passage, down sloped, walled with rough concrete, lit with dim electric eternalights.

His fingertip continued to pulse every few seconds.

He closed the heavy metal door behind him.

The concrete tunnel continued down to a doorless, dark room sixty feet below ground level. He stopped before entering and spoke one word firmly, distinctly: “Olympia.”

The word and his voice were recognized. Unseen automatic laser

guns switched from red to amber secondary alert. Light flooded the room, revealing ancient computers, files, communication equipment.

The power for this room was supplied by a Micropile, the last nuclear power generating system on Earth.

Had he not said that word and had his voice not been recognized, the lasers would have sliced and diced any 'alien' living presence in the room. In addition, the pile would have begun a self-destruct program. After an hour the tree would have gone up in a thermo-nuclear explosion which would rock the city.

Vik went to a silvery console and noted the label under the single glowing ruby diode among dozens set in a panel. He switched it off.

The periodic, muted sting in his fingertip ended.

He checked the status board for the Micropile. Everything was good. It should last another 500 years, provided he lived that long to keep it serviced and fed an occasional fuel rod.

Vik sat in the worn, deep-cushioned console chair and thought for a long moment. His finger idly traced a small manufacturer's plate.

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His pale blue eyes focused on the plate. So much time... So many dead friends, lovers, enemies... He smiled and murmured, " 'And I alone survived.' "

He sighed. He said self-indulgently, "Onward, into the endless valley of death."

He stood and left the room. Sensors watched him leave.