

Chapter Two

Vik went back up to his limb-cluster of rooms, to his bedroom. He slipped off his toga.

Naked, he stepped into a loin protector of leather and rubber and adjusted his large genitals carefully. He anticipated a long, active night.

He slipped on a dark red silk tunic and cinched a wide, heavy-buckled belt tight around his waist.

He pulled a corner of the living rug free of the floor. Hundreds of tiny suckers made minute popping sounds, leaving dot-like green marks on the raw boards that had fused together and grown solidly to the joists, which had in turn rooted themselves to the massive tree limb upon which the bedroom rested...or from which it grew.

The monster tree provided life to thirty-two rooms with attendant plant furnishings, glow leaves of various colors and brightness, and hollow water and sewage vines. The tree's huge and intricate root system reached seven hundred feet into the ground to provide the nourishment for this assortment of parasites. All by design.

Vik opened a small trapdoor in the exposed floor and lifted out an unlocked, ornate, killed-wood box from the foot-deep cavity. He opened the carved lid and took out a soft, lion hide holster which he attached to his belt on his right side. It had been made for a left-hand draw.

He took a chamois-wrapped revolver from the box. The gun was very old but well oiled and cared for. It had been made by hand and ancient machine over two hundred and fifty years before, by the steel guildsmen in F'Derick in the northwest Sahara where the last deposits of iron ore had been jealously guarded and used over a millennium.

Vik loaded the gun with hand-loaded ammunition. Guns were rare and expensive. Most were rusted museum pieces---in the few museums remaining. Ammunition was the problem. Shell casings were priceless.

He rarely used this pistol. But tonight it would be good to have in reserve. He slid the gun into the pliant holster and tied the flap down with a quick-release knot. He returned the box to its hiding place in the floor.

He took a jeweled, razor-sharp, eight-inch knife with matching sheath from a decorative wooden hook on the wall over the bed. He strapped it to his left leg below the knee, anchored above the knee.

Finally, he strapped on running sandals.

Vik left his tree by way of the "secret" stairwell. In the near-total darkness he exited the tree grounds by way of a disguised, remote, crawl tunnel through the high, poisonous thorn hedge that bordered his estate.

He began to run, effortlessly, north, weaving between the huge, surrounding tree homes. His sandals slapped quietly on the smooth, leaf-covered ground.

He was able to see in the moonless darkness like a cat, an ability he had never been able to explain. His body had several special wild talents he had merely accepted as he had discovered them in his real youth. He had been correctly afraid of revealing his differentness and superiority to scientists, to authority, to anyone but a very few trusted mortals.

Pale, glow leaf signs dotted the wide, winding lanes between the ever-looming giant masses of foliage. Pale winks of room light dotted the huge trees, like Christmas tree ornaments of long past centuries.

Only a few servants carrying torches, on unknown errands, were out at this late hour in this exclusive, upper-class residential area of Norlins, the imperial city.

And Vik avoided the rare lion riders who were usually accompanied by a guard of torch-carrying mercenaries.

He was noticed, if seen, as a swift-moving shadow in darknesses. He was a ghost who loped tirelessly north toward the city's slightly less exclusive Stalee Pool neighborhood.

Vik ran two miles. He slowed to a walk as he approached his destination, a squat tree home of modest two-hundred foot spread and ten-foot-thick bole.

The large, glow-leafed sign beside the killed wood gate in the living thorn fence read:

DOCTOR EVER CHAMBERS - 74201.
1525 North Ainsworth Lane
Surgeries - Cures - Drugs
Midday to Sunset

All residence and government and business trees in the city were registered by number and the current owner. There were over eleven thousand Junto trees in greater Norlins.

The trees dated from the final surge of highly specialized technology six hundred years before, when the California Republic had revived and flourished briefly...for ninety-eight years. Their scientists had concentrated on genetics, had developed the giant Junto home trees, the parasitic plant furnishings, had warped both plant and some animal genes in a desperate, vain attempt to maintain "civilization" on a planet exhausted of mineral wealth, and had broken under the waves of barbarians fleeing south from the

long-dying, icy ruins of Cascaland...originally a federation of Oregon, Washington, Idaho and lower western Canada.

The Junto tree ecology had been sent to all parts of what had been southern United States, and into Mexico and Cuba, but it had only taken root in Louisiana, and especially in what had been New Orleans.

Now The Greater American Empire of Jusef Nodman was the only remaining center of culture and learning and law on the continent.

Vik was not surprised to find Doctor Chambers' gate locked. He walked slowly along the vicious fence, searching for a break. The sensitized thorn vines stirred at his nearness and lashed at his heat.

He found a ten-foot-wide length of the fence lying limp, paralyzed by a sweet-smelling herbal fluid he knew about. Very few others in Norlins were aware it existed.

Vik stepped carefully through the still vines and moved under the limbs of the home tree. There was a glow of light from the oval, transparent membrane windows of a large room fifty feet up the trunk in a major limb room-cluster.

He ignored the small hydraulic elevator. The cage was up at the cluster and probably locked. In any case it would make too much noise for him to use.

He paused for a moment to study the tree's ramps and stairs, then took the narrow, spiral, servants' staircase that hugged the bole inside the elaborate public ramp.

He moved slowly, pausing often to listen. He freed his knife of its sheath and carried it lightly in his upturned hand, ready to throw or fight.

He reached the wide, main porch that semi-circled the tree trunk. He passed several rampways and room doors and approached the doctor's office. The outer windows continued to glow with light.

The porch ended at the office door. The only way to look into a window was to edge out from the railing by hanging free from a slippery overhead gutter vine on the cornice.

If he slipped it would mean a fall of fifty feet to the decorative marble set in the ground around the base of the tree.

And he would be vulnerable if discovered out there, spying.

Vik pressed his ear to the expensive, inlaid office door. The deep squares and wedges of varicolored woods had grown together; the door lived, fed sap via the five tough but pliant green plant hinges.

He could hear an angry voice...but no distinct words. And another insistent voice, more tenor. And...a groan.

Vik carefully tried the sliding, killed-wood door latch. But the door

was peg-locked from the inside.

The windows, then. He sheathed his knife.

Standing on the solid, carved railing, he tested the gutter vine with his weight. It bowed slightly, but the anchor suckers held. He curled his fingers deep into the leaf-choked trough and swung out into space.

The vine bowed down even more with his full 196 pounds. The sucker fibers screamed faintly but held.

Vik hung facing the wall and swiftly slid his gripping hands along the oily rim of the vine. His fingers dug into bird droppings and tiny, rotting corpses as well as the narrow, sticky tree leaves.

As he approached the nearest oval, membrane window, steadily increasing areas of the office came into view: a desk, a cluster of bright day glow leaves glaring in a large glass surgery lamp, killed wood cabinets of records---one drawer open...the M drawer.

Also in sight: shelves of herbs, jars of medical roots, and bottles of arcane fluids. A man's shadow cast on the blond wood interior wall paneling from another bright lamp deeper in the office, to the right.

Vik hung silently beside the window and carefully made sure of his right-hand grip on the gutter. He let loose with his left and lowered the arm. This angled his body, allowing him to see almost all the interior of the doctor's office while reducing the risk of being noticed from inside.

Doctor Chambers lay strapped face down on a treatment table. He was naked and his old, scrawny body writhed in agony. A long, thick Eater Snake had been inserted into his anus. Two-thirds of the snake was coiled around his twitching right leg. The other third was deep into his intestines.

Two men watched Chambers' strap-limited thrashing. They wore tunics similar in design to Vik's, but of coarse green cotton. They had the narrow, hawk-like face of the Hoostin tribe in east Texas.

Emperor Nodman was from Hoostin.

One man sat beside the treatment table, near the doctor's head. He had heavy jowls, a belly on him, and thick legs. He spoke now in a low, wheedling voice. The other man stood with hands on heavy hips, grinning down at the naked, agonized physician. A long knife in a thin green leather scabbard hung from his iron-vine belt.

Vik brought his left hand up to grip the gutter again. He swiftly edged further out until he was hanging before the oval window. He swung his legs up, planted his feet on each side of the window, bent his knees, kicked himself far outward and up, closed his feet and ripped in through the transparent membrane.

Vik twisted as his big body cleared the oval frame and he landed on

all fours beside the desk. He uncoiled, knife in his left hand, and with a terrifying grace and power leaped for the astonished, standing man.

The man was a trained professional. He managed to clear his own long knife in the second it took Vik to reach him, but he was too slow.

He was only beginning to crouch, to bring his knife into defensive position, when Vik clamped a vise grip on his wrist and slammed the razor-sharp jeweled knife full into his stomach, angling up to spear the keen, cool steel into his thudding heart.

The man grunted from the blow and lurched backward, turning, falling, his mouth loose, flared eyes staring with fading amazement. Blood spumed from the wound

Vik had pulled his knife free an instant after the savage thrust, knowing from long experience the man was beyond anything but death.

The body crumpled heavily to the orange, living carpet.

The other intruder had almost three seconds. He was older, however, and even slower, and equally amazed to see this giant of a man, this man he recognized as Martin, the Emperor's First Minister---an old man!---moving so fast, so powerfully, so young!

He was pulling a spring-powered dart gun from a leather bag beside the table when Vik slapped the gun away.

Vik did not waste time. He brought his free hand back and across the jowled face. The man's head jerked sharply sideways from the blow. His mouth sprayed blood.

Vik almost casually pushed him down onto his back and sat crushingly on his chest. His knees pinned the man's flabby arms. He demanded, as he sheathed his bloody knife, "Who sent you here?"

Without waiting for an answer, knowing there would be no true information so soon, not wanting to play games, Vik seized the man's right hand and calmly, viciously, dislocated the little finger.

The man gasped. His eyes dilated with pain. He labored to breathe. He wheezed and swallowed blood. But he said nothing.

Beside them, on the treatment table, Doctor Chambers continued to shudder and moan into his tight gag. The Eater Snake was following the soft tube of his intestine deeper and deeper, consuming his body's wastes, ever hungry, seeking more... Soon the snake would eat its way through the wall of the narrowing, twisting flesh tunnel and would gorge on liver, kidney...

"*Who?*" Vik impatiently twisted the man's broken finger.

The man's plump face rippled with pain. His lips drew back in a grimace. He shook his head as he hissed for air. His chest convulsively fought Vik's crushing weight.

Vik undid the man's belt and strapped his feet together. Then he cut the man's tunic free and with it tied the man's wrists behind his back.

Then Vik stood, grasped the end of the purple, diamond-back Eater Snake with his powerful right hand and slowly, calmly pulled the writhing, three foot length from Chambers' body. The scaly inches emerged sheened with blood.

When the snake's round, wet, suctioning mouth was free, gleaming with half-hidden rows of shark-like teeth, Vik looked down to the bound fat man. "It's still hungry and you've got a lot to feed it." He nudged the man's heavy gut.

His prisoner was pale with fear.

"Who sent you here?"

"You'll kill me anyway."

"No. Not if you tell me the truth."

The man's gaze seemed riveted to the snake's undulating, red-rimmed mouth. Then he glanced at the body of his dead companion. He said, "Quinn."

The Emperor's Defense Minister.

In that instant, the tip of Vik's middle finger, left hand, came alive with an alarm throb of pain. Another elltale. But he didn't know from where. He damped the nerve. He said to the agent, "Why is Quinn investigating me?"

"I wasn't...told." It was difficult for the man to talk. He swallowed blood. "Only...to get Martin's medical records. He wanted me to make the doctor talk about you...about your past."

"And what did Doctor Chambers tell you?"

"Only what his records show."

Vik glanced at the old doctor. Chambers lay limp, but an occasional spasm wracked his naked body. He continued to moan into his gag.

The Eater Snake continued to twist and flail in Vik's grip.

Vik said, "Where else is Quinn sending agents to investigate my past?"

"North and west...to the Whisper Hills...where you were first seen."

"First seen? Did he say it that way?"

"Yes."

Vik stared thoughtfully at the agent. "Do you believe I'm seventy-three years old?"

"No! The way you move! The way you fought!"

"Yes... I've waited too long this time." Vik drove the point of his knife into the snake's spine, just behind the tubular head. The squirming

body went limp. He threw it into a corner of the room. “Where are the servants and slaves? They would have heard all this.”

“We locked them in the trunk room.”

“Thank you.” Vik moved around behind the heavy agent, knelt, hooked a powerful arm under the man’s fleshy chin, lifted---

The agent’s chest pumped with sudden terror. He wheezed, “*You promised---*”

Vik squeezed off the voice and drove his jeweled knife cleanly between the man’s ribs, into the heart. The body convulsed for an instant, then subsided. Vik said quietly, “I lie often.”

He looked over into Dr. Chambers’ pain-ridden eyes. “I’m sorry. I warned you fifty years ago this time might come. You’ve been very well paid. You’ve had a long, good life. I cannot leave you alive. Quinn would take you...and you would tell him. Kun-zar must remain a myth, a dream...a wish.”

He retrieved the dart gun and sent the bolt smashing into the old man’s skull.

Vik took a deep breath. He smiled wryly. “I’m getting too old for this sort of thing.”

He picked up the fat agent’s leather bag and took out the sheaf of ill-made papers he knew would be inside---his counterfeit medical history as Jak Martin; a series of medical examinations showing his nearly perfect health through the decades, except for ever-worsening arthritis and recurring stomach trouble.

Vik flipped the brown, ragged pages until he came to one with a tiny, round black stain on the lower right corner. He sliced off the corner and slipped the bit of paper into a small white cotton drawstring bag he took from a slit in his belt. He returned the bag to his belt.

The “stain” was a nanotransmitter, alarm-keyed to light and motion. He would use it again, planted in another, sensitive location.

Vik continued to feel the timed throbs of diminished pain in his finger, which meant another nano-alarm had been set off somewhere...probably in Whisper Hills in what used to be the Texas panhandle. His faked birth record was planted there, along with a fragmentary record of the plague deaths of his fictional parents. The documents were utterly convincing to any mortal alive today.

His guts told him these alarms signaled more than just a routine empire security check. He’d passed that test decades ago. He was now alert to the distinct possibility that Quinn or Nodman, or both, suspected Jak Martin was the mythical Kun-Zar, the one immortal man.

Vik put his medical records back into place in the open file cabinet and closed the drawer. He went to the torn oval window and peered out, listening.

No one in sight, no tell-tale sounds. He unpegged the office door and opened it a crack. Satisfied, he slipped out onto the porch and went ghostlike down the servants' staircase.