

Chapter Four

Later that afternoon, Vik left his palace offices and took the long elevator to the ground. He was accompanied by his own Private One, a personal secretary, and the president of his shipping company.

Vik had never liked the swaying, creaking, killed-wood cage, the dead rope vines, the pulleys or the six-man gang of slaves who manned the clacking, ratcheted windlass. It was too easy to have an "accident".

But his rank and his limp made a long walk down the ramps and stairs out of the question for a man of his proclaimed age.

Vik watched the basketed counterweights rise toward their descending cage. He said, "Schedule the extension of our docks in Zeekton and here, out to the six fathom depth at low tide. The ice will claim enough water in the next hundred years to make our present docks unusable."

He automatically scanned the palace grounds as the cage sank below the giant lower branches.

The president asked, "Why are you concerned about the future of Norlins Shipping that far ahead?"

"You know I have an heir in Florda. It's for him and his son and his son's sons. And I'm doing my little bit to insure that trade and civilization will continue." He smiled wryly. "It's a hobby."

Albert Warner, Vik's Private One, said reverently, "Martin has great vision." Warner did not know Vik's true identity.

The pattern of people below, most of them going home, seemed normal.

Vik's prize lion, Copper Tom, waited with a groom, as did two of Vik's personal guards, their lions and the lions of the president and his Private One.

Vik added to his instructions to the president: "Set up an automatic company policy directive to buy all tidal lands as they become available. Buy the continental shelf if we can, now. Put in a formal buy application and I'll see if the Emperor will trade worthless sea-covered land for pure gold. Offer one hundred milled Emperors per ten miles."

Vik thought to himself: If I have time.

The secretary made notes on his pad of white leaves.

Vik's Private One, Albert Warner, was servant, tree-keeper and friend. He said, "Borus told me you'll have a lovely one for company tonight. Nimbus soup, water buffalo steak and Iona seeds for dinner?"

Vik nodded. "Private. You serve."

The cage bumped down on its marble platform. A slave opened the

door.

Three minutes later Vik was astride his huge cat. The golden-maned beast ambled through the crowded lanes and streets of the haphazard rings of shops, huts, buildings of all kinds, tents and cart merchants that encircled the walled grounds of the palace trees.

Vik was in the center of his small party. He was Martin, the Emperor's First Minister, a giant of a man in these times of smaller and smaller men as each generation passed.

He enjoyed the awe and respect in most of the faces of the people. He enjoyed the rumors that he was the secret emperor, that Nodman was only a front.

Suddenly the attack began---a sudden clot of men, a braying, maddened donkey, goaded by thorn whips, sent plunging with his loaded fruit cart into the diamond formation of Vik's company.

Vik was the center, the target.

The lead guard's lion spun, nearly throwing its rider. The secretary's small female mount hissed and slashed reflexively at the terrified animal. A donkey will never willingly get within ten feet of a lion.

The ass screamed and stumbled, his shaggy brown coat suddenly rippled, running blood.

The cart's left wheel came off its axle and the fragrant load of violet werzi grapes spilled.

Someone threw Mongo powder into the face of the rear guard's lion. The cat howled, recoiled and plunged away.

A quick, muscular young man in a tattered forest tunic raised a dart gun and aimed at Vik from ten feet. He was surrounded by a wedge of other young men dressed as beggars and lower class laborers.

Vik had only a few seconds in which to try to escape the attack. The wedge of men surged closer. He shifted to throw himself off to his lion's left side and use Copper Tom as a shield, but his Private One's mount, a dun-colored female reacting to the stink of fear and excitement and the screaming press of people, closed the space and bumped hard against Vik's left leg, pinning him in his saddle. Copper Tom jittered and roared. The Private One shrieked with terror and was as wild-eyed as his cat. He grabbed and pulled at Vik's toga.

For a precious instant Vik lost his balance and coordination. The knot of determined attackers was within five feet of him, stabbing at the intervening secretary's mount. The secretary had fallen from his saddle. The cat snarled and crouched, claws out, slashing.

Two of the attackers went down, gushing blood, but others climbed

over the lion.

Vik wore a sharp ceremonial dagger, but he knew his best course was to get clear. He bellowed, "TOM! LEAP!"

But the great cat had no space and took too long to crouch for the jump that would take it over the braying, kicking donkey and the lead guard's lion.

The guard was off his mount and drawing his precious antique sword to defend Vik. But it would be too late.

At the last split second Vik drew and lashed out with his ceremonial but razor-sharp dagger and laid open the face of an attacker. A grotesque, bloody slab of raw cheek flapped away from the jaw bone.

But simultaneously the man with the dart gun fired at point blank range.

Pain exploded in Vik's right thigh. The dart buried itself a hands-width below his hip joint. The green and red feathered shaft protruded from his toga, pinning the heavy purple brocade to his thigh.

Vik slashed at the shooter and opened a deep cut in the side of the youth's neck---releasing a fountain of arterial blood. The man fell back, astonished.

Then Copper Tom's great bunched muscles released and Vik was carried upward by that tremendous surge of animal power...soaring for an incredible second...barely able to shift his weight to stay in the saddle.

During that bound, Vik automatically "disconnected" the pain input from his thigh. And he realized the trigger man hadn't intended to kill. There had been time and freedom for a shot to the stomach or heart, even for a less-sure head shot. But the dart had been fred directly at his thigh. There had been no hesitation, no shifting of aim. The dart had traveled less than a foot.

Copper Tom landed, snarling, in the midst of tumbling, scrambling, howling, terrified people. Vik bent low into the clean, abundant yellow mane. "*Home!*"

The mighty lion uncoiled again and bounded through a narrow gap in the dense, hysterical crowd.

Vik felt the grating of the dart's saw-tooth, ironwood point against his thigh bone during the jolting, swaying ride. Blood flowed down his leg in spite of his constriction of the main vessels.

Copper Tom loped toward the home tree by the direct route, the one usually traveled to and from the palace compound. But Vik steered him off into side paths, to avoid possible secondary ambushes.

The giant trees loomed around him in sunset splendor.

He avoided any approach to the gate of his tree estate grounds. He neared his huge Junto from the opposite side and urged Copper Tom to a full-speed run at the fifteen-foot-high poisonous thorn hedge that surrounded his land.

“Up, Tom!”

The great cat soared in a fantastic leap. No other lion of those bred and gene-altered for size and strength and obedience could have done it with Vik’s weight on his back.

The green-tipped rows of thorn spikes stirred with frustration as Copper Tom cleared their highest tips by a foot. The landing was silken as the cat’s muscles and bones absorbed the shock and transferred speed and mass into continuing forward motion on the deep, tightly woven grass.

Three gardeners working in a new, oval bed of plump Cabon berries looked around in astonishment.

Vik motioned them back to work. He rode to the gloom of the pens and dismounted carefully as word of his wound and blood spread among his servants and guards.

Carl Damber, the over-eager assistant to Vik’s Private One, came running down a ramp, his light blue servant tunic flapping, his gold authority bracelet gleaming as he passed through a thin shaft of orange sunlight. Vik impatiently cut off the youth’s shocked words. “Send a messenger for Doctor Shonder. Get the elevator down.”

Arthur Taleg, a squat, muscular man in rich dark blue leathers and gold command necklace, sprinted around the corner of the pens. He was followed closely by a ten-man squad of estate guards---five swords, five bowmen.

Taleg’s steady eyes flicked at the pinned, blood-stained toga, the dart still solidly embedded in Vik’s thigh, the small trickle of red that dampened the hard-packed earth next to Vik’s wet sandal.

Taleg snapped to his men, “The big yellow cushioned chair!” He pointed to three of the guards and waved them toward the nearby master gardener’s hut.

Vik said to Taleg, “Draw forty men from the Kwa orchards. I want them here by midnight.” He didn’t have to tell Taleg to double the hedge security patrols and send out undercover scouts.

But if the Emperor was ready to move against his First Minister, a company of crack private guards couldn’t hold against Quinn’s massed regulars.

Vik explained to Taleg, “We were ambushed in the market rings. Send some men to see about Warner, Uvira, Isiro, and the two guards. I

want Columbo here. I want Luanda and Gayze at dawn.”

Damber had run off. Vik saw a lean, tall messenger on a fast Walla lion riding toward the massive, arched, killed-wood gate. A guard opened a smaller door within the gate and the rider and his mount squeezed out. Other guards stood ready at the gate’s multi-leveled arrow and spear ports.

The large elevator creaked down from Vik’s private rooms cluster. From the hut the guards brought the master gardener’s pride and only real luxury, his massive, deeply cushioned chair.

Vik sank carefully into it. His thigh was aching.

He was carried into the elevator. Kota slaves loaded more stones into the counterweight basket and pulled him up.

As he was carried into his bedroom he caught a glimpse of Warner and the others straggling through the gate. They had not been hurt.

Nodman and Quinn did not want to have it appear that an organized attack had been mounted against Martin and his entourage. They did not want the people to suspect the truth, because First Minister Martin was very popular. Their attack had only the effect of confining Vik to his tree for a while. An effective, ingenious house arrest.