

WILLIAM SHATNER

TEKLORDS

BOOK TWO OF THE TEKWAR SERIES



TekLords

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William Shatner



This work is dedicated to

Marcy, Leslie, Liz and Melanie, with a small thank-you to Grant, and a large one to Mary Jo.

Imagine...a sequel, continuity/progression

Why? Sales, reviews, terrific

Who? Ron Goulart—wise, witty, ingenious

Carmen La Via—hip, helpful and a friend

Susan Allison, Roger Cooper and Lisa Wager—Putnam, perfect

Ivy Fischer Stone and Fifi Osgard—also agents, also friends

And next?

Guess.

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FRIDAY, MAY 16, 2120, was grey and rainfilled across most of Greater Los Angeles.

It was not going to be an especially good day for Jake Cardigan.

At a little before ten in the morning he landed his aircar on the ground-level visitors' lot next to the Oceanside Educational Academy in the Santa Monica Sector of GLA. There was a sharp wind blowing across the choppy Pacific.

The academy consisted of a series of three huge linked plastiglass domes built on pilings out over the grey, foamy ocean. Several offwhite gulls came circling down through the hard rain to settle atop the nearest dome.

Jake unbuckled his safety harness, sighed, shook his head and, with hunched shoulders, stepped out into the rainswept morning. He didn't much want to be here.

He was a sandyhaired man in his late forties, of middle height, good-looking in a weatherbeaten world-weary sort of way. He ran from his car to the entrance of the nearest dome like someone who was still in pretty good shape.

The curved plastiglass door, which was tinted a pale blue, hissed open in anticipation.

Jake entered the large oval foyer. "I have an appointment with—"

"Halt," advised the seven-foot-tall security robot who stood, widelegged, at the far end of the room. "Keep your hands at your sides."

Jake obliged. "As I was saying, I have an appointment with—"

"Please state your name, sir." The big robot's voice was highpitched, a bit squeaky.

"Jake Cardigan."

"Last name first."

"Cardigan, Jake." He walked a few paces closer. "Look, I'm supposed to see the dean about my son—"

"Cardigan, Jake." The gunmetal robot had three rows of tiny lights implanted across his wide chest. Several of them began flashing in sequence as he checked out Jake's name. After less than ten seconds he made a disapproving clucking sound. "You can't be admitted, I'm afraid. Please, take your leave."

Instead Jake walked right up to the security robot. "My son, Dan, is a student here—and don't blame me for that, my exwife picked out this place for him," he explained. "The dean wanted to see her this morning to talk about some problems Dan's having. Kate, though, says she can't get time off from her new job up in San Francisco and she asked me to come instead. Clear?"

"Cardigan, Jake. Convicted felon, sentenced to fifteen years in the orbiting penal colony commonly known as the Freezer," recited the big bot. "It is the opinion of the academy that convicted"

felons tend to have a bad influence on the developing minds of our students and, therefore, there's a rule against—"

"I was up in the Freezer," Jake cut in to admit. "However, I was released after just four years. And, as of a few weeks ago, I was given a full pardon. All the officials and toadies in our great State of Southern California, not to mention every damn official in the Greater Los Angeles government, as well, now firmly believes that I was framed and wrongly sent to prison. So, unless you want to be dismantled piece by piece and donated to the nearest scrap heap, you'll let me in."

"Are you threatening me, sir?"

Jake gave a bleak grin. "I am, yeah."

"I'm designed to withstand assaults." He held up his metallic right hand, each finger of which was tipped with a different colored lightbead. "Built into this hand alone are several formidable weapons, any of which is capable of—"

"Maybe you ought to check with your bosses," suggested Jake. "Since I'm here, I'd like to keep the appointment with the dean."

After making a few rattling sounds, the robot shut its metal eyelids. Various sorts of whirring came out of its skull and broad chest, the tiny lights flashed. "Wouldn't you know it?" he asked when he snapped his eyes open. "Our files weren't properly updated. You aren't, Mr. Cardigan, a felon at all. Allow me, therefore, to extend you a cordial welcome to the academy." He held out his left hand and a slip of yellow plazpaper eased out of one of the thin slots in his palm. "Take this pass and travel along Corridor A-2, following the green floor arrows to Door A-2/203."

"Thanks." Closing his hand on the pass, Jake stepped around the bulky robot and crossed the threshold to the corridor.

A loud hooting commenced pouring out of a row of small overhead speakers.

"Whoa there, hold it." The robot spun, grabbed out and caught Jake by the shoulder. "You ought to have informed me that you were carrying an illegal weapon."

"I'm not." Jake tapped the shoulder holster he wore under his jacket. "I have the proper permits for this stungun."

"I have to have a look at them." The robot ran his left forefinger up and down each of Jake's arms, around his torso and then, bending with a faint creak, he frisked his trouser legs. "I don't see any other weapons."

Jake took his ID packet out, flipping it open to his gun permits and his license as an operative of the Cosmos Detective Agency. "I'm a private investigator these days, with all my papers in order."

"That must be a fascinating line of work," remarked the big robot as he scanned the material with his plaz-eyes and his left thumb. "I bet it beats standing around in a drafty foyer all day."

"The work is usually a little more interesting than that, yeah," Jake acknowledged.

"Everything is in order, Mr. Cardigan. You can proceed."

“Much obliged.” He put his IDs away and started again along the designated corridor.

The dean’s office was large and its one seethrough wall offered a view of the rough grey Pacific. Strung out along the horizon were several robot scows. The dean’s desk was made of licorice-colored plastiglass and seated behind it was a copperplated robot wearing a conservative business suit that was the same color as the rainy sky outside.

“We were expecting Mrs. Cardigan,” the robot told Jake.

“I was expecting the dean.” Jake lingered in the doorway.

“Dean Bushmill is, unavoidably, elsewhere. I’m the assistant dean of Oceanside,” explained the dapper robot. “My name is Ticknor (M14)/SCES-30FAB.”

Jake crossed the room slowly and sat down in the tin chair facing Ticknor. “My former wife couldn’t get the time off to come down here from Frisco,” he said. “Is Dan in some sort of trouble?”

“Serious trouble,” replied the robot.

“Can you give me some specifics?”

The robot said, “Your son is currently being held in the Detention Wing in Dome #2. He is suspected of using the highly addictive electronic drug popularly known as Tek. Pending further investigation into the—”

“Wait.” Jake was on his feet, frowning. “Dan’s not using Tek or any other—”

“According to our records, Mr. Cardigan, there is a family history of addiction to the—”

“C’mon, Tek addiction can’t be inherited.” Jake, his anger growing, leaned and put both hands palms down, on the desk. “I was a tekkie once, I’ve never denied it. But that was years ago and it has absolutely nothing to do with my son.”

“You were also a Tek dealer, convicted and sent to prison. Growing up in such an environment would certainly influence a child toward—”

“Why the hell can’t you guys keep your records up to date? I was cleared of all those charges—weeks ago,” Jake told him, lifting one hand and turning it into a fist. “I just went through all this crap with your secbot.”

“Perhaps I’m in error.” The assistant dean robot reached to his right, touching a control pad built into his desk top. “If you’ll turn your attention to the screen on the wall behind you.”

A picture blossomed on the large wallscreen. A lean man of about forty was seated crosslegged in a field of high yellow grass, lecturing a scattered crowd of several hundred people. His hair was deadwhite and long, tied back with a twist of crimson ribbon. He wore a two-piece suit of silk and crimson fabric. Up behind him on the sunny hillside was parked a glittering silvery landvan with the words CARAVAN COLLEGE lettered on its side in glowing tubes of colored light.

“...they tell you Tek will hurt you,” he was saying to the seated crowd. “They manufacture stories about its being addictive, about Tek’s causing epileptic seizures, about its ruining lives. Lies. All lies.”

my dear young friends and disciples. Tek is, if you want the truth, simply the most important discovery of our twenty-second century. Important because it has liberated the imagination, freed the mind of its fetters and, most importantly, enabled poor docile ciphers like you and like me to discover the true nature of ourselves and of our souls. Trust me when I tell you that Tek cannot at all harm you and can only liberate the...

The robot had touched the panel again and the image of the sunlit field died. "I assume, considering your background, that you know who that is."

"Sure, it's Professor Joel Freedom, a nitwit who travels around the country advocating the legalization of Tek." Jake sat again. "What's he got to do with Dan?"

"We found the vidcaz you've just seen," explained Assistant Dean Ticknor, "in your son's sleeping cubicle, hidden away in his property locker."

"You did, huh?" Jake stood again, walking around the desk to stand next to the robot's chair. "And Dan gave you permission to search?"

"Of course not. Our periodical random searches of the students' belongings for subversive materials, pornography and illegal substances wouldn't be effective if we were to warn them in advance of our intention to—"

"Under the existing laws in SoCal, Ticknor, you've violated my son's civil rights," Jake told him, keeping the anger out of his voice as best he could. "On top of which, even if your search had been legal, all you've proved is that Dan has dubious taste in what he watches on his vidcaz machine. Having a copy of a lecture by a dimwit like Prof Freedom doesn't make anybody a tekkie. I'm assuming you didn't find a Brainbox or any Tek chips when you ransacked Dan's stuff."

"Well, no. The important point, however, is that he was in possession of a vidcaz that openly—"

"I think I'd better talk to the dean. Fairly soon," mentioned Jake, the bleak grin touching his face again. "Since Kate seems to think, god knows why, that this is the school Dan ought to be attending, I guess he'd best stay here for now. So I want your dean—not a robot, not an android, but somebody with a pulse—to drop all the charges and reinstate my son." He paused, taking a slow, deep breath. "Otherwise I'm going to start a lawsuit against you folks."

"Well, now." The robot raised his hand and made a calming gesture toward Jake. Then he shut his eyes. "Allow me to check up on a few things, Mr. Cardigan." His coppery skull began to produce a low humming sounds. Every few seconds he nodded and after nearly two minutes he opened his eyes and said, "Dean Bushmill is unable to leave the golf tournament he's playing in up at his satellite country club. He does, however, agree with you that a grave mistake has been made in the case of your son. Daniel Cardigan will be released from detention immediately and all charges erased. Dean Bushmill wasn't aware, by the way, until just now, that you were such a highly thought of member of the staff of the Cosmos Detective Agency. A very prestigious, and influential, organization here in Greater Los Angeles."

“Which proves that even deans can learn something new every once in a while.”

The robot rose up. “I assume you’d like to visit with your son while you’re here.”

Jake hesitated a few seconds before answering. “Yeah, sure,” he said finally. “I would.”

THE SOUND OF THE rain was kept out of the visitors' lounge. It hit silently at the curved seethrough walls. Jake sat alone in the large, quiet room. Down near the arched doorway a small cylindrical servomech was aimlessly polishing the nearwood flooring. The silvery mechanism wasn't functioning just exactly right and it kept bumping into the wall, backing off, polishing a small circular area, bumping into the wall again.

Jake got up, stared out at the ocean. A lone gull came diving down, skimming the churning water and plucking up something in its beak.

The servomech bumped into the wall again.

Jamming his hands into his trouser pockets, Jake started pacing. He was very uneasy about meeting with his son.

The polishing mechanism bumped into the wall, but this time it tipped over on its back.

Jake strode over to it, crouched and righted the thing. "Sounds like you're on the fritz," he said.

"Always butting in on something, aren't you?"

Jake stood and faced his son in the doorway. "How are you doing, Dan?"

Dan was leaner than Jake, an inch or so taller already, and he had the same color hair. "How the hell do you think I'm doing? Everybody here knows you're a Tekhead, so they figure I must be on the same level too."

"Dan, I haven't used that stuff since—"

"Okay, never mind. I'm fine, I'm great. Isn't that what you want to hear?"

"Nope, what I want to hear, first off, is what's been going on," Jake told him. "Did you really have a vidcaz of that asshole Freedom in your locker?"

"You still playing cop?"

"Did you?"

"Professor Freedom is an honest, intelligent man and, while I don't exactly agree with his view of Tek, I think he has some interesting things to say about our society."

"I just wanted to make sure the damn thing wasn't planted on you."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. People have a tendency to frame the poor Cardigans. First they framed you and shipped you up to the Freezer, now they try to get your only son shipped out of this shithole."

"Don't you like the academy?"

"I love the place, it's absolutely terrific. Is that what you came to talk about?"

Jake put his hand on his fifteen-year-old son's shoulder. "I came here because they'd tossed you in detention."

Dan jerked free of his father's touch. "If Mom could've kept the appointment, you wouldn't have"

come at all. So don't bullshit me."

"Maybe I wouldn't have come, Dan. The few times I've seen you since we got back from Mexico you haven't acted especially—"

"What did you expect? You came down to Mexico and fouled up everything."

"I found the people I was hired to find—Professor Kittridge and his daughter Beth. I helped break up one of the bigger Tek cartels."

"Well, you got your reward, didn't you? I hear you're shacking up with Beth Kittridge."

Jake paused and met Dan's eye. He said quietly, "I'm seeing her, yeah."

After a moment Dan looked away. "Well, is there anything else you want to chat about? Want to see a printout of my latest grades?"

"Dan, I didn't plan to get myself sent up to the Freezer. I know I went away at a time you needed me, but—"

"Jesus, don't go trying to give me the same crap the school robotherapist hands out. Loss of the father at a crucial point in the development cycle." Dan turned away, kicking out once at the wobbling servomech.

"As for what happened down in Mexico—I didn't know at the start that your mother was tied with any of it," Jake told his son. "And I also didn't know that Bennett Sands was going to turn out to be connected with the Tek trade."

Turning, Dan faced him again. "I'll tell you something about Bennett Sands," he said. "He wasn't, I guess, the most honest guy in the world, but he was more of a father to me than you ever were."

Jake let out his breath suddenly, shaking his head. "Cmon, Dan. Don't keep trying to hurt me just because—"

"I'm not trying to hurt you. I'm just trying to tell you the goddamn truth," his son said. "You got Bennett Sands nearly killed. Then you—"

"Listen, Dan, Sands was in cahoots with a guy named Sonny Hokori. Hokori was one of the worst Teklords going."

"Well, Bennett Sands was also looking after Mom—and me. Now she has to work that stupid job with that vidad agency up in Frisco. We owe that to you, too."

"This probably isn't a good time to debate about what went on down in Mexico," Jake said. "I had a talk with the assistant dean. They're dropping all the charges against you, reinstating you in—"

"I already know. The bot who escorted me here told me that."

"If you need anything else, call me." Jake moved toward the doorway. "I'm sorry we always—"

"I don't need you for a damn thing. You've already screwed up my life just about beyond repair," his son told him. "The best thing you can do is just stay away from me. Can you, please, do that?"

Jake stared at Dan. Finally, he nodded. "Sure."

“Why did you come back at all? Christ, I wish you’d served the whole fifteen years up in the Freezer.”

Jake walked out of the room.

A few minutes later he found himself outside again on the parking lot.

The rain seemed colder and more penetrating than it had when he arrived.

THE NEW MALIBU SUPERMALL covered nearly five acres. Built of crystal-clear plastiglass and silver metal, it rose up ten levels above the ground and also offered ten below-ground floors. The supermall sat just across a wide slot-roadway from the ocean.

At a few minutes after one Jake was hurrying along an AG-Level 3 walkway. He was supposed to meet Beth Kittridge for lunch in a Mexican restaurant in Ethnik Row and he was nearly ten minutes late.

Off to his left stretched Pastry Lane and as he weaved his way through the afternoon shoppers the scents of fresh-baked cakes and pies—all piped out of an overhead bank of smell-simulation nozzles—briefly engulfed him.

He dodged a string quartet that was set up at the side of the walkway. Three humans, with a pretentious blonde young woman android on cello, were playing gentle baroque music that the combined noises of the third level nearly smothered. Next came a small parade of middleaged female shoppers, each trailed by a wheeled robot shopping cart. Skirting them, Jake nearly collided with a wandering robot balladeer who was playing a popular tune from the late twentieth century. He had an enameled surface that was painted in rainbow stripes and his out-of-tune electrolute was giving off faint swirling wisps of brownish smoke. As Jake passed a boutique that specialized in Moonbase fabrics, three large gunmetal security robots came bursting out. They were dragging a veteran of the Brazil Wars, a gaunt young man still wearing the tatters of his old uniform and clutching a large handmade sign that announced—BROKE AND HUNGRY!

“No begging allowed on this level,” said one of the robots in a thick, rumbling voice.

“Jesus, I fought for you guys down in ’Zil,” the onetime soldier told them. “I made it safe for you and your families. All I want now is—”

“Here.” Jake handed him a five-dollar Banx note.

“Five bucks? What the hell can I buy with that?”

“Move along,” another of the robots advised Jake. “No begging, no contributing to beggars.”

“Five bucks,” repeated the young man as he crumpled the note and stuffed it into a tattered pocket of his coat. “Have you priced any of the food in this shit-hole?”

Shrugging, Jake continued on his way.

On his left now was a maternity shop and on his right a hologram puppet theater.

Gathered in front of the gilded entrance to the theater were about a dozen or more small restless children. Lecturing them was a silvery female-model android in the crimson and white uniform of a supermall tour guide. “Okay,” she was asking, “how many of us know what a hologram is?”

“How many of us know where the darn bathrooms are?” asked a Chinese boy.

Grinning, Jake started to circle the cluster of kids. That was when he became aware of harsh muttering directly ahead of him.

“...no good bastard...kill the son of a bitch...Jake Cardigan...dirty bastard...kill...”

Lurching along the walkway, shoving shoppers out of his path, came a large well-dressed, well-groomed man in his late forties. His eyes were wide, his gait stiff-legged and jerky.

Noticing him, the android guide began shooing her charges toward the opposite side of the wide walkway. “Gang, let’s scoot over in front of that shop.”

“...dirty bastard...Jake Cardigan...kill him graveyard dead...” Jake looked at the man. He’d never seen him before. Suddenly, the muttering man swung out and slapped one of the scattering children.

It was a small, dark-haired girl and she began to scream and sob at the same time.

Jake was caught in the swirl of panicked kids. On the crowded walkway he was afraid to draw his stungun, and he eyed the stranger warily as he approached.

“...no good son of a bitch...kill him...” With no warning, the well-dressed, well-groomed man reached inside his coat and yanked out an electroknife. He clicked it on and the ten-inch black blade began to drone.

Jake held his ground. “Better put that away,” he advised.

Instead the man lunged violently, stabbing out with the sharp, chattering blade.

Jake dodged the thrust of the knife, got in under the man’s guard and elbowed him hard in the midsection.

They both went stumbling, tangled together, across the walkway and through the entry of the theater.

There were three people still inside the place, huddled up near the projection stage. One of them, a lanky teen, jumped over a row of seats and ran for a side exit. As he pushed his way out, the other two, a married couple in their thirties, went dashing along the aisle and out the same exit.

Up on the oval stage was the three-dimensional image of a lovely blonde maiden in a flowing white gown. She was about two feet high. She was tied to a stake and a ferocious emerald-green dragon was bellying toward her, snorting smoke and exhaling crackling orange flames. Rushing toward them on the back of an ebony stallion was a knight in gold armor who waved a golden sword.

Jake took all this in while he delivered several sharp punches to his assailant’s ribs and struggled to keep clear of the slashes of the whirring blade.

“...dirty no good bastard...better off dead...” He broke away from Jake, but tripped and fell onto the stage. He dropped through the image of the fiery dragon and stayed down, crouching on one knee.

“Throw away the knife, okay?”

“...son of a bitch!” The man leaped straight for Jake.

Pivoting and dropping into a crouch, Jake avoided him. Before the disoriented assassin had regained his balance, Jake jumped forward and landed several hard chopping blows on his neck.

The man started making gagging noises. He crashed into the front row of seats, twisted around and fell to the floor.

Jake moved forward, kicking out.

His booted foot connected with the knife hand, sending the buzzing blade spinning away into the surrounding dark.

Jake grabbed hold of the man by the front of his expensive coat and tugged him upright. “No, tell me what the hell is going on.”

The man’s eyes suddenly snapped shut. He began to jerk convulsively, moaning. Yellowish froth came spilling across his lips. He jerked twice more, then ceased to breathe.

Jake let go of him, took a step back.

The man dropped to the floor, hitting it with both knees. He stayed that way for a swaying second or two, then fell all the way over and was dead.

Up on the stage the golden knight thrust his sword into the heart of the dragon.

Jake found the deadman’s ID packet in an inner pocket of his suit coat. His name was Edwin L. Pland. He was an executive with a hydroponics company and lived in the Oxnard Sector of Greater Los Angeles.

Still breathing hard, Jake sank down into a front-row seat and absently started tapping the packet on his knee. “Edwin Pland. I never heard of him,” he said to himself.

From behind him, an authoritative voice ordered, “Please to stand up. Drop whatever it is you’re holding. Raise both hands high.”

Getting up, Jake tossed the assortment of IDs down onto the corpse’s chest.

Two big security robots were stomping down the center aisle, each pointing his forefinger at Jake. That was the finger that usually contained a lazgun, which indicated they had him figured for fairly serious, and dangerous, criminal.

Lifting both hands, Jake explained, “I’m Jake Cardigan, a licensed operative with the Cosmo Detec—”

“Move away from the victim, please.”

“You’ve got that wrong. I’m the victim or was supposed to be. This guy was—”

“You have the option of remaining silent until the law officers arrive on the scene,” recited one of the robots as he frisked Jake. “Or you can make a full confession to either of us.”

“I’m the one, see, who was assaulted, so a confession isn’t...Hey, I’ve got a permit for that.”

The robot, having found his stungun, was easing it free of the shoulder holster. “That will be settled after the police arrive, sir.”

The other security robot knelt next to the body. “Victim is dead,” he announced.

Jake nodded at his stungun. “I already showed my permit to your doorman down on Level 1. Just

contact him and ask him if—”

“Jake, are you all right?” It was Beth, standing at the back of the small theater.

“Yeah, I seem to have survived whatever sort of attack this was supposed to be.”

“Miss,” warned the robot who’d confiscated Jake’s weapon, “I’ll be forced to shoot you down if you take another step.”

“Why would you do something like that?”

“Because you’re armed.”

Beth frowned at the stungun in her hand. “So I am,” she admitted. “I got restless waiting at the restaurant, Jake, and decided to come hunting for you. I pulled this out when I heard the commotion here.”

“Please, miss. Surrender your weapon.”

Lowering her gunhand to her side, Beth came up to the stage area. She was a slender, darkhaired young woman. “You’re certain you aren’t hurt, Jake?”

“Outside of a few bumps and bruises, no.”

As she passed the bot, she handed him her gun, grip first. Moving close to Jake, Beth put her arms around him. “I’m glad you survived,” she said softly.

“I feel pretty much that way myself.” Smiling, he kissed her.

“Please stand clear of the prisoner,” warned the robot.

“Why is he a prisoner?” demanded Beth.

“They think I killed this guy who was trying to kill me.”

“What did kill him?”

Jake shook his head. “No idea. He just died—some kind of fit maybe.”

Letting go of him, Beth went over to take a look at the deadman. “Nobody I’ve ever seen. Who is he, Jake?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s not someone you arrested back when you were a cop—a crook with a grudge against you?”

Grinning, Jake replied, “He had a grudge all right.”

“Fellows, I’d like a word with you.” A tall, rawboned man had come into the theater and was making his way down through the shadows to them. “I’m Agent MacQuarrie with the Federal Security Office.”

Beth said, “Sorry I ran too fast for you, Hobie.”

“I would’ve kept up if I hadn’t gotten entangled with a robot gypsy violinist and several shopping carts.” He showed his ID packet to the standing secbot. “I’m one of the government agents assigned to look after Miss Kittridge. I’ll vouch for her and—with some reluctance—for Cardigan here.”

After the robot scanned the credentials, he returned the stunguns. “Forgive us for interfering with a government operation.”

“This isn’t a government operation exactly,” said the FSO agent, glancing over at the deadman.

“He was trying to kill you, Jake?”

“So he said.”

“Why?”

“No idea.”

“Know him?”

“Not even casually.”

“You working on a new case?”

“Between jobs.”

“Something left over from your work down in Mexico a few weeks ago?”

“The Hokori cartel’s defunct as far as I know. So’s Hokori himself.”

“Interesting. Beth, do you know this guy?”

“No. Anyway it was Jake he came after, not me.”

The kneeling robot got up. “This man, based on my prelim diagnosis, was poisoned.”

Jake frowned. “You sure?”

“All the indications point that way, sir. Meaning your beating of him didn’t contribute to his death.”

“I tend to beat anybody who comes at me waving a knife.”

Beth took hold of Jake’s arm. “This doesn’t make much sense,” she said. “Unless it is some leftover from what went on across the border.”

“All the survivors,” he reminded her, “are accounted for.”

Just then a large black man in civilian clothes pushed into the theater by way of a side door. “Well, it’s Jake Cardigan,” he said as he joined the group. “Had another falling out with one of your Tek-dealing buddies, did you?”

This was Captain Hambrick of the Southern California State Police. He’d been Jake’s boss once. “You know damn well,” Jake told him, “that I was cleared on all those Tek charges.”

“I heard about that, Jake, but it’s funny—I still can’t shake the notion that you’re tied in with the Teklords,” said the policeman. “Sooner or later—I can feel it, trust me—sooner or later I’m real going to get something on you.” He bent over the corpse. “Maybe today’ll be the day.”

JAKE AND BETH WERE sitting in the shadowy last row of the small theater. The young woman, hair resting on the back of Jake's neck, was massaging gently. He was looking straight ahead, eyes narrowed.

A half dozen seats over Agent MacQuarrie was lounging in an alert way.

Up front Captain Hambrick was supervising a crew of five that included two men from the Forensic Squad and a white enameled medibot from the SoCal Coroner's Office.

"You really don't know the deadman?" Beth asked in a whisper.

"Nope."

"I don't like this. I was hoping we were through with the whole Tek business."

"No way yet of telling what prompted Pland to make a try at killing me. It could turn out he's simply a freelance loon."

"Who just ran into you here today by chance?"

"Okay, somebody had to plan this little assassination attempt," he conceded. "But that doesn't mean anybody in the Tek trade is involved. There are several—"

"Cardigan!" Up near the stage the captain was making a come-here gesture with his left hand. In his right he dangled something in a plasack.

Jake went down to his onetime boss. "Yeah?"

"Know what this is?" He held the small sack up.

In it was a silver disk, about a half inch thick and roughly two inches in diameter. There were smears of blood across one side of it. "Looks like some kind of parasite control box," he said. "I've never seen one that small, though."

"This is a variation on the sort of parasite control gadget they use in prisons in some of the less enlightened nations of the world." Hambrick swung it back and forth a few times. "Attach one to somebody and he becomes docile and obedient. This version here is a lot more sophisticated."

"Meaning it took over Pland, made him come gunning for me?"

"Exactly. You, of course, wouldn't know anything about that."

"I never heard of this kind of parasite before."

"This one is also capable, from what the Coroner's Office tells me, of delivering a fatal dose of fast-acting poison."

"That's what killed him?"

"Pretty certain it was. It can be activated from a distance. That eliminated Pland as a source of information."

"Have you checked him out?"

“Legit businessman, no criminal record. He had a couple of runins with the SoCal Revenue Service about his taxes. Outside of that, nothing,” said the policeman. “He seems to have taken off from his office in the Oxnard Sector a few minutes before noon. Was supposed to meet a client over in the Westwood Sector for lunch, but he never showed up. His aircar is parked outside the supermall on Lot 13J.”

Beth had come down the aisle. “May I?” She took the plasack from Hambrick, held it close to her face and studied the disk. She frowned, nodded once, handed it back. “Thanks, Captain.”

“Ever seen one before?”

“Not exactly like that.”

Jake asked, “Have you, Hambrick?”

“As a matter of fact, I have. This happens to be the third one we’ve encountered in the past few weeks,” he replied. “We call the poor bastards who wear them zombies.”

“Any idea who’s behind them?”

“Not yet. But the other two victims of our zombies were both Tek dealers—and, unlike you, they both died.”

“Did the other zombie assassins die, too?”

The captain nodded. “Yep, just as soon as they finished their chores,” he said. “Odd, isn’t it, that the other two targets were known Tek dealers? But you say you’re completely out of that now, so—”

“I was never in it.” Anger flashed in Jake’s voice. “You know I was cleared of—”

“Captain, would it be okay if we left now?” asked Beth, very politely.

“Unless Cardigan would like to stay around and explain what’s really going on.”

Jake took a slow, deep breath. “We’ll go,” he said.

Beth had insisted on piloting his aircar. Rather than assuring her again that his tussle with the zombies hadn’t done him any serious damage, he’d settled into the passenger seat.

They were flying across the afternoon toward Beth’s beach condo in the Laguna Sector. The rain wasn’t as heavy now, but a thick grey fog had started drifting in from the sea. The towers of Great Los Angeles were already shrouded and most of the huge vidad billboards down below showed only agitated blurs of color.

“From what the captain told you, this has to be tied in with the Teklords somehow—the attempt to kill you.”

Jake said, “I got the impression you recognized that parasite gadget that was used to control Pland.”

She concentrated on her flying. “It reminded me of something, that’s all.”

“Reminded you of what?”

She shrugged the shoulder nearest him. “Nothing important.”

He turned in his seat, taking a look out the rear window. "MacQuarrie's still on our tail."

"He's okay, for a government agent. Much better than Agent Weiner on the graveyard shift. I know they mean well, but sometimes all this surveillance really annoys me."

"Your father is still, potentially, in a position to wipe out most of the Tek trade. That's why the government has to be interested in your wellbeing."

"My father," she said, bitterness in her voice. "I don't have much contact with him anymore after Mexico. I'll never work with him again, I know that."

"Even so, you'd make the Teklords a terrific hostage."

Beth sighed. "Father hasn't even recovered from what he went through down there," she said. "Since he got back to this country he's been at that government rehab center up in NorCal. It may be a few months, Jake, before he's ready to finish up the work that remains to be done on his anti-Tek system. I really don't much like the idea of having all these government men lurking around for another year or more."

Jake grinned. "It does somewhat hamper my courtship."

"Is that what's been going on between us?" She laughed. "That's very quaint and oldfashioned."

"Sure, I've been courting you. Didn't I mention that?"

"No, but I suspected as much."

Jake said, "That attack on me today might have been tried because the Tek folks figure they'd have an easier time getting at you if I'm not around."

"I know that my father's convinced a slew of law officers and government agents that we were kidnapped by Sonny Hokori," Beth responded. "I was there, though, and I can't help feeling that he made some kind of deal and was ready to sell out to Hokori."

"I've been digging into that, Beth, but so far—"

"The point is, I'm pretty certain the Tek cartels could simply bribe Dad to delay his researches or halt them altogether," Beth said. "They wouldn't have to kill him or kidnap me."

"But that's a maxsecurity facility he's recuperating in," Jake reminded. "Be tough to get a bribe to him there."

"You've been very patient with me." Reaching over, she touched his hand. "I know I must've told you about my concerns over my father a hundred times now."

"A hundred and sixteen actually, but who's counting?"

Smiling, she asked, "Can you stop awhile at my place?"

"Not now, no," answered Jake. "There are some things I have to find out first."

THE COMPUTER TERMINAL CHUCKLED. “Just kidding,” it said.

Jake tapped the fingers of his left hand on the arm of his desk chair. “Anytime you feel ready to continue, Rozko.”

Rozko-227N/FS was displaying a drawing of an enormous stack of papers and memos on its three-foot-square screen. “When you asked for a list of people who might still have it in for you, I couldn’t help whipping up this little cartoon,” it said. “Or I might have simply started running off pages of any one of the GLA vid-phone directories. The overall notion being that in your years as a SoCal state cop you made considerable enemies, Jake.”

“Okay, just tell me what you’ve got on the Hokori Tek cartel.”

A picture of an ebony urn appeared on the screen. “Here you see all that remains of Sonny Hokori.”

“And his whole organization is definitely out of business?”

A succession of fullcolor mugshots began to show up. “The remnants have been split up between these five gents. According to all our Cosmos sources, the Hokori cartel is no more.”

Jake was sitting at his desk high up in Tower I of the Cosmos Detective Agency building in the Laguna Sector of Greater Los Angeles. He leaned forward slightly in his chair. “None of these lads has sworn to get even with me for being involved in smashing Sonny’s operations?”

“Let me doublecheck.” The terminal, which sat on the right side of his desk top, hummed a middle-twenty-first-century show tune, showing him a picture of a mountain lake. “Here’s something soothing for you to look at while I’m digging, boss.”

“Rozko, why’d they design you to be such—”

“Okay, here’s the dope. There’s not a single indication that any of Hokori’s former business associates are planning to bump you off in revenge.”

“What about friends and relatives?”

A naked blonde, lying on a floating airmattress with her buttocks thrust high, appeared next. She was smiling over her bare shoulder at whoever had taken the vidfootage. “Next three shots are Sonny’s other recent known mistresses,” explained Rozko. “Interesting birthmark on the second one, huh? The whole set of them has made other arrangements, shedding nary a tear nor vowing to get even with you, the International Drug Control Agency or any of the others involved in the recent Mexican rubout of Sonny.”

“Relatives?”

“None left above the ground. Sonny did have a sister—picture in a sec.”

A slim, attractive young Japanese woman showed on the screen. She wore a dark pullover and

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