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SCAVENGER HUNT

Stephen Goldin

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This time it's
MARY

for whom all my Songs are sung

CHAPTER 1

Hunt Ball

If only they were kind enough to hate us, we could use that hatred to forge a racial identity. But they refuse to give us even that much respect. We are tools, things to be used, not worthy of love or hate, pity or calumny. They define us by our functions, not our persons. And, because we have no alternatives, so do we....

It took a bloody strike to win the most basic of freedoms. It will take more, much more, to win a sense of identity....

—Jasmine S

An Android Manifesto

SUCH WAS THE STRENGTH OF HER REPUTATION that Tyla deVrie's presence brought a quiet tension to Hunt Hall hours before she even entered the building. Women preened self-consciously, knowing that no matter how resplendent they looked, *she* would look better. Men fidgeted self-consciously—former lovers wondering what they'd done to lose her favor, and hopefuls wondering whether they were flashy enough to attract her attention.

When the android chargé d'affaires finally announced her arrival, no one was gauche enough to stop and stare. Scattered people here and there turned their heads *discreetly* toward the door, then returned nonchalantly to previous business. Only a few at a time, but before Mistress deVrie had reached the third of the three broad steps leading from the doorway down to the mezzanine overlooking the ballroom floor, everyone had taken full inventory of her latest outrageous array. While her face bore the approved expression of pleasant boredom, her outfit was far enough from boring to set off the next interstellar fad.

Thin phosphorescent streaks swirled electrically across her face like red and green electrons around a nucleus. Her hair was swept upward and plaited, with thick braids of green and red skillfully interwoven, giving it a candy cane appearance and adding twenty centimeters to her height. Starting from her shoulders, two wide strips of plastiglo, one red and one green, arched down the front of her body, covering her breasts and making an X right at the crotch, then twining around the smooth contours of her legs and finally wrapping themselves around her feet as sandals. From there the bands wound back up her legs, crossed once again at the buttocks, and continued up to her shoulders to

complete the cycle. Around her left ankle was a narrow silken band, from which nonchalantly dangled her single piece of jewelry—a cherry-sized piece of heartstone cut from the heart of a silicon creature on the planet Ootoyce. On anyone else the outfit would have been outré; on her, it was heartstopping.

Tyla deVrie had strolled the gamut of media reporters outside the hall, all of them armed with questions about the fantastic deVrie heritage in the Scavenger Hunt. Now she stood at the balustrade, looking out across the vast domed hall. While there were close to a thousand people on the floor, it appeared less than half full. Crowding, after all, would be déclassé.

An orchestra played at the north end of the hall. This was no mere collection of synthesists and mixers, but eighty flesh-and-blood people playing actual phonic instruments, masters of their craft gathered from planets throughout the galaxy. The music they played was soft, suitable for Society's statelier dances. Some people were, in fact, dancing, though most were content to sit at the tables around the edges of the floor or stand and talk. The orchestra had little amplification—just enough to drown out neighboring conversations, but not enough to interfere with your own.

Tyla stood like a monarch surveying her domain; then, deigning to move, she walked in long, catlike strides to the transparent gravtube. She could have been posing for a statue as the gravitic field floated her gently to the floor of the hall; her gaze remained level and her expression never altered. There was only the slightest of bumps to inform her she'd reached floor level. She stepped out of the tube and began to mingle.

She only seemed to move at random through the crowd, accepting a drink from one android servant's

tray, tasting an hors d'oeuvre from another. The Brownian movements of society might cause her destination to change a dozen times in a minute, but she always knew precisely where she was going. Like a skilled politician flipping through his Farley file, her mind was a computer index with precise information about the people she encountered.

***Kontorr, Occla:* Late 80s, though she pretends to 70. Three ex-husbands (including Tonas!), currently divorced. Family is Old Society, but have fallen behind the trends. Cosponsor of the Jumpdown. Casual acquaintance—treat with cordial nod, word of greeting.**

***alMassan, Ranso:* 120 or so. Loves to complain about malfunctions in his artificial arm. Married to Rorbidia for 30 years—out of the running. Old family friend—treat with warm smile, exchange of pleasantries.**

***Tens, Arrira:* 30(??). Married up into Society (Vond, no less!), then stayed after divorce. Delusions of self-worth. On the prowl for social advancement. Made play for Billin before I was through with him. Not speaking to her this year—treat with frown of cool disdain.**

***Corbright, Wilfern:* 62, harsh, braying laughter for no good reason. Thoroughly Nouveau. C-list (definitely). Never formally introduced—treat with polite diffidence.**

***Danovich, Necor:* 68. Former lover, about two years back. Kind eyes, mediocre performance—treat with friendly smile, stop for small-talk chat.**

There were a great many entries like that last. Tyla

deVrie was notorious for the swath she'd cut through the ranks of Society's eligible men, dropping them just as suddenly as she'd acquired them without ever giving a reason. Her bedhopping was a source of constant gossip among ladies of lesser reputation and glamour, a source of eternal frustration for the lovers she'd abandoned—and a continual source of hope for the men she had yet to become involved with, each of whom fancied he was the one who'd finally tame her. At the age of only thirty-three, she was one of *the* people in the galaxy.

When she met one of her old lovers, she always asked whether he was entered in the Hunt. It was *pro forma*; the answer was invariably, "Of course." Apart from routine flirtations, though, she paid scant attention to the eligible men who hadn't yet been her lovers. This was not a night for starting new affairs. Tyla had her own agenda.

The effete droning of the crowd whose only credo seemed to be *loquo, ergo sum*, the genteel politeness and hypocritical smiles—this was the world she had conquered with calculated precision. She wrapped the conversational buzz around her like a warm, familiar coat. Her world, her Society. But she felt a faint touch of Alexander fever tonight—there had to be another world, somewhere, to conquer.

Better savor this, girl, she warned herself sternly. *This may be your last party for quite some time.*

While she was chatting with Doz Linn, a former lover, they inadvertently crossed the social orbit of the Barb. Barbanté Leonyn, a tall, gorgeous brunette, was Tyla's former sister-in-law. Her gown, revealing ample cleavage front and back, parodied a spacer uniform, including gloves and boots. The right side was bright red

with sapphire bells dangling from it; the left side was blue with ruby bells.

The Barb was a natural force that swept everything before her. Surrounded by a cluster of admiring men, she brushed them aside to concentrate on Tyla. “Tyla, my dear, you look positively ravishing, and I’m sure at least half the men here have that precise thought on their minds. Where do you keep coming up with those outfits? I’d turn positively green with envy, except then I’d clash with my own gown, so of course I won’t, but it’s no surprise to see you in the company of one of our handsomer men. I’d steal him from you, darling, but I can’t, can I, because you’ve already let him go, so what would be the point?”

She finished her drink and handed her glass to one of her admirers, taking a new glass from another of the men who’d been about to drink from it himself. Scarcely pausing to draw a breath, she continued, “Space, what appalling music! All this tinkle–tinkle is enough to drive me positively premenstrual. You’d think they could afford to hire an orchestra that knows the difference between real music and the sound of urination in a tin chamber pot. How is Bred, by the way? And don’t tell me he isn’t here, my love, because I saw the *Honey B* out on the spaceport just this afternoon. I don’t suppose he’s bothered to come to the Ball. No, of course not, you couldn’t expect any behavior that sociable from him. Why I married him is beyond me. I’ve had three husbands since then, and every one of them has been more than willing to be seen on my arm at parties. No, don’t ask me what their names were, darling, I’m not an almanac, and there’s ladies here who could recite the whole list backward and forward. Come to think of it, some of them preferred backward to for-

ward. Ah, but no matter. Doz, would you be a dear and refill my glass, please?”

“It’s not empty,” Doz Linn had the ill-grace to observe.

The Barb looked at her glass, then at Doz Linn. Then she looked back at her glass. Then she calmly poured its contents on his shoes. “Now it is,” she said.

As Doz stood with his mouth open, the Barb handed him the glass, took Tyla by the arm and led her past the suddenly retreating circle of male followers. Tyla wasn’t sure why she tolerated this invasion of her empire, except that she knew the Barb would say things no one else dared to voice.

“I have missed you, Tyla, truly I have. I’ve missed our little sisterly talks. Even though you were Bred’s sister, not mine, I always felt there was some mystic bond between us. And truly, no matter how much I complain, I do miss Bred, too. We were as mismated as two left shoes, my little muffin and me, but he was the only man whose name I could remember the next morning without writing it on the pillowcase ahead of time. Life is never easy for we queens of Society, is it?”

Tyla didn’t bother to respond. The Barb did not ask questions to receive answers.

“What do you think of the great android scandal? Personally I think it’s all a silly wobble, making such a big thing out of so little. It isn’t as though it had a chance to win or anything, not with just a scrap metal ship and a robot crew. And even if it did have a chance, who really cares except a bunch of puffed up peacocks with IQs half their penile size? If they think they’re better than an andie, all they have to do is beat it in the Scavenger Hunt, right?”

“Oh and speaking of that, Arrira tells me there’s a

couple of establishments on Hellfire that *none* of our men can beat. It's almost enough to make one want to visit Hellfire. She swears she doesn't know this from personal experience, of course; leave it to her to deny the one thing that would raise her to the level of subhuman in my estimation. They genetically tailor those andies for their specific job, you know, which is more than I can say for any of the men I've had lately. It's enough to make you give up all faith in Darwin, I can tell you."

The Barb could always be counted on for a diversion, but a little of that went a very long way indeed. Tyla looked casually around for a way to extricate herself and saw Nillia Rathering chatting to a group of other women just a few meters away. Nillia was not much of a step up, but at least she played the social game by the same rules Tyla did.

Tyla called out her name. Nillia looked up and saw Tyla, then beamed with the warm radiance of a superannuated cherub and waved for Tyla to join her. Tyla immediately began regretting her action. Had she been too quick to leap from one cannibal's pot to the next?

Her maneuver did have its desired effect, however. The Barb took one look at Gentlelady Rathering and decided her time could better be spent elsewhere. "Well, Tyla my love, it's been positively exorbitant being your sister again for these last few hours, but I came to the Ball on a quest of my own, you know. I simply must find a man worth seducing, hard a task as that may be. Looking around, I truly fear you and I will be forced to lower our standards to achieve a truly satisfactory heterosexual life, though I suppose I may be putting a few too many adjectives in my qualifications. Happy hunting." And just like that, the Barb was off to bedazzle an-

other sector of the Hall.

Tyla, meanwhile, was left with Nillia Rathering. “It’s nice to see you again, Nillia.” Tyla could lie socially with the pleasantest of smiles.

“Yes, my child, it’s been far too long,” Nillia said. “Do come over here and let me see that stunning outfit.”

Tyla obliged grudgingly. Nillia Rathering was harmless, but such a dreadful bore. And, Tyla noticed with distaste as she approached, Nillia had gained yet a few more kilos since their last meeting. Some women just seemed to lose all pride in their appearance once they’d reached a hundred and fifty. *I’ll never let that happen to me*, Tyla decided silently.

Nillia examined the dress closely, oohing and aahing with delight. “Oh, to be a hundred years younger. I could really show you a thing or two, my dear.”

“I’m sure you still can,” Tyla said, landing the compliment Nillia had been fishing for.

“Oh, no, no, dear, you flatter me too much. My days of glory are all behind me, I’m afraid.” Since Tyla knew Nillia didn’t believe it, the truth came out sounding like a polite social lie.

“And what about you, Tyla?” Nillia prattled on. “You’ve been something of a hermit these past few months, haven’t you? I’ve missed your lovely face at all the parties. I haven’t seen you since...since the Maze, wasn’t it, on New Crete?”

“Personal affairs became a little too pressing, I’m afraid,” Tyla answered, ignoring the obvious curiosity.

“And speaking of personal affairs, dear,” Nillia said, lowering her voice to a just-between-us-girls level, “have you heard about Randa and Mendasan?”

“I heard their marriage broke up, but I hadn’t heard

why.” This conversation might be of some value, after all. Information was everything in Society.

“She caught him in bed with one of *her* lovers. And they hadn’t even had the grace to invite her. It was all the talk of the Blue Star Ball. Of course, that was before Fendon showed up with an *alien*.”

“What sort of alien?”

“Goodness knows, I can’t keep them all straight. Of course, he *claimed* it was part of a business meeting, but the alien was wearing Dorin’s platinum pendant and Dorin was conspicuously absent. *Neither* of them was at the Delder 400, and you know how regularly they used to attend.

“And there’s rumors of a duel to be fought before the Hesperion Ball. Certain unnamed parties took exception to other unnamed parties calling them ‘an ineffectual whiner and a blue-nosed hypocrite,’ so they went home to Gavilon to practice their marksmanship. Why do men have to have such fragile egos?

“But there is some good news. Cathalia Ling is getting married.”

“I hadn’t received an invitation.” It was unthinkable that anyone of any worth would get married without inviting Tyla.

“Well, of course, they haven’t announced it yet, but Walsa assures me he drew up the contract himself.”

“Who’s she marrying?”

“That hasn’t been decided yet. One of the two younger Untermann boys, almost certainly. That will make quite an alliance, don’t you think?”

Nillia’s voice dropped to even more conspiratorial tones as she continued, “And speaking of that sort of thing, dear, I know it’s none of my business, but have

you gotten married yet?”

You know I haven't, you old busybody. Nothing in the galaxy happens without your finding out about it. "Now don't be silly. You know I wouldn't do anything like that without inviting you to the wedding. You shouldn't worry about it so."

“I know, dear, but I can't help it. I did promise your mother I'd look after you, you know.”

There it was, the old promise Nillia dragged out of mothballs at every social occasion, like some ancient soldier emerging from the attic wearing a uniform threatening to burst at the seams. *Maybe it gives her some kind of thrill to think she's responsible for me,* Tyla thought. *Just once I'd like to get all the way through a party without it.*

“You must admit it's not normal for someone your age not to have been married at least once,” Nillia continued, blithely unaware of the younger woman's annoyance. “You're completely wasting your best years. Youth is the time for experimentation, you know.”

“I thought I'd been doing quite a bit of experimentation, myself.”

Nillia dismissed that with a wave of her hand. “Those are affairs, dear, not marriages. All shallow. You need something deeper, a lasting relationship, something more than just a week or two.”

“I've yet to find a man I'd even want a lasting relationship with.” Tyla had used Nillia to escape from the Barb, and now she was looking around for someone to rescue her from Nillia. The orchestra had stopped playing momentarily. Over Nillia's shoulder she caught sight of Tendric Parto. If she could manage to catch his eye....

“It wouldn't have to be forever, you know,” Nillia

persisted. “A year or two would be fine. I can think of several young men who’d make an excellent first husband for you. You just haven’t been looking hard enough, that’s all. Even your brother was married once, and goodness knows he’s....” She caught herself in the *faux pas* and let her voice drift off awkwardly.

“Odd’?” Tyla supplied, enjoying for a moment the feeling of putting her inquisitor on the defensive.

“No, of course not, dear, I was going to say ‘eccentric.’ But if even he and the Barb could survive a marriage, there’s certainly no reason why you can’t. Look around the hall tonight. Every eligible, desirable man in the galaxy is here. And in that outfit of yours, you’ll certainly have no trouble attracting the man you want.”

Tyla looked around. Tendric Parto had been pulled aside by some woman, probably his new wife—Tyla had missed the wedding and hadn’t had a chance to meet her yet. But there had to be someone she could use as a ruse for leaving Nillia. Her eyes roamed over the tables set around the perimeter of the dance floor. Every face was familiar from previous parties except....

“Who’s that?” she asked, pointing at a good-looking young man sitting alone and dejected at one table.

Nillia’s expression dropped, and her voice became a whisper. “Oh. Believe me, dear, you wouldn’t want anything to do with that. It’s the android.”

The Barb had mentioned something about a ‘great android scandal’ but, true to form, she’d been long on opinion and short on detail. “What’s it doing here?” she asked.

“You mean you hadn’t heard about the scandal? My dear, you have been out of touch, haven’t you? That creature has enrolled in the Hunt.”

Tyla was genuinely shocked. “I didn’t know they’d

let one in.”

“Devon didn’t want to, I assure you. But the Rules were quite explicit—any male sentient being who can pay the entrance fee can enroll. There were social niceties, and the Committee of course didn’t want to look as though they were excluding aliens. But who would ever have believed an android could come up with enough money to enter?”

“Where *did* it get the money?”

“Apparently all the androids in the galaxy contributed to pay its fee and buy it a ship. It’s like a cause or something with them—some nonsense about trying to prove their equality with human beings.”

Tyla’s eyes narrowed. “Do you think it stands much of a chance?”

“No one I’ve talked to thinks so. But just the thought of its being in *our* Hunt is disgraceful. I can assure you the Rules will be changed by the next time.”

Tyla nodded. The android’s entry into the Hunt could tarnish the contest slightly, but the Hunt’s tradition was so glorious that the damage would be minimal. A year after it was over, all anyone would remember was the winner. She wasn’t worried about the android as competition, either—not if, as the Barb had said, it only had a battered old ship and robots as a crew.

Most of the regular entrants competed solely because a failure to do so would have meant loss of status. They’d pursue the Hunt lackadaisically, perhaps gather a few of the objects on their list and lose gracefully, later telling exciting anecdotes about how they *might* have won if it had not been for thus—and—such unfortunate accident. There was only one person she was really worried about. One person who took the Hunt as more than just a game.

“Hello, Tyla,” said a voice from behind her, and she recognized the sound of the enemy.

“Hello, Master Jusser,” she said, turning around. “I was just thinking about you.”

Ambic Jusser looked the part he played—a broad-shouldered, sophisticated ladykiller. He stood a full two meters tall and had a handsome, craggy face with a deeply space-tanned complexion. His mustache and goatee were sprinkled with silver-colored dust; the shaved strip front to back down the center of his skull was three centimeters wide and lavishly tattooed by the famous Corinarr himself.

Jusser’s shirt was smooth, semitransparent plastic silk, swirling in blues and reds and yellows. The design at first glance seemed haphazard, but it was planned to direct the eye around his magnificent frame and then downward toward the waist. His knee-britches were rainbow velvet, shining in all colors at once, and so tight they might have been painted on. His codpiece was grossly padded, and he wore soft leather boots that glided noiselessly along the smooth ballroom floor. His hands were neatly gloved, the right in red and the left in yellow.

Jewelry flashed excitingly all about him. A string of diamonds circled his head, tied at the back of the neck with two tassels. A ruby earring dangled from each ear, and tight bracelets of canary diamonds circled his wrists. His belt was a row of emeralds, while his garters were mosaics of rubies, emeralds, sapphires and diamonds. There was a platinum spur on his right boot with a large star sapphire instead of a rowel. And around his neck was a clear plastic tube filled with hundreds of small, living firebeetles that glowed and sparkled—alive and warm, yet ever-changing in hue

and pattern. The firebeetles were hideously expensive, even by Society's standards, and could live for only a few hours inside that tube.

Tyla hated Jusser with a passion so intense it was a fire in her gut.

Jusser's smile was the one he always wore: the sportsman, the magnanimous winner, the charitable superior. God on the seventh day. "I hope they were nice thoughts," he said.

"They were about you," Tyla reiterated.

"You look exquisite this evening, my dear," Jusser continued. "But then, you always do."

"And you're the same as ever," Tyla said sweetly.

Nillia Rathering could sense the upswelling of unpleasantness and decided that her attentions were wanted elsewhere. With a graceful apology she glided casually to a less intense corner of the hall. Other people around Tyla and Jusser also drifted toward safer areas.

"It's certainly wonderful to see you again," Jusser said. He took her arm so smoothly that she had no alternative but to let him. "I've missed you, you know."

"You seem to have managed well enough while I was away."

"Of course I managed. I'm a winner, aren't I?"

"That depends," Tyla said carefully, "on the games you play."

Jusser shrugged. "The only thing I've wanted that I've never had is you, my dear, and now that I've made up my mind on that, it's only a matter of time. Why waste your energy fighting me?"

As they talked, he had been leading her towards the center of the hall. Just as they reached it, the orchestra began playing again. "Would you care to join me in the

Zolthen?" Jusser asked before Tyla could frame a reply to his previous question.

Tyla hesitated for just a fraction of a second, and that was her undoing. Jusser took her silence as consent and swept her up into his arms in time to the music. It had been a smooth ambush, and timed perfectly.

"I suppose you're here to watch the start of the Scavenger Hunt," Jusser said as he whirled her gently around him.

"In a manner of speaking, yes." She took her cue from the music, backed one step away from him while holding his left hand in her right and ducked under his arm to come up behind him.

"I'll expect you to be down at the *Hermes* to see me off." He let go of her hand with his left, took her other hand with his right and spun once more to face her.

"I'm afraid that will be somewhat difficult," she said, stepping up close to him and slipping her free arm loosely around his waist. Together they moved three steps to Jusser's right. "I'll be aboard the *Honey B* at the time."

"Bred's ship? Is he in the Hunt?" Jusser pushed her gently away from him and she did a slow pirouette.

"Yes, he was a last minute entry." She waited the required beat, then leaped into the air and came down on one foot. Her partner took her free leg, knelt, and slipped it over his shoulder. Then, grabbing an outstretched hand, he lifted her into the air.

"Wouldn't you prefer to be with a winner?"

"I intend to be."

He spun her around once, then set her down again. "You don't really expect that flying bawdyhouse of his to be a serious contender, do you?" He turned halfway

around, so that the two of them now stood back to back.

“I certainly do,” she said, taking five steps backward as he took an equal number forward so their backs stayed together. “Because *I* am going to run the Hunt for him.”

“Oho, now it becomes clear. I was wondering why Bred would come down from his cloud and join the rest of us.” They took three steps to his right, two to his left, then turned so they were once more face to face. “It’s his sister pulling the strings.”

“Since women can’t enter by themselves, I asked Bred to enroll in the Hunt as a favor to me. He agreed, as long as I do the actual work.” They grabbed each other’s wrists and did two long, shuffling sidesteps. “He’s given me temporary command of his ship.”

“And why are you so interested, all of a sudden? You’ve always preferred the parties to the games.”

“There’s always been a—” At this point, the dance called for a momentary exchange of partners. They confronted a nearby couple and did a few light whirls with others before coming together again. “—deVrie in the Scavenger Hunt,” Tyla continued easily. “And we’ve usually won, too.”

Jusser’s smile broadened. “But not the last time.”

Her anger at him doubled. “You needn’t be so ghoulish. If my parents hadn’t died, they would have won. You were lucky.” She was so mad she almost missed a step, but recovered in time and maintained her dignity by making her lapse appear to be an embellishment on the basic step.

“Luck had nothing to do with it, my dear.” They held each other’s hands loosely and walked around in a small circle. “I simply played that like I play everything

else—to win. And I did.”

The rigid requirements of the Zolthen now called for an embrace. Tyla put her arms reservedly around her partner, but there was nothing reserved about Jusser’s clinch. “My agents have recently found some exotic new aphrodisiacs for me,” he whispered in her ear, “and I’d be delighted to share my first sampling of them with you.”

They broke from the clinch. The dance here called for each to make one spin on their right foot, then come together again. Jusser spun perfectly. Tyla simply walked away from him, deliberately leaving Jusser standing partnerless in the middle of the floor.

One did not leave one’s partner in the middle of a Zolthen. Such an act was a calculated insult, and Jusser was speechless. What was worse, though no sound had been made, the insult was instantly noticed by everyone in the hall, and the room was instantly abuzz. No one else, however, deviated from the dance.

Tyla’s temper was boiling, but even so a cool part of her mind weighed the alternatives. Deserting Jusser in the middle of the Zolthen was a major insult, but there had to be something more she could do. Walking out of the hall altogether would deprive her of the rest of the party, and wouldn’t be nearly demeaning enough. Tyla deVrie was a noted expert at slipping in the quiet dagger, and no ordinary insult would do.

She walked resolutely over to the lonely figure of the android sitting at a table by itself. It was so busy being dejected that it didn’t even notice her approach. “Would you care to finish this Zolthen with me?” she asked.

The android looked up, startled out of its reverie. “Huh, who, me?”

She repeated the question.

“But we...we haven’t even been introduced. Maybe you don’t know who I am.”

“Is that necessary?”

“Uh, no, no, I guess not. All right, fine, I’d love to.” It grinned boyishly and stood up.

The android looked surprisingly young. Androids came out of their processing plants fully grown and aged very slowly, so they were normally made to appear of a more ripened age—say, sixty or so. This one looked barely twenty years old, more a boy than a man. To fit in with Society it had bought some obviously expensive and well-tailored clothes—but the fashion was last year’s, and the android’s ignorance showed even worse. It had the fashionable shaved part in its hair, but it was barely a centimeter wide. The android was tall and thin, with an overexaggeration of the limbs—gawky, as though built to bring out motherly sympathies in women without alienating men. It looked hopelessly innocent and bewildered, but not without some redeeming boyish charm.

It’s an artificial entity, Tyla reminded herself, created in a test tube and grown in a vat to serve some specific function.

She took its hand and led it back to the dance floor, watching Ambic Jusser’s reaction out of the corner of her eye. It was as good as she’d anticipated. He was not very pleased. Nor were any of the other people at the Ball, who’d worked hard all evening to ignore the android. Now its presence had been acknowledged by one of Society’s most important people and its status had been raised by her invitation to dance.

Tyla could sense the anger and outrage radiating through the hall, disguised though it was by polite

smiles and vacuous expressions. And she didn't care. Her position was stable enough to weather any storm; the important thing was that her revenge on Jusser be as thorough as she could make it. He would not recover quickly from this blow.

As they started to dance it became painfully obvious that the android was as clumsy as it looked. Tyla pretended not to notice, and even did her best to cover up some of the creature's more glaring missteps. She kept herself aloof and concentrated on the dancing, eyes focused blankly ahead.

"Well, *I* might as well introduce myself, at least," the android said hesitantly. "My name is Johnathan R."

"How very nice for you," Tyla replied. Circumstances might compel her to dance with this creature, but she needn't go so far as being polite to it.

The android flushed and missed two steps. "I know you're Tyla deVrie, because I heard the android announce you at the door."

"Clever."

It missed some more steps, and Tyla winced. Did it have to be such a buffoon?

"Mistress deVrie, you are very beautiful and I'm sure you could have danced with any man at the Ball tonight. You obviously don't like me. Why did you ask me to dance?"

"I've never danced with an andie before."

It stopped completely. "Oh. Well, I'm sure you found it a novel and exciting experience. Now, if you will excuse me, Mistress deVrie, I have some important business to transact back at my table. Thank you very much for the dance." And it left, turning its back on her and walking crisply to the table it had occupied all evening.

The orchestra stopped playing. Everyone stopped dancing. Conversations ceased. And all eyes focused rigidly on a single spot within the enormous hall.

Tyla could feel, in a remote way, the attention she was receiving, but it took even that much concentrated power to register anything in her brain. Her mind had gone numb. This couldn't be happening to her, not to Tyla deVrie. How could an android dare to walk out on her—especially after she had condescended to dance with it? Its only repayment for her graciousness had been to belittle her in the eyes of everyone who mattered.

The smile was back on Ambic Jusser's lips. He had avenged Tyla's insult without even trying. He started to approach her again. From the far side of the hall, the Barb also started moving toward her, a strangely alien look of sympathy on her face.

But Tyla would not let that happen. At the worst—and as far as she was concerned, this *was* the worst—she would preserve her honor. With self-control born of years of social training, she lifted her head proudly and marched to the gravtube. The field congealed about her feet as she entered, lifting her gently upward until she reached the mezzanine. She stepped out of the tube and, with dignity, left the hall.

The reporters were still there, unaware of the social cataclysm that had just struck. Tyla deVrie walked regally past them to the call post and raised her left thumb gracefully to its scanner. Moments later her limo pulled up to the curb, its door sliding open to admit her. She stepped inside and the door slid shut again, concealing her from human eyes.

Only then did her emotional shield break down. "Spaceport," she said in a barely audible voice, and her

hands were shaking so badly she had to try three times before she could place her thumb chip over the scanner to verify her ID.

The limo glided off down the darkened street.