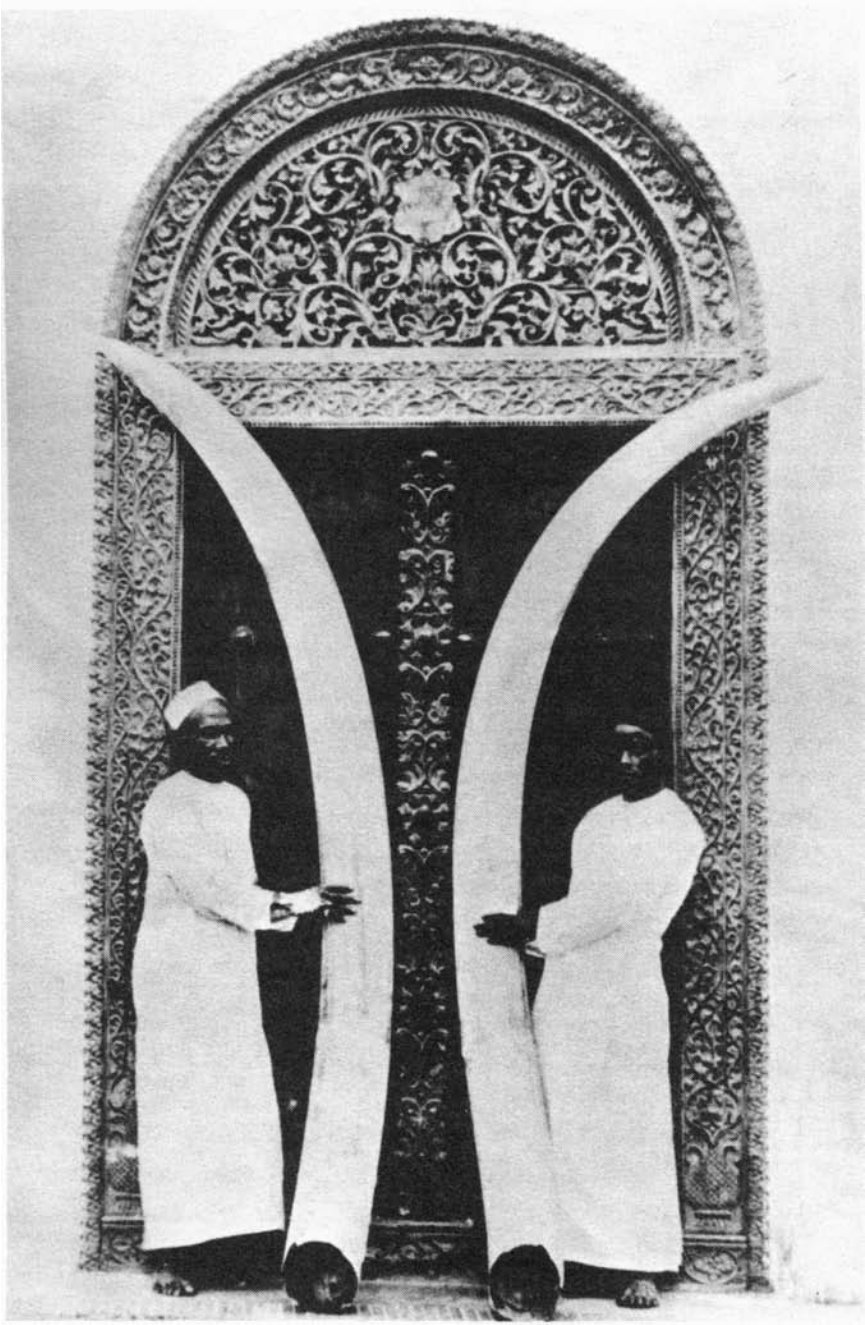


IVORY



The ivory of the Kilimanjaro Elephant, photographed at Zanzibar in 1898.  
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# IVORY

A LEGEND OF  
PAST AND  
FUTURE

MIKE RESNICK



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Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228-2197

VOICE: 716-691-0133, ext. 210

FAX: 716-691-0137

WWW.PYRSE.COM

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To Carol, as always

And to Perry Mason,  
the best damned guide in East Africa



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# THE GAMBLER

(3042 G.E.)

*I had many names.*

*The Samburu called me Malima Temboz, The Mountain That Walks, for I towered above all others of my kind, and always I would climb the next hill or cross the next valley to see what lay beyond.*

*To the Kikuyu I was Mrefu Kulika Twiga, Taller Than Giraffes, for I could pick succulent delicacies that were beyond the reach of the largest of animals, and no shadow was as long as mine.*

*The Makonde knew me as Bwana Mutaro, Master Furrow, for wherever I went my tusks would plow up twin furrows in the hard African earth, and my spoor could be mistaken for no other.*

*In Maasailand I was Fezi Nyupi, White Gold, for a veritable fortune protruded from my mouth, a fortune such as no other member of my race had ever carried.*

*And now I am known only as the Kilimanjaro Elephant, my true name lost on the winds, my body decayed, my bones turned to dust. Only my spirit remains, restless and incomplete.*

**I**t was a typical night on Athenia.

The storm had reached gale force. Dark clouds of methane swirled about the sky while tidal waves of ammonia raced across the oceans and crashed resoundingly against the jagged cliffs. Bolts of blue lightning gave the clouds an eerie glow, and the endless claps of thunder seemed to herald an imminent and unpleasant Day of Reckoning.

Once, many centuries ago, the Democracy had possessed a mining colony on Athenia, and the tallest of the planet's mountains, which had been given the less than original name of Mount Olympus, was still honeycombed with hundreds of miles of tunnels and shafts as testimony to that bygone era. Then other worlds had been opened up, richer worlds whose resources were easier to plunder, and the miners had moved on, leaving the mountain—and the planet—completely deserted.

It had remained deserted for almost a millennium, until the day that Tembo Laibon claimed it as his own, erected a dome at the very apex of the mountain, and called it the House of Blue Lights, in acknowledgment of the eternal storm that raged overhead. The House of Blue Lights was ostensibly a tavern, but of course nobody came to the ninth planet of distant Beta Greco merely to drink. In fact, it was precisely because Athenia was so far out on the Galactic Rim and so far from humanity's seats of power that the House of Blue Lights flourished, not so much as a bar but as a meeting place for outlaws and fugitives of all races. The many-limbed Kreboi, who inhabited Beta Greco III and had no love for the Democracy, gave Tembo Laibon permission to operate and extended their protection to include his world.

And now some two dozen humans and nine non-humans sat in the main room of the tavern, ignoring the brilliant blue explosions that illuminated the atmosphere outside the dome. Two men sat huddled with a trio of elongated, crimson-skinned, narrow-eyed Canphorites, negotiating the price for a secret cache of laser weapons; a flashily dressed silver-haired man was telling two slightly bored companions fantastic tales of the Dreamwish Beast and other myths of the spaceways; a delicate, crystalline being from the Atrian system, his body enclosed in a suit designed to muffle potentially dangerous sounds, sat motionless in a corner, staring balefully at the airlock for no discernable reason; a pair of elegant women, exquisitely coiffured, were bartering their services to a quartet of men who obviously had no need to haggle but seemed to enjoy it anyway; two furry, tripod-like Lodinites were arguing with a corpulent and obviously unsympathetic man over the price of a rare Doradusian carving that sat on the table before him.

In a corner four men, another Canphorite, and a Kreboi were playing *jabob*, a card game that had been invented half a galaxy away. The game was

entering its seventh month and had had a total of 403 participants. When a player was broke, or tired, or hungry, or decided that he had business elsewhere, he turned his seat over to the next in line. Three men currently sat at an adjacent table, each waiting his turn to join the game.

But despite all this activity, everyone knew that there was another game going on behind locked doors in Tembo Laibon's back room—the game.

The room itself had always been the subject of much speculation, for it was here that Tembo Laibon kept his storehouse of personal treasures. Above the hand-carved bar were four mounted heads of hideous, flesh-eating beasts from Earth itself, while pelts of still other animals covered the entire back wall. There were a score of long metal spears on display, as well as a number of small wood carvings locked inside a glass case. And, finally, there were the twin pillars of gently curved ivory that dominated the room, towering above everyone, man and alien alike, who was permitted to see them.

Tembo Laibon himself was there, all six foot nine inches of him, his black skin shining like polished ebony, clad as always in the pelts of alien animals. He sipped a green concoction from a tall glass, wiped his lips, and looked around the table as he began shuffling the cards.

To his immediate left was the alien known only as the Gorgon, a huge, purple-skinned monstrosity who claimed to be from the New Roanoke system. Everyone knew that the New Roanoke system was uninhabited, but one look at his bulging muscles and protruding fangs was sufficient to convince them to suspend their disbelief and inquire no further into his origins or past. Nobody knew how many sentient beings the Gorgon had killed, but rumor had the total well above one hundred.

The Gorgon had been losing heavily for the past two hours, and, not much of a talker to begin with, he had grown increasingly sullen.

Not so the Iron Duchess. More machine than woman, her metal hands were busy putting her winnings into tidy little piles, her titanium teeth reflected the lightning as she smiled, her artificial heart pumped chemically enriched blood through plastic veins, and her mechanical voice filled the room with the strange melody of her happy chatter. Tembo Laibon studied her out of the corner of his eye, and wondered how much of her was actually alive.

One who was unquestionably alive, and reveling in it, was the creature

that sat to Tembo Laibon's right. Nobody knew what it had been originally, but somehow, somewhere, as it wandered down the highways and byways of its life, it had decided that it wanted to be on the winning side for a change, and had undergone a series of surgical alterations that left it looking like a misshapen human. Its eyes were orange, its nostrils were too far apart, its ears were too flat against its head, one could still see where extra fingers and opposing thumbs had been removed from each hand, and it continually shifted its position on its chair, for it had not yet adjusted to the way its new body bent.

It spoke in exquisite Terran, as if it had spent its formative years in an exclusive school on Deluros VIII or even Earth itself, it brushed its locks of false hair back from its reconstructed forehead, it drank dry martinis and tried to hide its expression of distaste, and, when it felt no one was watching, it turned to admire its reflection in the glass of the reinforced viewport that Tembo Laibon had inserted on one wall of the room.

It called itself Son-of-Man, and thus far this evening it was playing as if a more revered Son of Man were standing by its shoulder and bringing it luck.

Sitting directly across from Tembo Laibon was Buko, the red alien from Sigma Silani IV. His lizardlike skin looked slick and moist, and glistened in the dim light of the viewport, and his face, which was incapable of expression, bore a striking resemblance to the dragons Tembo Laibon had read about when he was a small child. Buko was totally naked, and his skin exuded a too-sweet odor of alien oils. Perched motionless between his shoulder blades, its transparent claws and long beak buried deep in his flesh, was a tiny featherless birdlike creature that lived in some bizarre kind of symbiosis with him.

Finally Tembo Laibon put the cards down on the table and shifted his weight on his chair, which hovered a few inches above the floor. The ship carrying the last two players had just docked, and he had suspended the game until they arrived at the table.

"I'd like a drink, please," said Son-of-Man, flashing him a smile that displayed a mouthful of carefully chiseled purple teeth.

"Same as last time?" asked Tembo Laibon.

“But of course,” replied the thing that looked like a man. “Alien drinks are so . . . so *gauche*.” It wrinkled its artificial nose distastefully.

“Anyone else?” asked Tembo Laibon, watching an exceptionally violent blue explosion through the viewport. He wondered idly if the lightning above the sprawling Serengeti Plains was as foreboding, and decided that it couldn’t be.

“Last call for drinks.”

There was no response, and Tembo Laibon tapped out an order on the panel in front of him. A moment later a robot entered the room, bearing a single glass on a polished silver tray.

“Thank you,” said Son-of-Man as the robot placed the drink on the table.

“You are welcome, Honored Sir,” replied the robot in a grating monotone.

“He looks so ludicrous!” tittered Son-of-Man as the robot walked away. “A metal monstrosity shaped like a man!”

“What’s wrong with metal?” asked the Iron Duchess, as the reflected glow of a blue lightning bolt illuminated her platinum nails and titanium teeth. “It wears a lot longer than flesh.”

“Oh, my dear lady!” said Son-of-Man. “I meant no disrespect, truly I did not. Please believe me.”

She stared at him coldly, her pupils contracting slightly as tiny microchips within each eye made instant adjustments to the light of the explosions just beyond the viewport.

“I forgive you,” she said at last.

“Thank you. I assure you that—”

“I forgive you,” she repeated. “That does not mean I believe you.”

“Enough talk,” rumbled the Gorgon. “It is time to play.”

“In a minute,” said Tembo Laibon, calling his consciousness back from the green African savannah where it spent most of its time. “Two more participants have arrived.”

“Can they afford the game?”

“Nobody gets into this room without an invitation,” Tembo Laibon assured him. “They can afford it.”

There was a momentary silence, and then the panel in front of Tembo Laibon flashed a silent message. He frowned and looked up.

“My robots tell me there are *three* of them out there.”

“Who is the third?” asked the Iron Duchess.

“They’re not sure. She looks like a human female, but the readings are all wrong.”

“I hope she’s pretty,” said Son-of-Man with what it thought was rugged masculine enthusiasm.

Tembo Laibon tapped a message on his panel. “Let’s let them in and find out.”

A moment later the door slid back, and two men and a woman stepped into the room. One of the men was powerfully built, broad and burly, with curly black hair and small dark eyes; he was Ajax the First, the brawn of the pair. The brain was small and wiry, and sported a bushy red beard; he was Ajax the Second. More than twenty outpost worlds had posted rewards for their capture, and yet they moved freely across the Outer Frontier and the Rim, and more than one bounty hunter who had tracked them down had wished he had gone after easier prey.

The woman, dressed in a glittering metallic blue gown, had long blonde hair piled high on her head, and wore a necklace of gleaming bloodstones from the mines of Altair III.

“Gentlemen, please introduce your companion,” said Tembo Laibon, frowning.

“I am Helen,” volunteered the blonde woman.

“She’s our wife,” explained Ajax the Second.

“*Our* wife?” repeated the Iron Duchess, arching an artificial eyebrow.

“His and mine.”

“She’s married to both of you?”

“That’s right.”

“She was not invited to participate,” said Tembo Laibon. “She must leave the room.”

“She’s only an android,” explained Ajax the First. “She won’t bother anybody.”

“Please deactivate her,” said Tembo Laibon.

“I’d like to watch,” said Helen.

Tembo Laibon looked at her. “Because of the stakes involved in this game, there must be no hint of impropriety,” he explained. “You must be deactivated.”



“How can there be any impropriety if she sits behind me and watches?” asked Ajax the First.

“I have no idea,” replied Tembo Laibon. “Perhaps she can see through the backs of the cards. Perhaps she will compute the odds and find some way to relay them to you. It makes no difference. T empers can run high in a game like this, and for your own sake I would not want it said that you took unfair advantage of your fellow participants.”

“What about the little animal on *his* back?” demanded Ajax the First, pointing to Buko. “How do I know that it isn’t helping him?”

“It is a symbiotic life-form that oxygenates my blood when I am on low-gravity worlds,” replied Buko.

“This isn’t a low-gravity world.”

“It is to *me*.”

“If you are through arguing,” said Tembo Laibon patiently, “you may deactivate the android.”

Ajax the First shrugged, then looked directly at the android.

“Go to the corner, Helen,” he ordered, and she promptly walked to the farthest corner of the room. He then uttered a brief command in a tongue that was unfamiliar to Tembo Laibon. Helen’s eyes closed and her head sagged on her chest.

“Satisfied?” said Ajax the First, turning back to the table.

“How do we know she is not still operative?” asked the Gogon suspiciously.

“Devise any test you wish and apply it,” said Ajax the Second.

“That will not be necessary,” said Tembo Laibon. “The house rules that she has been deactivated.” He turned to Ajax the Second. “She is new,” he noted.

“We commissioned her about a year ago. She was completed last month, and she’s been with us ever since.”

“Why would anyone want to marry an android?” asked Son-of-Man curiously

“Why not?” responded Ajax the Second. “We like a little pomp and ceremony from time to time.”

“How very interesting,” said the thing that looked like a man. “By the way, we haven’t been introduced. I am Son-of-Man.”

“We are the Aiantes,” said Ajax the Second.

“I beg your pardon?” said Son-of-Man.

Ajax the Second smiled. “You haven’t read your Homer, have you?”

“Who is Homer?”

“*I’ve* read him,” interjected the Iron Duchess. “And to the best of my memory, there was only one Ajax in the Trojan War.”

“Then your memory deceives you,” replied Ajax the Second. “There was Ajax, son of Telamonian, a giant warrior who fought shoulder-to-shoulder with Odysseus. That’s *him*. But there was also Ajax, son of Oileus, who was small, slight, and the most accurate of spearmen. That’s *me*. *Together, they were known as the Aiantes.*”

“I’m absolutely fascinated by names,” said Son-of-Man enthusiastically. “How did you happen to choose yours?”

“Athenia offers us a safe haven, so whenever we’re in this sector, we take Athenian names in gratitude,” said Ajax the Second.

“But why the same name twice?”

“Why not?”

“It is very confusing.”

“Not to us, it isn’t,” replied Ajax the Second.

“What names do you use in other sectors of the galaxy?” asked Son-of-Man.

“That’s none of your business.”

“I was just making conversation,” said Son-of-Man petulantly. “There’s no need to be rude.”

“I wasn’t being rude, just cautious,” responded Ajax the Second. “If you’re so interested in the genesis of names, why not ask the others?”

“There’s no need to,” replied Son-of-Man. “Buko and Tembo Laibon are proper names, and the origins of the other two are obvious.”

Ajax the Second smiled. “Out here no human uses his own name.”

Son-of-Man turned to Tembo Laibon. “Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“Then what does Tembo Laibon mean?” asked Son-of-Man.

“In an ancient dialect called Swahili, it means Elephant Chief.”

“What is an elephant?” asked Son-of-Man.

Tembo Laibon smiled. “Do you see those two pillars of white?” he said, pointing to the ivory.

“What is their relationship to you?” asked Son-of-Man.

“They belonged to the greatest elephant of all,” said Tembo Laibon. “I am descended from a race called the Maasai. They used to hunt elephants with spears such as you see on the back wall.” He paused. “The last elephant was killed four millennia ago.”

Son-of-Man got to its feet and walked over to the ivory.

“They look like wood,” it said at last.

“Once they were white, and gleamed like silver in bright light.”

“This must have been a very large animal,” continued Son-of-Man, obviously impressed. “Are these its ribs?”

“They are its teeth.”

Son-of-Man threw back its head and laughed. “You have a remarkable sense of humor!”

“They are its teeth,” repeated Tembo Laibon.

“No animal that ever lived had teeth half so large,” retorted Son-of-Man. “You are making fun of my ignorance.”

“I am enjoying your ignorance,” replied Tembo Laibon. “But I am telling you the truth.”

“Ridiculous!” muttered Son-of-Man, returning to its seat. It focused its orange eyes on Tembo Laibon for a long moment. “Why are you the Elephant Chief? Your teeth are no longer than mine.”

“I am the Elephant Chief because I say I am,” answered Tembo Laibon with some annoyance. “Do you plan to spend the rest of the night disputing my right to call myself what I wish, or are you ready to play cards?”

“Cards, by all means,” said Son-of-Man. “I have better luck with them than with getting you to answer a civil question.”

“Same rules as always?” asked Ajax the Second.

Tembo Laibon nodded. “No currency presently in use in the Democracy will be accepted.”

“Not even Stalin rubles?”

“None.”

“You let us use them last time,” complained Ajax the Second.

“They were all you had last time,” replied Tembo Laibon. “And I told you then that they would not be acceptable again.”

Ajax the Second frowned. “What about Maria Theresa dollars?”

“Only for the amount of gold they contain.”

Ajax the Second muttered something under his breath. “This could be a short night,” he said more audibly.

“Since I do not wager, but only deal the cards,” said Tembo Laibon, “I will relent if your opponents will accept your currency.” He looked around the table.

“Not a chance,” said the Iron Duchess. “I spend most of my time *avoiding* the Democracy.”

“We all do,” chimed in Buko.

“And some of us,” rumbled the Gorgon in his deep, growling voice, “have very little confidence in the Democracy’s longevity, and hence in the value of its currency.”

“I hate to vote against my fellow man,” said Son-of-Man with false regret, “but currency is too easily traced.”

Tembo Laibon looked at Ajax the Second. “There you have it,” he said.

The small man nodded his head. “All right,” he said.

“You’ve made your point.”

“Buko,” said Tembo Laibon. “Your game, your ante.”

Buko snaked a hand into a pouch that was made of a pelt which bore a striking resemblance to human skin and withdrew a small sparkling gemstone. He stared at it for a moment, then shoved it to the center of the table. “*Krinjaat*,” he announced.

“Please refresh my memory,” requested the Iron Duchess, and Buko launched into a brief explanation of the rules of *krinjaat*, a card game that traced its origins to Binder X on the Inner Frontier, deep at the core of the galaxy. When he had finished speaking, she looked totally confused and decided not to pay the ante.

Son-of-Man sorted through his pile of winnings and finally withdrew an exquisite gold figurine. He held it up for Buko to see, then pushed it next to the gemstone after the red alien nodded his acquiescence. The Gorgon and the Aiantes followed suit, the former with an uncut diamond, the latter with a delicate crystalline sculpture, and finally Tembo Laibon dealt each player six cards, three face up and three face down. Bets and card exchanges ensued, and finally the Gorgon claimed the pot.

Tembo Laibon took a small crystalline pendant from the pot, held it up for the Gorgon's approval, and appropriated it for the house's commission. He then looked across the table at the Iron Duchess.

"Your game, your ante," he announced.

"Draw poker," she said, tossing a diamond bracelet onto the table.

The game proceeded for another ninety minutes, with Son-of-Man and the Gorgon doing most of the winning, the Iron Duchess breaking even, and the Aiantes losing so heavily that toward the end they paid the ante only for card games of human origin.

Then, as the storm continued to pound against the viewport, illuminating it with a series of ghostly blue lights, Tembo Laibon declared a ten-minute break.

The Gorgon immediately stood up and lumbered through the door and out to the main section of the tavern.

"But we just got here," complained Ajax the First.

"Some of us have been sitting at this table for four hours," said Buko, getting up and stretching his reptilian arms.

"Right," chimed in the Iron Duchess. "If Tembo Laibon hadn't called a break, I would have done so myself." She began flexing her fingers one by one, studying them with the interest of a master mechanic.

"I could use a drink myself," said Ajax the Second. "I think I'll pay a visit to the bar."

"What the hell," said his partner. "I might as well join you."

The Aiantes walked to the door, which slid open long enough for them to pass through.

"They haven't gotten any better since the last time," remarked Buko with a smile.

"You've played against them before?" asked the Iron Duchess.

"Twice," said Buko. "You'd think they'd have learned their limitations by now."

"The larger Ajax is the poorer player of the pair," added Son-of-Man. "He bluffs when he should fold, and folds when he should bluff."

"Perhaps I should only invite card players who are better than you," suggested Tembo Laibon wryly.

“That’s not necessary,” said the Iron Duchess. “Just keep ’em dumb and rich and we’ll get along fine.”

“If they lose two or three more hands they’ll be destitute,” observed Son-of-Man, getting up and walking over to examine the ivory more closely.

“Then they will rob another bank to replenish their funds,” said Buko.

“Is that what they do?” asked Son-of-Man.

“When they’re not losing at cards,” replied Tembo Laibon.

“I suppose there’s no immutable law that says a competent criminal must necessarily be a competent gambler,” said Son-of-Man thoughtfully. It turned to Tembo Laibon. “Is that why you only deal and never become an active participant?”

“I take ten percent of every pot,” responded Tembo Laibon. “Why should I gamble?”

“For the thrill, of course,” said Son-of-Man.

“I find other things more thrilling.”

Son-of-Man gestured to the four mounted heads. “Such as killing animals?”

“If it’s done honorably,” replied Tembo Laibon.

“I trust that the killing involves more honor than your obviously exaggerated recounting of it,” said Son-of-Man. “Imagine hunting something with teeth like *this*”—he laid a hand on the ivory—“armed with only a spear!”

“You’d be surprised at the damage a spear can do,” said Tembo Laibon calmly.

“Have you ever hunted with a spear?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know?” demanded Son-of-Man.

“It is my heritage.”

“I suppose these tusks are part of your heritage too?”

“They are.”

Son-of-Man stared at the ivory. “Where were these elephants found?”

“In Africa,” said Tembo Laibon.

“Ah, Africa!” said Son-of-Man with an expansive smile. “The mysterious Dark Continent, covering twenty percent of the Earth’s surface. Home of Mount Kilimanjaro and the Sahara Desert.”

"You've done your homework well," remarked Tembo Laibon.

"But of course," agreed Son-of-Man. "It's *my* heritage, too."

"Africa?"

"Earth."

"Have you been there?" asked Tembo Laibon.

"Certainly," said Son-of-Man. "Haven't you?"

Tembo Laibon shook his head. "Not much to see."

"My dear fellow, you're absolutely wrong! Earth is a veritable paradise!"

"Then why has almost everyone left it?" asked Tembo Laibon sardonically.

"Because Man always rises to challenges," replied Son-of-Man. "I wouldn't be anything else."

"So I gather."

"Really, you must go there sometime."

"I don't think so," replied Tembo Laibon. "They've built a city where my people used to live."

"Where was that?"

"At the foot of Kilimanjaro."

"Ah, yes," said Son-of-Man, happy to display its knowledge. "The city of Nyerere, climbing halfway up the side of the mountain: population two million, four airports, one spaceport, and home of the remarkable Waycross Sculpture." It paused. "Surely you would enjoy seeing such a wonder!"

"No."

"But why not?"

Tembo Laibon's dark eyes suddenly flashed with the fire of an ancient hatred. "Because Julius Nyerere was a Zanake, and the city bearing his name was built on Maasai land."

"The city of Nyerere was built more than three thousand years ago," pointed out Son-of-Man. "What possible difference can it make at this late date, especially to someone who has never even been to Earth?"

"I am a Maasai," said Tembo Laibon firmly. "It makes a difference."

"You are a Man, and all men are brothers," said Son-of-Man. "It is the aliens we must worry about, not each other."

"Spoken like one who knows," replied Tembo Laibon with a touch of irony.

The Gorgon reentered the room and plodded over to his chair, and a moment later the two Aiantes, fortified by alcohol, also returned.

“Are we ready?” asked the Iron Duchess, who had finally finished checking every artificial bone and mechanical joint.

Tembo Laibon nodded and took his seat.

“We are ready,” he agreed, turning to Ajax the First. “Your game, your ante.”

“Five-card stud poker,” declared Ajax the First, taking a diamond ring from his finger and putting it in the center of the table.

Tembo Laibon dealt out the hands, then settled back to watch the players.

The Gorgon, he decided, was like the extinct rhinoceros: huge, hot-tempered, subject to sudden rages, but too stupid to survive against such warriors as Son-of-Man and the Iron Duchess. He was a holdover from the bygone days when a direct approach was the only effective one: he never bluffed, never tried to cut his losses, but simply bulled ahead. If luck was on his side, if the sun was in the warriors’ eyes or they could not sidestep him in the tall grass, he would carry the day and win the battle, as the Gorgon had done earlier this evening—but he would never win the war.

Ajax the Second studied his cards, then shook his head and withdrew from the play. He is the silver-backed jackal, thought Tembo Laibon; confrontation simply isn’t in his arsenal. He circles, he hides, he beguiles, he cajoles, but he never looks the larger predators in the eye as he waits for his turn at the kill. Still, sometimes cunning isn’t enough, and tonight the jackal will go hungry.

Son-of-Man could scarcely conceal the smirk on its almost human face as it pushed a large sapphire to the middle of the table. Tembo Laibon looked at the huge pile of booty in front of it, and decided that it was the hyena of the House of Blue Lights’ little menagerie: a grinning, cackling repository of the spirits of the dead, he was the most efficient of predators. But the hyena’s shrill, irritating laugh and his hideously misshapen body made him shunned and hated above all other animals, as Son-of-Man was shunned and hated in all human and alien societies. The thing that looked like a man chuckled happily when Buko matched its bet, then turned and winked at Tembo Laibon. Yes, thought Tembo Laibon distastefully; definitely a hyena.



He turned his gaze next to the reptilian Buko. A snake, perhaps a mamba? No, the snake was too cunning and devious. Buko was the crocodile, swift and agile, his scaly skin glistening in the sunlight as Buko's shone beneath the blue explosions in Athenia's atmosphere. Hidden beneath the murky surface, the crocodile approached unseen and then struck, just as Buko had been doing all evening to the Aiantes, holding back, never raising, drawing them deeper and deeper into his river of destruction, then opening his fearsome maw when they were too far from shore to retreat.

Ajax the First looked at his cards again, frowned, then removed a jewel-studded platinum locket from his neck and tossed it onto the growing pile in the middle of the table. Tembo Laibon studied him carefully. A lion, he decided. Not a huge black-maned patriarch, such as the Maasai *el Moran*, armed only with spears and shields, would face in mortal combat as their rite of passage into manhood, but a young male who had not yet mastered the hunt, who stood upwind of his prey, stepped on dry branches, allowed a growl of anticipation to pass his lips. It was he who had lost most of the Aiantes' limited supply of treasure, he who had made the hunt doubly hard for Ajax the Second, he who had always given his prey a chance to escape by displaying his strength too soon. Yes, decided Tembo Laibon, a young lion—and, like the jackal, another who was destined to go hungry this evening.

Finally his eyes came to rest on the Iron Duchess. Here was a leopard, small, sleek, savage, intelligent, far more dangerous than animals twice her size. And, like the leopard, she adapted to all terrains. She would bluff the suggestible Son-of-Man and the cautious Ajax the Second; she would back down from the straightforward Gor gon and the hungry Ajax the First. She wasn't holding good cards this evening—even leopards didn't always kill fat, succulent antelope—but even so, she was ahead of the game, as leopards were always ahead of *their* game.

Tembo Laibon sighed and leaned back on his chair, looking at his reflection amid the flashing blue explosions in the viewport.

And what animal are you, King of the Elephants who has never been within fifty thousand light-years of the savannah that gave your people birth? Are you truly your namesake, the strongest and wisest of all living things?

Tembo Laibon stared at himself for a long moment. No, he decided, I am

neither the elephant nor any other animal. I am the caretaker of the Maasai, he who tends the twin flames of our former greatness, who keeps them against the day when prophecies shall be fulfilled and gods shall walk the Earth and the withered tree of the Maasai shall bloom once more. We grew up naked and wild on the plains of the vast Serengeti, swarmed like locusts to the stars, and will follow destiny's spoor wherever it may lead us—and eventually it must lead us home.

In the meantime, it is very pleasant to sit here, safe and secure from the raging storms of Athenia, to grow rich from other people's follies, and to dream of the hot African sun on my back and the acrid scent of game in my nostrils.

He looked once again at the ivory. I must polish and clean you, turn you into white gold once more, prepare you for the day that lies ahead, though how far ahead I do not know. I will start tomorrow.

But then Tembo Laibon remembered that he could not start tomorrow, for tomorrow there would be another game, and the day after that yet another. So he would deal the cards and close his mind to the sights and odors of the players, and continue stockpiling his share of each pot against that day that he would truly be the Tembo Laibon of the Maasai.

"Are you going to deal, or are you going to sit there all night staring off into space?" asked Ajax the First, and Tembo Laibon realized with a start that the hand was over. He immediately gathered in the cards and began shuffling.

Tembo Laibon turned to Ajax the Second. "Your deal, your ante."

"Draw poker," announced Ajax the Second. He fished through his pockets, frowning, and finally withdrew a gold timepiece.

"Not enough," rumbled the Gorgon.

"Let me see it," said Tembo Laibon. He examined the timepiece for a moment, then pushed it back. "The house rules that it is insufficient."

"Then you're going to have to accept these," said Ajax the Second, tossing a handful of gold coins onto the table.

Tembo Laibon looked around the table, then nodded.

"The house will accept them for this hand only."

Ajax the First was about to add an uncut diamond to the pot when Ajax the Second grabbed his hand.

"Sit this one out," he said.

“Why?” asked Ajax the First, confused.

“I’ll need it if I have to bet.”

“Why can’t *you* sit it out and let *me* play?” demanded Ajax the First.

“House rules,” interjected Tembo Laibon. “If you name the game, you play the game.”

“Do what I tell you,” ordered Ajax the Second, and finally his partner shrugged and put the diamond back into a pocket.

Buko, the Gorgon, Son-of-Man, and the Iron Duchess all placed their antes in the center of the table, and Tembo Laibon began dealing the cards.

“Openers?” he asked when each of the players had had a chance to evaluate their hands.

“Toss the diamond in,” said Ajax the Second, and Ajax the First put the uncut diamond on the table. “What else have you got?”

Ajax the First rummaged through his pockets, and came up with another diamond, also uncut.

“Put it in,” said Ajax the Second.

Buko studied his cards, then shook his head and tossed them down on the table. The other three matched the bet.

“Cards?” asked Tembo Laibon.

“Three,” rumbled the Gorgon.

“Two,” said the Iron Duchess.

“None,” replied Son-of-Man.

Everyone paused to stare at Son-of-Man for a moment. It smiled smugly back at them.

“None,” echoed Ajax the Second.

Tembo Laibon accepted the discards, then dealt out three cards to the Gordon and two to the Iron Duchess.

“Bids?” asked Tembo Laibon.

“What have we got left?” asked the smaller Ajax.

“Nothing.” Suddenly Ajax the First turned to the deactivated android. “Just a minute! We’ve still got her necklace.”

“Get it and put it in.”

“You’re sure?” asked Ajax the First.

“I’m sure.”

The larger Ajax got up, removed Helen's necklace, and placed it in the center of the table.

The Gorgon growled and declined to match the bid.

The Iron Duchess held up a large ruby, surrounded by emeralds and star sapphires in an exquisitely detailed platinum setting, Ajax the Second nodded, and she added it to the growing pile.

"I'll see your bet," said Son-of-Man, casually rolling a large emerald across the table, "and I'll raise you." It rummaged through its winnings, withdrew a delicate crystalline sculpture from the Atrian system, and gently placed it next to the emerald.

"I have nothing left," said Ajax the Second.

"Find something," said Tembo Laibon.

"You have your wife," noted Son-of-Man casually.

"And I'm keeping her!" snapped Ajax the Second.

"You must match his bet or forfeit the hand," said Tembo Laibon.

"I'm not forfeiting *this* hand! Give me a minute to come up with something." He gestured to Ajax the First, who walked around the table, took the cards from him, fanned them out just enough to see them, and then returned them. The two conversed in low whispers for a moment, and then Ajax the First nodded. "All right," said Ajax the Second. "I'll see your bet and raise you."

"With what?" asked Son-of-Man.

"Our ship. If I lose, we'll turn over the registration papers to you."

"How will you leave Athenia?" asked Tembo Laibon.

"I don't plan to lose."

"What's the book value of the ship?" asked the Iron Duchess.

"I'd say it's about eight hundred thousand credits."

The Iron Duchess smiled. "I'm afraid we can't accept the owner's evaluation."

Tembo Laibon activated his panel and posed the question. The answer appeared on a small screen a few seconds later.

"Five hundred and fifty thousand credits," he announced.

"Your machine's crazy!" snapped Ajax the Second. "It's worth an absolute minimum of seven hundred thousand!"

"Not in this game, it isn't," replied Tembo Laibon calmly. He paused. "Do you bet or do you fold?"

"I bet," growled Ajax the Second, glaring at him.

The Iron Duchess pushed three gems across the table.

"More," ruled Tembo Laibon after he had examined them.

She sighed, pressed a small gold figurine to her lips, and added it to the gems.

"I'll match your bet," said Son-of-Man, shoving a substantial portion of his winnings into the pot, "and raise you again."

"Damn it!" shouted Ajax the Second. "You know I haven't got anything left!"

"That's hardly my problem, is it?" said Son-of-Man superciliously.

Tembo Laibon waited for Ajax the Second to calm down. "Do you bet or fold?" he asked at last.

"I'm not folding. You'll have to take an IOU."

"IOUs are not permitted."

"We're good for it," said Ajax the Second. "You know that."

Tembo Laibon turned to the Iron Duchess. "Will you accept his IOU?"

"I don't even know him," she replied.

"And you?" he asked of Son-of-Man.

"I don't mean to be unnecessarily pessimistic," it replied, "but what good is an IOU if the author of it is apprehended by the police before he has a chance to pay it off?"

Tembo Laibon turned back to Ajax the Second. "There you have it."

Ajax the Second studied his cards. "You mentioned Helen," he said at last.

"That was a joke, my good man," said Son-of-Man.

"And *I* didn't mention her," added the Iron Duchess distastefully.

"I'm *not* folding," said Ajax the Second firmly. "How long have I got to raise some capital?"

"You may not leave this room," said Tembo Laibon. "That is the house rule, which I have already bent by allowing you to wager your ship when the registration papers are not on your person. You bet what you entered this room with, and when you have nothing left, you are through playing."

Ajax the Second stared at him for a moment. "You've been accumulating a tidy little pile. I want a loan."

"I am not in the business of making loans."

“You’ve known me for eight years,” said Ajax the Second. “You know I’m good for it.”

“Nevertheless.”

“I want it for ten minutes, and I’ll pay you twenty percent interest.”

“You have no collateral,” said Tembo Laibon.

Ajax the Second passed his cards to Tembo Laibon. “*This* is my collateral.”

“I object!” said Son-of-Man.

“No one gives me orders in my own establishment,” said Tembo Laibon, picking up the cards and examining them.

Ajax the Second had a straight flush in hearts, the seven through the jack.

“Well?” said Ajax the Second.

Tembo Laibon stared thoughtfully at the smaller Ajax, and made up his mind. The Maasai, after all, do not reach an accommodation with the jackal; they kill him, or, if they feel charitable, they throw him a bone.

“I will not lend you the money,” said Tembo Laibon.

“But—”

“I am not thorough,” said Tembo Laibon. “I will not lend you the money—but I will buy your hand from you.”

“For how much?”

“Half of what I have before me.”

“You’d better take it,” urged Ajax the First. “It looks like the best offer we’re going to get.”

“And what about my ship?”

“If I win, I will sell it back to you.”

“At book value?”

Tembo Laibon nodded.

“All right,” said Ajax the Second bitterly. “It’s a deal.”

“I object!” said Son-of-Man.

“On what grounds?” asked Tembo Laibon.

“You yourself ruled that the one who named the game had to play the game.”

“And he has played it as far as he can,” answered Tembo Laibon. “If I don’t buy his hand, he is through playing anyway.”

“What do *you* say?” Son-of-Man asked the Iron Duchess.

“It makes no difference to me,” she replied with a shrug. “Only the players will change—not the cards.”

Son-of-Man considered her answer for a moment, then nodded its agreement. “I withdraw my objection,” it said.

Tembo Laibon divided his pile of treasure in half, and pushed one of the two new piles over to Ajax the Second. “You are finished playing for tonight,” he said. “Your money and your treasure is no longer acceptable at this table until you replenish it.”

“That’s fine by me,” said Ajax the Second. “Just finish the hand so we can leave.”

Tembo Laibon estimated how much he owed to match Son-of-Man’s bet and placed a number of jewels, pendants, and carvings in the center of the table. “I call your bet,” he announced.

And then the leopardess struck.

“And I raise it,” said the Iron Duchess, as Son-of-Man looked its surprise and Tembo Laibon tried to remember how many cards she had drawn.

Son-of-Man raised again, and Tembo Laibon, after appraising the two bets, pushed the remainder of his treasure into the pot.

“And raise again,” said the Iron Duchess, adding a perfect blue-white diamond.

Son-of-Man, seeming a little less sure of itself, merely matched the bet, and then turned expectantly to Tembo Laibon.

“I will see the bet,” announced Tembo Laibon.

“With what?” asked the Iron Duchess.

He waved his hand around the walls. “Every artifact here is a rare and valuable collector’s item, worth hundreds of thousands of credits on the open market. Choose any two, except for the ivory.”

“I choose the ivory,” said the Iron Duchess, looking more mechanical and less human with each passing second.

Tembo Laibon shook his head. “Other items are more valuable.”

“Not to you,” she said. “I want the ivory.”

“I am its keeper. I cannot part with it.”

“I am the keeper of the Blue Diamond,” replied the Iron Duchess. “I choose the ivory, Tembo Laibon.”

“You cannot even lift it. What would you do with it?”

“I’ll think of something.”

“Choose any other three artifacts,” offered Tembo Laibon.

She shook her head. “If you’re willing to part with them, they’re no match for my diamond.”

“I rule that they are.”

“You abrogated your right to make such rulings when you purchased Ajax the Second’s hand. And,” she added, “by your prior ruling, you are forbidden to leave the room to bring back more treasure.”

“I hate to vote against my host,” said Son-of-Man pleasantly, “but she’s quite right, you know.”

Tembo Laibon leaned back and studied his cards again, lost in thought. Finally he nodded his acquiescence; the Maasai do not retreat in the face of danger.

“The ivory,” he agreed.

“That’s it,” said Ajax the Second. “Let’s see some cards.”

Son-of-Man laid down its hand first: four aces and the three of clubs.

“Not good enough,” said Tembo Laibon, laying down his straight flush.

All eyes turned to the Iron Duchess. Her plastic lips parted in a smile, showing her titanium teeth, as she placed her cards down on the table one at a time: nine of spades, ten of spades, jack of spades, queen of spades, king of spades.

Tembo Laibon sat in stunned silence for a full minute, while the Iron Duchess gathered in her winnings.

“I will buy the tusks back from you,” he said.

“They’re not for sale,” she replied.

“You have no use for them.”

“They will make a lovely trophy.”

“What need have you for a trophy?” demanded Tembo Laibon. “You have never stalked the elephant across the African plains.”

“But I *have* tracked Tembo Laibon to his own lair, and defeated him in fair and honorable battle,” she replied with a smile. “Whenever I look *at them*, I will be reminded of *this*.” She got to her feet. “I’ll be back tomorrow with two of my assistants. Please have the ivory ready and waiting.”

“What about my ship?” demanded Ajax the Second.



"I'll be happy to sell it to you," said the Iron Duchess.

"For book value?"

"*Plus* fifty thousand credits," she replied with a smile.

"That's robbery!" snapped Ajax the Second.

"No," she corrected him. "That's business."

"You know I don't have the money with me."

"For another fifty thousand credits, I will take you to wherever your money is kept, and then return you to your ship."

He muttered something under his breath, then turned to Tembo Laibon. "Lend me six hundred thousand credits. I'll have it back to you in twenty-four hours."

"Go away," said Tembo Laibon.

"I *can't* go away!" said Ajax the Second in exasperation. "I need my ship."

"Go away," repeated Tembo Laibon tonelessly. "I have lost far more than a ship."

Eventually the Aiantes agreed to the Iron Duchess's terms and left with her. True to her word, she returned the next morning, and for the first time in more than a millennium the ivory passed from the possession of the Maasai.

Fourteen days later an enormous meteorite broke through the force field that surrounded Mount Olympus and pierced the House of Blue Lights, killing everyone within it. Tembo Laibon was surprised that it had taken the god of his ancestors two whole weeks to find him.

## FIRST INTERLUDE (6303 G.E.)

I was sitting at my desk, examining some authenticating hologram of a near-record Horndemon from Ansard IV, when I suddenly realized that I was no longer alone.

A large man, tall and well-muscled, stood in the doorway, staring at me. His skin was black, his hair close-cropped, his clothing stylish and well-tailored. Since I am almost never visited by anyone except senior editors, I assumed that he had chanced upon the wrong office.

"Good afternoon," I said. "Are you lost?"

"I don't believe so," he replied in a rich, deep voice. "This is the Research Department, is it not?"

"Yes."

"And you are Duncan Rojas?"

"That is correct," I replied, staring curiously at him. "Do I know you?"

"Not yet, Mr. Rojas—but you will. My name is Bukoba Mandaka."

He extended his hand and I took it. His grip was strong and firm.

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Mandaka," I said. "How may I help you?"

"They told me at Reception that you are in charge of research. Is that correct?"

"Research and authentication," I replied.

"Then you are the man I want to see. May I sit down?"

"Please do," I said, gesturing toward a chair that rested just beneath an ancient hologram of the legendary hunter Nicobar Lane posing beside an enormous Bafflediver he had just slain.

He ordered the chair to approach him, waited until it had floated over to him, turned it so that it faced me, and seated himself.

"I need your help, Mr. Rojas," he said quietly, "and I am prepared to pay handsomely for it."

"I am quite content with my job here at Wilford Braxton's, Mr. Mandaka," I said.

"I know. That is precisely why I have sought you out."

"I don't believe I made myself clear," I said. "I am very happy with my work and my position; I have no intention of leaving."

"You would be worth nothing to me if you left," he assured me. "It is essential that you have access to all of Braxton's data." He leaned forward intently. "I want you to work for me, right here in your office, during your free time and days off. With luck, it may require no more than a couple of evenings."

"I couldn't possibly consider it without first attaining the company's permission."

"I have already obtained it," said Mandaka.

"You have?" I said, surprised.

"Yes."

"What is it that you wish me to do?"

"I want you to find something for me, Mr. Rojas," he replied seriously. "Something that has been lost for a very long time."

"How long?" I asked.

"More than three thousand years."

"Three thousand years?" I repeated incredulously. "Is this some kind of joke? Because if it is, I am a very busy man, and—"

He placed a holographic voucher for twenty thousand credits on my desk.

"It is made out in your name, and can be withdrawn from any branch of my bank once your retinagram, bone structure, and thumbprint have been confirmed," he said. "Does that seem like a joke, Mr. Rojas?"

I picked up the voucher and examined it. It looked authentic.

"No," I admitted. "It does not. Please continue."

"This is merely a down payment," he said. "When you locate what I am after, I will deposit another thirty thousand credits in any account of your choosing."

I tried to hide my surprise, stared thoughtfully at my interlaced fingers for a long moment, and found myself wondering what service I could possibly render in two or three evenings that was worth that much money.

"What are you looking for, Mr. Mandaka," I asked at last, "and how do you think I can help you?"

"I seek the tusks of the Kilimanjaro Elephant," he replied.

"I have seen photographs of elephants in books and museums," I said.

"But I have no knowledge whatsoever of any particular animal known as the Kilimanjaro Elephant."

"Yes, you do."

"I do?" I said, surprised.

"Let me say, rather, that the Wilford Braxton's *Records of Big Game* does," he amended. "You have published four hundred and nine Terran editions—eighty-two under the imprimatur of Rowland Ward, and three hundred and twenty-seven since Braxton's acquired Ward—and every one of them since the third edition has listed the Kilimanjaro Elephant."

"Well, there you have the problem, Mr. Mandaka," I said. "Our last Terran edition was published almost seven centuries ago, when the last bird was killed. With no possibility of surpassing the various records, there has

been no need to come out with a new edition. Our main work these days is in the Quinellus and Albion Clusters.”

“But museums and collectors from all across the Commonwealth use Braxton’s for authentication of their exhibits, do they not?”

“Yes,” I acknowledged. “But our information on these tusks will be seven centuries out of date.”

“In point of fact, Wilford Braxton’s information is more than three millennia out of date,” he said. “If there were any current information, I would not be offering you fifty thousand credits to help me locate them.” He paused and stared intently at me. “Will you accept my commission? I will, of course, pay for all computer time and access fees.”

“Let us discuss exactly what is involved, and see if we’re both still interested,” I suggested cautiously.

“That is acceptable,” he said. “But I must tell you that if you do not agree to work for me, I will hire one of your assistants.” Suddenly his eyes seemed to glow with an unholy fire. “I will not be thwarted, Mr. Rojas.”

“I understand,” I said, though in truth I did not. “I will need some basic information,” I added soothingly. “To begin with, we list the two hundred best trophies of each species. How will I know which of them is your Kili-manjaro Elephant?”

“He was the greatest of them all.”

“You mean the largest trophy?” Mandaka nodded.

“As I recall, there were two separate and distinct subspecies of elephant. Which was yours?”

“African.”

“Just a moment,” I said, turning to the small glowing crystal on my desk. “Computer?”

“Waiting . . .” replied the crystal.

“Check the 409th Terran edition, under the heading *Elephant*, sub-heading *African*.”

“Done.”

“What is the data on the largest trophy?”

“Left tusk, two hundred and twenty-six pounds; right tusk, two hundred and fourteen pounds.” It went on to list the length and circumference of each.

“Is that your elephant, Mr. Mandaka?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Computer, who possessed the trophy at the time of the 409th Terran edition?”

“Unknown,” answered the computer.

“Have any collectors or museums asked us to authenticate trophies of identical, or even similar, size and weight to these tusks since the 409th Terran edition was published?”

“Checking . . . no.”

“Check through previous editions for the most recent listed owner of the tusks.”

“Checking. . . . The most recent listed owner was Tembo Laibon of Beta Greco IX, also known as Athenia. The listing appears in the 322nd edition, which was published in 3042 G.E. The 323rd edition, published in 3057 G.E., lists no owner.”

“Thank you. Deactivate.” I turned back to Mandaka. “I appreciate your offer, Mr. Mandaka,” I said. “However, I would be taking your money under false pretenses if I didn’t tell you that there is only a minimal chance of success. After all, we are talking about a pair of tusks that disappeared more than three thousand two hundred years ago.”

“I have exhausted all other possibilities,” he replied. “Somewhere in your files or your computer’s memory banks or your correspondence there *must* be a clue, a spoor that you can follow until you find the tusks.”

“Let me make sure that I understand you correctly,” I said. “You have offered me twenty thousand credits to attempt to locate the tusks. If I do not succeed, am I expected to return the money?”

“Not if you have made an honest effort.”

“And I am to receive another thirty thousand credits if indeed I do find them?”

He nodded.

“You understand that I will work on this project only at nights and during my spare time?”

“Yes.”

“Then,” I said, leaning back on my chair, “I agree to work for you. I’ll

need any information you can supply me with. Computer, record this portion of the conversation.”

“Recording . . .” said the computer.

“Well, Mr. Mandaka,” I said, “what can you tell me about them?”

“Very little more than your computer,” he replied. “I know that Tembo Laibon lost them in a card game to a cyborg known only as the Iron Duchess, and she in turn seems to have vanished from human sight and history in the year 3043 G.E.”

“There is no record of what happened to her?”

“She was a criminal,” said Mandaka with a shrug. “Doubtless she had enemies.” He paused. “If the tusks are not in a museum, and your computer implies as much, they may have changed hands hundreds of times since the Iron Duchess obtained them. I think trying to find out what happened to every owner is fruitless, especially since many of them lived on the Inner and Outer Frontiers, where records are at best incomplete. Besides,” he added, “they are all dead; the tusks still exist. Tracing the ivory itself is the only viable course of action.”

“What makes you so certain that the tusks still exist?”

“I would know if they did not,” he said with absolute certainty.

“How?”

“I would know,” he repeated in a manner that precluded further discussion of the subject.

“My next question has nothing to do with my investigation, but I can’t help being curious: what do you propose to do should I find the tusks?”

“Purchase them,” he said promptly.

“And if the owner will not sell?”

“He will sell,” said Mandaka with such assurance that I thought it best not to ask why he thought so.

“What is their approximate value?” I asked.

“I thought you were the expert.”

“Wilford Braxton’s is merely a registry body for trophies, not a buyer or seller of them,” I explained.

“I have no idea what they might be worth to a museum or collector—but I personally am prepared to pay two million credits for them.”

“That’s a lot of money,” I said, impressed.

"They are very important to me," he replied.

"That is my final question," I said. "The elephant itself has been dead for almost seven thousand years. The tusks have been missing for almost three thousand. Why are you so interested in them? What is it about them that makes you willing to part with a veritable fortune to acquire them?"

"I don't think you would believe me if I told you," said Mandaka.

"That is quite possible," I replied. "But why don't you tell me and let me decide for myself?"

"When we know each other better, Mr. Rojas."

"Is that the only answer I am to be given?" I asked.

"For the moment," he said, rising to his feet and directing the chair back to its original resting place. "I don't wish to keep you from your work any longer, Mr. Rojas. I want you to be fresh when you begin tracing the tusks this evening."

"How will I contact you if I find them?" I asked.

"I will contact *you*," he replied. He walked to the door, then turned to me. "I cannot stress too greatly the importance of finding them, Mr. Rojas. You may well be the last hope for the future of my race."

"Your race?" I repeated, puzzled. "But you are a Man."

"I am also a Maasai," he replied with both pride and sorrow. "More to the point, I am the *last* Maasai."

Then he was gone.

It was many minutes before I went back to examining the holograms of the Horndemon.

I returned to my office, after dinner, closed my door, ordered the couch to take the shape of a contour chair, and sprawled back on it.

"A gentle vibration, please," I said.

"Done," replied the couch, as a pleasant tingle went through my body.

"And a little heat in the small of my back."

"Done."

"And I—think I would like a view."

The wall of my office suddenly became transparent, and the lights of the

city flooded the room. My clothing instantly adjusted its color , abandoning its bright indoor hues and becoming a sedate brown.

“Thank you,” I said. “Computer?”

The crystal on my desk glowed brightly. “Ready,” it replied.

“Please recall to memory my conversation this afternoon with Bukoba Mandaka.”

“Recalled.”

“Do you understand what I have been hired to do?”

“You have been hired to locate the tusks of the animal known as the Kilimanjaro Elephant.”

“That is correct. To help me, you will have to access a secondary source, since your own records stop with the 409th edition. Based on your knowledge of the problem, which source would you suggest?”

“If the tusks are currently recorded, they will be registered with the Master Property Tax File on Deluros VIII,” answered the computer.

“Even if they’re owned by a tax-free institution such as a museum?”

“Even tax-free institutions are required by law to list their property.”

I considered it for a moment, then shook my head. “Mandaka said I was his last resort. If locating them was that easy , he’d have found them already.”

“It will take me less than two minutes to verify your conclusion,” said the computer.

“Go ahead, but I think it’s a waste of time.”

“Checking . . .”

“In the meantime, I think I’d better find out exactly what these tusks look like, so I’ll know them if I see them. Have you any holograms on file?”

“No. But I do possess two photographs, both taken prior to the Galactic Era.”

“Let me see them.”

The image of a small black-and-white photograph suddenly appeared in the air just in front of me.

“Adjust my angle, please,” I said.

My contour chair gradually became straight-backed.

“I need a larger image, please.”



The photograph tripled in size. It was a picture of two white-clad men, each one supporting one of the tusks, which towered far above them. The photograph faded, to be replaced by another one showing them on display in a museum.

“He must have been a monster,” I said, awestruck by the proportions of the ivory.

“He was an elephant,” replied my very literal computer.

“I meant that he must have been enormous,” I explained.

“Unknown.”

“Unknown?” I repeated, puzzled. “How can that be unknown?”

“The records are incomplete,” replied the computer. The second photograph vanished, to be replaced by the *Elephants, African* page from the 409th Terran edition of *Records of Big Game*. “Please note,” it continued, “that neither the date of death nor the identity of the hunter is recorded. Furthermore, every other elephant listed was measured for height at the shoulder and body length from tip of trunk to tip of tail, but no measurements exist for the Kilimanjaro Elephant.”

“What about earlier editions?” I asked.

“The data is missing from all editions.”

“Including the one that was contemporaneous with the elephant?”

“That is correct.”

I pondered the computer’s remarks for a moment. “So nobody knew anything about the elephant even when we were still Earthbound, and the ivory completely disappeared three thousand years ago,” I said with a sigh. “I hope I’m being paid enough for this job.”

“Reporting . . . the Master Personal Property Tax file on Deluros VIII has no listing for the Kilimanjaro Elephant’s tusks.”

I didn’t think it would,” I said. A private aircar shone its lights into the office, practically blinding me, and the wall immediately changed from transparent to translucent, while the color of my clothing adjusted accordingly. “All right,” I said at last. “Let’s start with what we know about the ivory. Please give me its history since its first appearance.”

“The tusks were purchased by an American company at an auction on an island called Zanzibar in 1898 A.D. They were shipped to England, where

the British Museum purchased the larger one in 1899 A.D. The smaller was sold and resold many times before the British Museum acquired it in 1932 A.D. They remained in the British Museum until 2057 A.D., when they were donated to the Republic of Kenya and placed in the National Museum at Nairobi. In 2845 A.D. they were removed from Earth and transferred to the Natural History Museum on New Kenya. They disappeared in 16 G.E., appeared briefly on Alpha Bednari in 882 G.E., disappeared for another eight centuries, and then reappeared on the Outer Frontier in 1701 G.E., in the personal collection of Maasai Laibon. They remained the property of Maasai Laibon's descendants until 3042 G.E., when Tembo Laibon lost possession of them and our records cease. According to Bukoba Mandaka, Tembo Laibon lost them in a card game to a woman known as the Iron Duchess, but I cannot verify this."

"That's very curious," I mused. "I wonder if there's a connection?"

"I do not understand," said the computer.

"Didn't Bukoba Mandaka say that he was a Maasai?"

"Checking . . . Verified."

"And one of the owners of the tusks was Maasai Laibon. Could they be related?"

"I must use a secondary source to verify that."

"Please do. And while you're at it, find out exactly what a Maasai is."

"Checking . . ." There was a pause of almost two minutes. "Due to incomplete records, I cannot definitely verify the connection. However, there is a 98.37% probability that Bukoba Mandaka is a descendant of Maasai Laibon."

"Please explain."

"There were less than two thousand five hundred Maasai extant during Maasai Laibon's lifetime, and their numbers have decreased drastically during the past four millennia. Since it is a rigid Maasai social custom to procreate only with other Maasai, the probability of a hereditary relationship between Maasai Laibon and Bukoba Mandaka is 98.37%."

"What *is* a Maasai?" I asked.

"Before the advent of the Galactic Era, humanity was divided into numerous social or political groups, each with its own customs and identity.

The Maasai were one of two thousand one hundred and three such groups inhabiting the continent of Africa.”

“I also notice that Maasai Laibon and Tembo Laibon bear the same family name, but that Bukoba Mandaka does not,” I remarked.

“Laibon is not a name, but rather a title. In the extinct Terran dialect of Swahili, Maasai Laibon means King or Chief of the Maasai, and Tembo Laibon means King or Chief of the Elephants.”

“Does Bukoba Mandaka mean anything in Swahili?”

I pondered the information I had been given.

“So,” I said, “if Bukoba Mandaka is a descendant of Maasai Laibon and Tembo Laibon, can we safely conclude that the Maasai have been interested in the ivory for more than four thousand five hundred years?”

“No,” answered the computer. “You can draw such a conclusion only of those Maasai who actually possessed the ivory between 1701 G.E. and 3042 G.E.”

“But you noted the paucity of their numbers. Doesn't it seem meaningful that the Maasai are so intimately connected with the ivory's history?”

“Not necessarily. We do not know how or why Maasai Laibon obtained possession of it, but it is worth a great deal of money. It is possible that the family retained possession of it only to increase its market value.”

“I disagree,” I said. “Mandaka doesn't want to sell it; he wants to buy it.” I paused and frowned. “I wish I knew why.”

“I possess insufficient data to offer an answer.”

“I know,” I said with a sigh. “Oh, well, this is all very interesting, but it's not getting us any closer to the ivory. I think we'd better get to work. Let me have some music, please; perhaps it will help me to think.”

“Have you a preference?”

“Greddharrz, please.”

The room was suddenly filled with the atonal rhythms and intricate light patterns of Greddharrz's misnamed Fourteenth Symphony—her first twelve had never been performed—and I ordered my chair to conform to the contours of my body once more. Ordinarily I don't like alien music, especially from the Canphor system, but this piece was an exception. The incessant percussion and carefully controlled dissonances always seemed to stimulate my

adrenaline, and it was the piece I invariably chose when I was plotting a plan of attack for a unique research problem.

I sat motionless for perhaps five minutes, sorting out all the probable approaches, then ordered the chair to come to rest on the gently undulating carpet.

“Stop,” I said, and the music and light patterns immediately ceased.

“How much of your total capacity is under my control until the morning?”

“As of this moment, 83.97%. When I finish verifying data for the 36th Sigma Draconis edition, which will take another fifty-three minutes, 85.22% of my capacity will be at your disposal until nine o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“Good,” I said. “We’re going to need every bit of it. First of all, I want you to access the Master Library Computer at Deluros VIII.”

“There are one hundred and twenty-seven billion volumes on file in the Main Library Computer,” it noted. “It will take seventeen days for me to scan the entire collection.”

“I know,” I replied. “But we don’t have any leads, so we need a very general source. There could be a reference to the ivory in a personal memoir, an auction catalog, a museum brochure, a—”

“I ascertained this afternoon that no museum has asked us to authenticate the tusks since the appearance of the 409th edition,” interrupted the computer.

“Not every museum asks us to authenticate its exhibits,” I pointed out. “Nor do all alien worlds register their possessions with the Master Property Tax File. In fact, the Bureau of Property Tax has been centralized on Deluros VIII for only four centuries, so even human museums wouldn’t have reported ownership of the ivory there prior to 5900 G.E.”

“Noted.”

“I want you to begin by accessing all listings of art and biological collections for the past millennium, and then, in order, all auction catalogs, all histories and studies of the Maasai, of Africa, and of Terran fauna. If you don’t find what we’re looking for, then access each of those subjects in five-hundred-year increments back to 3042 G.E. I also want you simultaneously to search for any mention of Tembo Laibon and the Iron Duchess, which means you must scan all accounts of the Outer Frontier beginning at—let me

think—oh, I imagine about 3030 G.E. If you finish accessing all of these subjects without success, then begin a more general search through all non-fiction volumes in the Master Library Computer.” I paused. “I also want you to scan all recent newstapes and electronic media for any mention or hologram of the ivory.”

“Please define ‘recent.’”

“Within the past three years,” I said. “Anything older than that is already on file in the Master Library Computer.”

“Have you any further instructions, or shall I begin?”

“Not just yet,” I said. “We’ve only covered the broad-based approach. Now let’s see if we can’t get a little more specific.” I paused to clarify my thoughts. “We know that the ivory was on the Outer Frontier in 3042 G.E. We have no idea how many people have owned it in the intervening three millennia, but I think we can safely assume that sooner or later it must have come into the possession of someone who understood its true value. Therefore, I want you to scan all insurance records since 3042 G.E.; someone, somewhere, *had* to insure the tusks. Now,” I added, “the ivory is a unique property, so begin your search with those insurance companies that were most likely to cover such an item. If you are unsuccessful, then scan the records of all the remaining insurance companies.”

“Not all insurance records are accessible to me,” said the computer.

“Everything during the Democracy and the Oligarchy should be a matter of public record,” I replied. “If you reach the Monarchy without any success, let me know and I’ll try to arrange access.”

“Correction.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“You used the word Monarchy. The proper term is Commonwealth.”

“I stand corrected,” I said. “However, I should alert you to the fact that Monarchy is a term that is used quite frequently in the electronic media, and is for all practical purposes synonymous with Commonwealth.”

“Registered.”

“That’s all. Please access and scan all these sources simultaneously.”

“Doing so will add considerably to the time it takes me to complete any of them,” noted the computer.

“It can’t be helped,” I said. “Proceed.”

“Working . . .”

The crystal darkened as the computer busied itself accessing various sources, and I left the office and went down the hall to the commissary where I had a cup of tea and scanned the evening newstapes. I returned almost two hours later, found that the crystal was still dark, and decided to take a nap.

The computer woke me at five o’clock in the morning.

“Duncan Rojas,” it repeated over and over, less gently each time.

I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and saw that the crystal was glowing again.

“Yes?”

“I have located the ivory, circa 4375 G.E.”

“Which source?” I asked, curious.

“It was listed on an insurance premium, paid to the Blessbull Agency by Euphrates Pym of Szandor II.”

“Szandor II? That’s on the Inner Frontier, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“How did the ivory get all the way from the Rim to the Core?”

“I possess insufficient data to answer that question.”

“Then bring up all the data that the Main Library Computer possesses on Euphrates Pym,” I instructed it. “I want to know who he was, what he did, where he lived, and how he came into possession of the ivory.”

“Working . . .”