

MIND GAMES

William Walling

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Knowledge dwells
In heads replete with thoughts of other men;
Wisdom in minds attentive to their own.

William Cowper
The Winter Walk at Noon

prologue

Venture there, if you can afford the truly exorbitant wherewithal, and it will be impossible to imagine Eden's raw, pristine state—a frigid, backwater world smaller than Old Earth, the neohuman ancestral home. Selected from among hundreds of candidates because it best fit the prescribed template, the lonely planet featured large, ice-covered seas, a crust readily manipulable by advanced terraforming technology, and sustained no higher life forms per se—a fact completely immaterial to the pleasure world's founders. Had such been the case, the anonymous planet would have been “cleansed.” Of almost equal importance, the isolated mote circled a G₂V main sequence primary, Sol's veritable twin, in a sector of the visited galaxy thus far untrammelled by militant cultures in conflict.

The shadow masters of a far-flung commercial empire, Eden's absentee owners inhabit a remote, enigmatic hydrosphere known as Parvo in Lingua Stella, the interstellar trade patois. An exotic species renowned for “otherness” as well as entrepreneurial brilliance, the Parvons resemble neohumans in only one respect—intelligence.

After a round of stiff competitive bidding, the Parvon Syndicate awarded an exceptionally lucrative contract to a terraforming specialty conglomerate based in Chalseanne, thirty parsecs distant along an intergalactic, nadir geodesic. Titanic mobile fusion cells were brought to bear, powering teragauss generators capable of “seizing” the raw world's molten ferrous core in a magnetic vise. During the course of one standard decade, the barren planet was pulled and pushed into a stable orbit closer to its primary, well within Rasool's Optimum, where exposure to the star's x-ray and ultraviolet flux was deemed ideal for neohuman tenancy. Dual moons were orbited to silver the night skies. Minor adjustments were made to the orbital dynamics of two inner planets and four outlying gas giants, together with their broods of natural satellites. The obscure system's minor bodies were left to seek equilibrium on their own.

Terraforming then began in earnest. An atmosphere enrichment program commenced concurrently with extensive mountain-building projects. Conclusions derived from multiple, exhaustive studies led to

the seas and continents being “cleansed” of inimical life forms—life forms inimical to profit in the Parvon sense—but not before benign, ecologically compatible substitutes had been procured, or cloned, and readied for transport.

Architects and ecologists, engineers, agronomists, marine biologists, artists, designers, social scientists—legions of professionals boasting expertise in a host of disciplines—descended on the gestating pleasure world in droves, accompanied by an enormous, multiracial construction crew. The Parvon Syndicate’s directors worked reflexively, weighing from afar the economic versus aesthetic aspect of every facet of each prospective venture. Trade-offs involving trillions of stellars and millions upon millions of labor manhours were debated at length.

More than eighty planetary systems populated by unmutated and lightly mutated neohuman stock were screened for their most inordinately attractive male and female specimens. Tens of thousands of cloning contracts were signed and, as living quarters became available, cloned infants and toddlers were transported to newly established crèches in Eden and reared according to the Syndicate’s precepts, their maturation rates paralleling final constructions.

The Syndicate’s investment of time, energy and valuta had been immense. The predicated long-range return on the investment could only be estimated as astronomical.

At the end of the sixth standard decade, a pair of senior Syndicate directors—iridescent, vermiculate exotics encased in bioregenerative null-grav capsules to interdict them from the poisonous, oxygen-rich atmosphere—arrived in Eden on a final inspection tour. They found the cloned android population enjoying its late teens and early twenties.

The Parvon Syndicate looked upon its handiwork, and was pleased.

During the seventh standard decade it rested.

PARADISE FOUND
Gessim Ahmed Kallas
Terra Nova, 3427 C.E.

o n e

The weapons technician was nervous. He looked away to avert the inquisitor's chill gaze.

"You did work that night," said Klavik.

"Uh, yessir." The technician licked his lips. "We spent the wee hours crowded into the test lab, waiting for His Omnipotence to tour the site."

Rippling burbles of anxiety mixed with corollary twinges of foreboding impinged upon Klavik's consciousness—reactions he knew were common in subjects under interrogation. State Security Director by appointment to the Crown, he was disappointed by the absence of hoped-for intimidation, his secondary stock in trade. Intimidation was something his impassive features and fixed, unblinking stare ordinarily brought into full flower. If told, few would have believed his primary weapon—enhanced empathic sensitivity, a "sixth sense" that enabled him to clearly perceive gross emotional patterns in others.

Schooled as a specialist in the mental discipline, he had interviewed a veritable parade of witnesses, none of whom were under active suspicion. Recently had he resumed questioning personnel at random, trolling with folded hands and searching mind for slips or stray scraps of information while alert for the slightest hint of elevated emotional disquiet that might prompt intensive questioning. He realized he was again pumping at a dry well. Other than general anxiety over the interrogation by someone in authority, the technician's emotional tenor fell more or less within normal parameters.

"Who told you to leave the arsenal proper?" asked Klavik, who already knew the answer.

"The super. . . Our supervisor, sir. He upped and told us to clear out. We cooled our heels in the lab till His Omnipotence and the, uh, people with him went back aboveground."

"I see," said Klavik, who did not see anything revelatory. During the late night hours in question, Kraan's semi-deified monarch had dismissed his escorting Royal Elite Guardsmen and paid a surprise visit to the underground nuclear arsenal. None of the scientists, engineers, technicians or administrative staffers he had grilled could imagine why the ruler had appeared there unannounced, or if they could, declined to say.

Wearied by session after session of fruitless questioning, Klavik felt it foolish to conclude the interview with the now familiar mantra. He did so anyhow on general principles. "You noticed nothing unusual that night, no untoward incidents, no strangers on the premises?"

A blink of surprise. "Strangers down here, sir? Security's tight as a bung in the complex." The technician tapped the badge clipped to the pocket of his dun-colored jumpsuit. "Eye patterns and a fancy hologram're digitized on these rad badges. Doors stay shut if the reader don't like what it sees. Can't event guess how a stranger'd get inside."

Nor can I, thought Klavik darkly. "You saw no one you failed to recognize?"

The technician's brow creased. "Scuttlebutt says a half-dozen priests came down with His Omnipotence. Didn't see 'em myself."

Klavik had interviewed the prelates individually, and their accounts had been in total agreement. His Omnipotence had asked the clergymen to await his return in the blockhouse atop the vault's sealed, guarded entrance. As with all prior interviews, the present one was going nowhere.

"Wouldn't it be highly unlikely," asked Klavik, "for our gracious sovereign to arrange for the theft of ultra-expensive, weapons grade thorium isotope?" Hoping the off-the-wall query would nudge loose an emotional spike, he was not at all surprised when it failed to do so. "His Omnipotence," he added, knowing the bait useless even before he dangled it, "would have no reason to steal something that was already Crown property."

The middle-aged technician puffed his cheeks. "Never thought of it that way, sir. Me 'n the others, we kicked the whole crazy business around amongst ourselves. What happened to that thorium is. . .No one has a glimmer."

Klavik's enhanced sense of perception reinforced the truth of the statement, and reconfirmed the technician's innocence. The puzzle deepened another notch.

Ultra-sophisticated surveillance systems had recorded nothing unusual, nor had equally complex alarm systems been triggered, on the night a lethal, extremely costly quantity of weapons-grade thorium isotope had vanished from the subterranean arsenal. Working alone as was his habit on any case with global security implications, Klavik had chased a number of skimpy leads. Most had proved to be either arrant hearsay, or confusion attributable to contradictory eyewitness accounts. The current interviews had again led him into a blind cul-de-sac. It was his personal impression that some unknown higher-up within Kraan's fractionated government had engineered the outrageous theft, then

heaped over it a tangled skein of incidentalia no amount of sleuthing could hope to unravel.

Stymied by a total lack of progress, Klavik dreaded the civil war he feared was brewing in Kraan. By this time, the enriched thorium could be in the hands of radical elements within either the Kaolin or Kamala political factions, or both. And when the time was ripe. . .

“Now hear this, Klavik!”

In the act of dismissing the weapons technician, Klavik flinched when the high-pitched, bone-conducted voice erupted from a nanotechnology implant behind his right ear. “Why the crisis circuit?” he demanded of thin air.

Seeing his inquisitor respond to an unseen presence was too much for the weapons technician. He recoiled instinctively.

“Now hear a Class I Directive,” declared the tinny voice. *“You are directed to report to the Palace now now now! Prime Minister Kurani awaits your arrival.”*

Klavik frowned. “Particulars?”

“A planetary emergency has been declared. The PM ordered a crash-priority search for your whereabouts. On his authority, you will proceed directly to level six of the Palace. Do not tarry.”

“Acknowledged.” Klavik thanked the technician. “You can go, but remember what I said. You are not discuss what was said here with anyone. Understood?”

“Yessir!”

Caught up in the stagnant thorium investigation, Klavik had not yet been presented to Kraan’s recently invested chief of state. He guided the government-issue verticraft toward the Palace, reflected upon what he knew, or had heard, about the former Royal Aerospace Forces icon.

Urged by his personal physician to undertake a long rest, Kewart ab Kraan, Esemplastos, His Omnipotence XXIV, had departed for a solitary holiday in Eden, leaving behind his consort and the juvenile heir apparent, Prince Kewart. A Lord Regent and Protector of the Crown had been appointed to act during the monarch’s absence, a move viciously maligned by the right-wing Kaolin media, who accused Kraan’s wan, unwell ruler of “turning his back” on grossly unsettled conditions in the homeworld.

Kraan’s beloved sovereign, offworld now for subjective months, had invited RAF Grand Marshal Kurani to form a bipartisan government, a compromise agreed to by both political parties. A

staunch if previously unannounced adherent of Kamala political philosophy, Kurani had been found acceptable to the Kaolin nobility due to his reputation for rectitude and fair dealing. A political null throughout his distinguished military career, the new prime minister had explained in his inaugural address that laying aside his cherished grand marshal's baton was the most excruciatingly difficult thing he had ever done. He had also voiced a conviction that planetary politics must by necessity end at the ionosphere. Even so, with the world watching and listening, he had taken the bit in his teeth and donned the burnt-orange robes favored by the Kamala. Yet in his very next breath he had announced that his deeper loyalty had always been, would forever be, to the Crown.

Controversy and political infighting notwithstanding, popular acclaim for the former grand marshal had risen to landslide proportions. Kurani's straight-from-the-shoulder approach to governing had fueled a public perception that he viewed himself above the political fray, and had adopted the role of elder statesman, saying he had no choice but to respond instantly, without reservation, to his sovereign's invitation to form a bipartisan government.

But 'bipartisan' is a slippery term, thought Klavik. Assuming office, the PM instantly became embroiled in a thick atmosphere of Kaolin finger-pointing and behind-the-scenes intrigue. Dismayed by the polarization sundering the homeworld, Kurani's patriotic soul had been sickened by the looming prospect of Kraan warring against Kraan. He had seized the nettle firmly, with typical blustery bluntness. During the Regency's first chaotic month heads had rolled, Kamala burnt-orange and Kaolin oyster-white alike. With Kraan's hereditary monarch enjoying a recuperative holiday in the notorious, parsecs-distant pleasure world, the threat of civil war had been narrowly averted.

Or had it? Klavik asked himself. The reason for the emergency summons was worry-making.

Orbiting high above the forested, night-shrouded reservation surrounding the Royal Enclave, he waited impatiently for a bull's-eye landing pad to illuminate on the Palace's mid-level roofpark. He disengaged the autopilot, but left the ID transponder activated; without its encrypted signal, concentrated laser fire would have incinerated the ducted-fan verticraft the instant it encroached upon restricted airspace. He brought the vehicle to a full hover, rotated the four-seater about its vertical axis, and nudged it forward until a green cross glowed in the head-up display, slightly off-center of the orange bull's eye symbol. He jockeyed the verticraft sideways, visually superimposed the green cross on the center of the concentric, illuminated landing circle below.

Winds aloft gently buffeted the hovering vehicle. He stretched forward to initiate descent, and hesitated when activity on the ground caught his eye. Red and blue lights were flashing all around the reservation's perimeter. He leaned sideways, forehead pressed against the transpex bubble, and studied the scene below. What from on high looked like null-grav heavy weapons sleds were drawn up outside all four cardinal access points to the reservation. Tiny figures milled about in the adjacent canyonlike streets. Far off, beyond Constitution Mall, something similar was apparently taking place in and around the greenbelts and esplanades separating clusters of high-rise government buildings.

The looming specter of civil war elevated Klavik's pulse rate. He punched up Doppler radar, turning command of the verticraft over to ground control. With a drop off in power, the verticraft fell toward the roofpark, flared to a semi-hover, surged propulsively twice more, and settled on pneumatic shock-dampening struts. Klavik kicked on the brakes, shut down the whispering ducted fans and depowered. He unbelted and cracked open the hatch.

Laser weapons at port arms, a quintet of gray-green uniforms jogged toward the grounded vehicle. "This way please, sir," invited a Royal Elite Guards subaltern.

Apprehension lent haste to Klavik's strides as he was escorted across the roofpark's deserted expanse. He was ushered into an express lift. The floor fell away with gut-wrenching suddenness and the compartment practically went into freefall. Seconds later it juddered to a stop under knee-bending deceleration. The doors rolled apart, exposing a wide hallway carpeted in muted tones of blue and gray.

Prime Minister Kurani, standing in the hallway legs apart, his hairy, muscular forearms folded belligerently across his chest, wore a sleeveless burnt-orange robe. Waves of red rage emanating from him reverberated in Klavik's mind like a drumbeat. The State Security Director cringed inwardly.

His expressionless features at odds with the emotional turmoil perceived by Klavik, the PM curtly dismissed the guardsmen. "Come, we must speak in private." Erect and straight-backed, the much older man's age-defying military carriage made Klavik hustle to keep pace. "We're not acquainted," said the statesman over his shoulder, "but your reputation precedes you."

Klavik trailed the PM into the Palace's opulent, high-ceilinged library. His craggy features composed by sheer force of will, his

manner stiff and uncompromising, Kurani closed the parqueted double doors behind them. “We’ve a major crisis on our hands,” he announced, his timbrous bass voice edged with rancor. “You were out of your office when summoned. Where were you?”

“At the arsenal, Prime Minister. I’m still investigating —“

“Ah, the thorium, of course. It had slipped my mind.” Despite the climate-controlled library, the other was perspiring. Standing statue-still, head lowered, hands clasped behind his back, he said without preamble, “With the Lord Regent’s approval, I’ve ordered full mobilization of all aerospace, ground and naval forces. More than once has His Omnipotence spoken very highly of you, Klavik. He praised your work, your devotion to the Crown. I therefore, have no qualms about where your loyalties lie. If, as I suspect, a Kaolin coup is brewing, we must learn of it at once.”

Cascading burbles of shock intermixed with naked outrage impinged upon Klavik’s consciousness. He made an effort to sublimate his own emotional turmoil, but the other’s agitation affected him, inhibited clarity of thought. “Your pardon, sir. Why do you believe a Kaolin coup is in the —?”

“Believe. . ? It’s not a matter of ‘belief,’” assured the other with ascerbic intonation. “I’m *certain* that pack of white-robed renegades is readying a stealthy move of some sort. And a murderous, underhanded move it’s likely to be. I know they’re behind it. *Know* it!”

“Behind what, sir? What basis have you for —?”

“*Basis. . .!*” The other blanched. Then he subsided. “Forgive me; I assumed you’d been told. Less than two hours ago, the Lord Regent received a hyperspace transmittal from that hedonistic pigstye, Eden. His Omnipotence has been assassinated.”

Klavik’s limbs turned rubbery. Sinking back in a lounge, he stared upward, speechless, at the stoic mask of Prime Minister Kurani.

t w o

Massed drummers beat a slow dirge tempo, the heartbeat of a mourning planet. A uniformed Royal Elite Guardsman held the reins of a saddled, riderless *kelwaat* and marched beside the tawny beast to the solemn, slow-step cadence. The animal's bullet head and smooth-furred, rippling musculature bore no resemblance to its equine counterpart, but a military boot reversed in one stirrup preserved the tradition born centuries earlier in Old Earth.

Preceded by a mounted honor guard, the Lord Regent's brocaded ceremonial robe hung about him as heavily as his heart. He rode alone within the bejewelled coronation coach leading the procession, preceding an antique caisson bearing the catafalque and an empty, flag-draped coffin. Behind the slow-rolling caisson, the opulent Royal carriage was drawn over the Sacred Way's worn cobblestones by a matched pair of *kelwaat*.

The sorrowful cortege wound its way past silent, densely packed throngs along the broad, tree-shaded thoroughfare. Subdued for the most part, the people were desolated by the knowledge that they had been deprived not only of their hereditary sovereign, but of his remains as well.

The surviving Royals managed to sustain their regal bearing. Prince Kewart sat stiffly, knees together, staring straight ahead with unseeing eyes. Proud and expressionless beside him, the veiled widow who was his mother rested one hand on her son's arm.

Trailing the Royals, a third, less ostentatious carriage swayed beneath the prime minister and state security director. When the conveyance passed beneath a soaring triumphal arch erected in honor of Kraan's first omnipotent sovereign, the PM took advantage of the brief respite from public scrutiny. "Their mood?" he asked. "What do you make of it?"

Tall and rangy, wearing neutral gray rather than the burnt-orange robe of Kurani's allegiance, Klavik's dark, hooded eyes lent him an air of looking far beyond what he could see. He had allowed his cultivated sense of esthesis to pulse the throng's emotional tenor as they rode. His response was slow in coming. "Sublimated rage, sir. Simmering

outrage and icy fury melded with the deepest imaginable sorrow. For the moment, I doubt if there's much to fear from the loyal opposition."

"Loyal, hah!" The exclamation, uttered quietly, grated in Klavik's ear like a throaty boar's grunt of disgust. "The conniving Whites are about as loyal as brook trout. There'll be a reckoning for this infamy. Once we learn how the treasonous Kaolin nobles used the odious pleasure world to effect a regicide, well. . ." The somber threat was left unfinished.

"Forgive my presumption, sir, but we did agree to let the dust settle before moving forward. Random finger pointing is no substitute for a logic-driven, intensive investigation."

"Logic, aye! Assuming the worst on the part of the Kaolin fanatics is to my way of thinking entirely logical."

Uncomfortable with what he knew had to be said, Klavik said it anyhow. He mentioned their previous discussion, when a variety of possibilities and probabilities had been postulated. "Take no offense, sir. Mightn't your brand of 'logic' be tainted by personal bias?"

The other's low-voiced expletive was lost in the sound of ironshod carriage wheels rolling over worn cobblestones. After a brusque nod of acquiescence, the PM subsided.

Klavik settled back against the cushions. He retrieved the train of thought derailed by the other's caustic utterances. The hideous reason for cutting short his investigation of the vanished thorium could not be gainsaid, nor could the PM be faulted for preempting it. Even on short acquaintance, he had come to admire the former grand marshal's dogged determination, his towering strength of character. Yet being torn away from the pursuit of justice, denied even the opportunity to put some form of closure to it by filing a report, rankled him.

Rife with speculation ever since he had learned of the assassination, he could not shake an intuitive feeling that some connection existed between the missing thorium and the horror in distant Eden. Prime Minister Kurani, on the other hand, held fast to his preconceived assumption that radical elements within the Kaolin nobility were responsible for the frightful crime, if not *both* crimes. Under enormous pressure due to the infinitely more pressing assignment now before him, Klavik had hoped to dismiss the thorium puzzle from his thoughts. But the unfinished business continued to nag him. Discovering who had perpetrated the infamy in Eden, and why, was of course first and foremost, and yet. . .

Shock and bereavement at losing Kewart ab Kraan, Esemplastos, His Omnipotence XXIV, had rocked the planet to its foundations. In less than three standard cycles, were the Regency to be extended, adolescent Prince Kewart would accede to the throne, thereby

perpetuating an unbroken succession of hereditary monarchs stretching back almost to the neohuman colony's founding.

Yet strangely enough, news of the tragedy had welded the divisive populace into one people, with a single mind and purpose. The protest marches and vicious riots disrupting society had subsided, then ceased of their own accord, as if a switch had been thrown. Diametrically opposed politically they might be, but dissidents within the conservative, moderate and radical factions of either party had apparently fallen back and regrouped in the face of common adversity. Neither the Kamala nobility nor their Kaolin counterparts, or for that matter their partisan, hoi-polloi followers, had voiced a syllable of discontent with the age-old institution of constitutional monarchy, or about Kraan's lost, revered monarch himself.

The Kamala-controlled media had naturally hurled allegations of regicide at the Kaolin hierarchy, while the loyal opposition—Klavik wondered how “loyal” the Whites had been during those first, desperate hours—had fallen back, retrenched and drawn about themselves a shell of wary. . .

Had it been indignation, he asked himself, or guilt?

An uneasy truce had ensued. Bringing the guilty party or parties into the light, and effecting concomitant punishment—a hoary Kraan tradition—had inspired a firestorm of public outcry. With a single voice the people of Kraan had shouted a vociferous demand for those culpable to be searched out and obliterated. Media pundits aligned with either political faction had trumpeted a concerted warning, saying in effect that if some unknown malefactor had used Eden's arbiters of pleasure to effect the loathsome crime, why then so much the worse for Eden. Resolving the question of guilt, and bringing the perpetrator before the bar of justice, were endeavors Klavik knew would occupy his every waking moment for some time to come.

The hem of the Lord Regent's rich robe rippled about his crimson boots as he and Kurani mounted the cathedral steps side by side, staying behind the Royals as a measure of deference. Slowly, one broad riser at a time, the foursome ascended to the cathedral's marbled entrance and filed into the vast basilica. A robed archprelate bowed low and ushered them to seats in the front row of handcarved pews.

Strains of ancient music—the “Dead March” from Handel's *Saul*—accompanied the lock-step entrance of uniformed pallbearers. The

ebon catafalque was borne to an alcove in the nave, the figurative if not literal resting place of His Omnipotence XXIV. Beneath the raised ceremonial sabers of two dozen Royal Elite Guardsmen, the coffin was lowered to the gleaming tiles beside a niche in the royal columbarium.

Prince Kewart covered his mother's hand, a comforting gesture.

Clad in cloth-of-gold vestments and miter, the sad-eyed Lord First Advocate stood before the coved altar, waiting for the mixed choir to fall silent. His sonorous baritone filled the basilica. "Your Royal Highnesses, Lord Regent, Prime Minister, cherished and honored friends, we are gathered on this dolorous occasion to pay homage to the thrice-blest Father of us all who has been rudely taken from our midst. Yet His Omnipotence shall not be remembered that way, for in this, our hour of supreme bereavement, He is with us still. The Holy First Principle tells us Change is universal. The universe that nurtures us is dynamic, not static, not immutable. The universe is evanescent, ever-changing, and it is our obligation to change with it.

"His Omnipotence is now one with the universe, where naught is ever lost or gained. Hence it matters not whether in our minds and hearts He assumes the form of a wise, benevolent Father cast in the neohuman image, or as an invisible essence dwelling forever in the limitless seas of infinity. . ."

High in the nave, Klavik tried to stay out of sight. Large-boned, with the breadth of shoulder befitting the denizen of a massive world like Kraan, he crouched behind the mirror-faced shield held by a sculpted Kraan warrior of old. Rough-chiseled features jelled in concentration, he looked down upon the sorrowful congregation below. Letting his enhanced sense of esthesis rove the cathedral floor, he tried to sort and categorize the cascades of fleeting emotional impressions, and found it extremely difficult. Time and again he asked himself the detective's immemorial question: Who stood to gain the most by murdering Kraan's revered sovereign? In each instance, a tentative answer flashed through his mind. In each instance, he refuted it.

Targeting the contingent of Kaolin nobles and officials—row upon row of somber men and women in oyster-white robes—he strained to absorb the nuances of emotion wafting upward. His searching mind met subtle, fluctuating ripples of sorrow, here and there spikes of profound outrage coupled with smatterings of outright fear. The dearth of clearly perceptible emotional patterns did nothing to encourage, or for that matter alleviate, a suspicion he had unwillingly begun to share with the

PM. Tenuous yet tangible, he could not put down an intuitive feeling that one or more nobles of the “loyal opposition” were responsible for the despicable crime.

Unable to differentiate between the emotional tenor of one segment of the congregation and another, he grimaced. The broad emotional spectrum boiling upward from the thousands jammed into the immense basilica had a moderately uniform quality: overwhelming sadness coupled with a pervasive rage lurking close beneath a veneer of grief.

Somewhere in the Lord First Advocate’s ever-changing universe, he thought bitterly, the abysmal sadness visited upon the homeworld was causing delight.

A professional criminalist conditioned to become an adept in the quasi-telepathic discipline of empathic perception, Klavik deeply appreciated his gift. But thorough self-knowledge made him realize that, for the time being, his own outrage tended to defeat whatever insight he might have gained from pulsing the multitude seated and standing on the cathedral’s vast floor. Unnerved by an uncharacteristic lack of self-control, and in fact angry with himself for what he considered a weakness, he stepped out from behind the warrior’s statue and strode briskly from the coign of vantage. Descending the cramped spiral stair dispirited, he reached the basilica’s floor just as the Lord First Advocate concluded the invocation.

“...nor shall we dwell upon the injustice of the supreme tragedy visited upon Kraan. While in deepest mourning, we must and shall go forward, one people striving toward a single goal. We have little choice but to accept the devastating loss Change has thrust upon us, for only in such acceptance does sanity lie. We shall live our lives in the spirit of the Holy First Principle, for Change is all and all is Change. A truly vile deed has snatched His Omnipotence from our midst. Long live Kewart ab Kraan, Esemplastos, His Omnipotence Twenty-fourth!”