

The Counterfeit Emperor

A novel by Brian Buckley

The sky, I thought, is not so grand;

I 'most could touch it with my hand!

And reaching up my hand to try,

I screamed to feel it touch the sky.

-Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Renaissance"

PART I: STAR-WITCH

Chapter 1

When Petras Fairburn first heard the news, it was the strangest thing he'd ever learned in his twelve-year-old life. The Star-Witch had come to *his town!*

His classmates had talked of nothing else today, and the stories were as different as the children who told them. One boy said the Star-Witch could turn invisible; no, said another, the trick was she could do things to your brain that made you forget her. Yet another said she could not be killed except by falling into a black hole – that she had a lifeword on Emperor Monifice himself – that she was four hundred years old – no, two thousand – no, older even than the Empire. They agreed on one thing only: that anywhere the Star-Witch visited was never the same for long.

The school bus stopped. Petras alone got out; no other children lived in the eastern commercial district, among the shops and signs and clear white lights, as he did. He leaped a stretch of grass and crossed the parking lot at a run, feet thumping over the rough gray surface. The fury of his exertion whipped at his coarse black hair and dotted his brow with sweat. Petras was strong for his age, and fast; to prove it now he pushed himself to greater speed, savoring the air-rush on his cheeks and the brief, continuous feel of flying.

The other children had been bubbly with excitement over the coming of the Star-Witch, but he thought that was stupid. Despite all the stories about her, nobody seemed to have any clear idea of who she was, or why she had come, or what she would do. They just loved talking about her.

Not Petras. The Star-Witch was important, of course; anyone could see that. But he had to *understand*.

He still wasn't sure where the news had come from, though a couple of the older students said somebody's parents had seen her walking down the street, plain as anything. They had talked about checking the official Imperial news on the Net for confirmation, but Petras knew better. The official news was worthless.

He would ask Father when he got home. Father would know.

He caught a flash of blue in the corner of his eye, halted, and looked left to see a car slam to a stop just short of hitting him. It hovered there, just off the ground: a sleek vehicle, about five meters long, all smooth lines and curves like a shuttle. Its propulsor strips glowed blue from underneath, humming quietly. Expensive. He raised his hand in apology and would have run on, but the door opened, and a man stepped out. Petras felt a queasy thickness in his throat.

The man was young, blond hair cut close, and his thin, pale lips narrowed further in his anger, but it wasn't the man's anger that scared Petras. It was the uniform: black boots, black jacket and trousers, dark blue sash, cap, and collar. An Impo officer – a member of the Imperial police. "Impo" was a silly word that had made him giggle the first time he heard it, but it didn't seem funny right now.

"The hell is wrong with you?" demanded the officer. "You want to get hit by a car, kid? Huh?"

Petras blinked in shock at the swear word. Father had said such words before, but not often. And that accent all Impo had, slight but distinctive: *Yoo wont to get heet by a cahrr, kid?*

"No, sir. I'm sorry."

"I said, what the hell is wrong with you?" The officer grabbed Petras's chin, fingers clamping painfully tight, and made him look up. "What's your name?"

"Petras, sir." The 'sir' was a lesson from Father; anyone in a uniform was 'sir,' whether they deserved it or not. He thought this one didn't deserve it.

"*Full* name. Look at me."

"Petras Fairburn, sir." He swallowed, knowing that a name like Fairburn would mark him as a native Winnokan, if his lack of an Impo accent hadn't already.

"Petras Fairburn, sir. Didn't your mommy teach you to look at the damn road before you jump in front of cars, Petras-Fairburn-sir?"

Petras shut his eyes tight, opened them. His heart hammered. "Sir, my mother is dead."

"No wonder. Probably shot herself, having to raise a brat like you." The man let go. He tapped the netlink embedded in his finger to check the time, and grimaced.

"You're lucky I have more important things to do than beat the shit out of you. This one's a warning. If I see you again," he said, stepping back into his vehicle, "I'll fuck you up proper."

The car surged forward; Petras watched, taking quick, deep breaths as it glided away.

Father had warned him about the Impo. They'd gotten worse lately, more obvious in their contempt for the locals. It hadn't always been this way. Only two years ago, he would often get off the bus at the western edge of the commercial district and walk the last kilometer on his own, taking his time, wandering through the giant indoor mall and

stopping to look in the dozens of shop windows that lined the avenue. Back then, the police had been mostly of the gray-uniform local variety, and they'd left him alone.

Now only the Impo patrolled the streets, and he took the bus every day.

Some kids at school said things would be different, now that the Star-Witch was here. That she would use her powers and make the Impo leave everyone alone. He didn't believe that, either, but a part of him hoped – just a little.

Petras ran past the end of the sprawling white warehouse and into the smaller parking lot that marked the familiar end of each day's journey home. There, between the pet store and the herbal boutique, stood his destination: 'Fairburn's Exotic Varieties,' read the sign. The front of the building was a single two-story-tall piece of see-through polycore, curved like a pale blue ocean wave, still shiny from its last cleaning. Father kept his storefront free of dirt. You had to clean up your store, he said, before you could clean out your customers.

The doors parted and cool air enveloped his face, welcome after the summer heat. Father was inside – a tall, solidly built man, with the same black hair and blue eyes as Petras, the same square jaw and pale skin. He was with a customer; he nodded at Petras, but did not break his conversation, and did not smile.

That wasn't good. Normally, he smiled.

Petras brushed past the automated register and the rows of merchandise to the door in the back: 'Employees Only.' He took the stairs up to the second level, where the two of them lived, and reached his room at the end of the hall. It was a small space, its curvy white ceiling sloping down to brush his head at its lowest point, but he was glad to be alone for the moment.

Against his will, he replayed in his mind the scene with the Impo officer. He was still angry, still scared; and the more he thought about it, the more scared and angry he got, till he felt ready to explode. It wasn't right! Why should the Impo be able to do this, to make him feel this way? What was the reason? There was no reason, no reason at all!

He dealt his pillow a tremendous blow, took a breath, and was still.

Sighing, Petras glanced in the mirror. A flick of his right index finger, with its embedded netlink, activated the nanofibers in his clothes and transformed his school outfit into his ash-gray store uniform. He straightened his shirt, descended the stairs and got to work.

Father was still with the customer, so he assumed his usual after-school duty: sweeping the floors. Many stores had self-cleaning floors, but Father did not have the money for that. Waving the brown, long-necked tool over every square meter of the shopping area was boring work, but it would soon be over, and then Father could sort through the rumors of the day.

Besides, if you were stuck with sweeping duty, Fairburn's Exotic Varieties was a pretty good place for it. Everything in it was from far away. At the back of the store was a section labeled with the name of their own planet: WINNOKA. There were bulb-shaped bottles of sand from the Winnokan Central Desert, and chime bracelets from the north pole at the opposite end of the world. As you worked your way toward the front of the store, the merchandise came from off-world, from ever more distant locations – a holographic fire-dancer from Senris, an antique ripgun from Darmis, a sculpture of the Emperor from Riaadika. Finally, in the main window was a long prayer sash woven in the shape of a Möbius strip, a genuine relic from the Church of the Infinite God, in

Vorne, at the center of the galaxy. Petras swept and dusted, and wondered which of these places was home to the Star-Witch.

At five o'clock the store closed, but Father kept on with the customer: a sandy-haired man, lanky, with a hooked nose. At quarter to six the man finally left, and Petras could see from Father's face that he had not made the sale. They exchanged short greetings and went upstairs in silence.

As usual, they ate at a little table in the far corner of the kitchen, the lights dimmed to save money. Supper was unpleasant. Father's silence compelled him to look down at his plate of synthetic veg-and-beef, or across the table at nothing in particular. At last he found the courage to speak.

"The Star-Witch is here, in Southshire," he said. "They say she's been on Winnoka for years now, traveling from one city to the next. They say she's looking for something. And now she's here."

Father did not at first seem to hear. When he answered, it was quiet. "Chiyoko's a criminal. You stay away from her."

"Chiyoko? Is that her name?"

Father's head bobbed once. "And the only reason you need to know it is so you can keep far away. She's at the top of every most-wanted list in the galaxy."

Petras had heard this about her, too, in the flood of other information. Father's statement lent the fact a sober reality. "What did she do?"

"Does it matter?"

"I just wondered if maybe she was going to get rid of the Impo."

"If she does try anything, then all the more reason to keep away!" he snapped.

Silence.

Father wasn't always like this, but when he got in one of his tempers, there was no use trying to talk to him. Still, Petras had gotten two bits of solid information: the Star-Witch was named Chiyoko, and she was a criminal. He was grateful for any clarity he could extract from the mess of silly rumors. And a part of him whispered again: *she might be here to fight off the Impo after all – she just might!*

Father's mind was elsewhere. "I knew he was never going to buy that relic. After five minutes of talking to him, I just knew. Why did he waste my time like that?" He looked at Petras. "Why do people do that?"

"I don't know," said Petras, because some answer seemed required.

Father shook his head and looked down. "He was the third customer I had all day. Three, in a whole day. When your mother was alive we had to hire extra help from the university to handle everyone. And now we get three in a whole day."

"Is it the offworlders' shop?" On the west side of town, in the city's other commercial district, an offworld chain had opened up a store. Father often spoke bitterly about the offworlders and the competition they brought.

"They're bribing them," he said, meaning that the offworlders were bribing the Impo. "They have to be – they're bribing them, and the Impo aren't enforcing the tariff. They're still selling at the good old price from before the law. Blasted Impo are probably buying 'em themselves." He seemed suddenly aware of what he was saying. "But you know not to talk about it to anyone, right? It doesn't do any good, telling people this."

"I know."

"People treat you different when you're a native Winnokan. When you grow up,

get out of here. Doesn't matter where, just don't live on this planet."

Petras nodded. He had heard this before.

That night, he pulled his viewscreen out of its drawer and sat on his bed with it. It was thin and flexible as paper, and fit neatly in his lap. He tapped it, and it activated, responding to the netlink inside his finger. With a few more taps, he told it he wanted information on the Star-Witch. Chiyoko – that was her name. His searcher directed him to the official Imperial page, of course, emblazoned at the top with the seal of the Emperor, the gardenia, in Imperial green and white. The Imperial pages were pretty worthless, true, but he figured they were better than nothing – and nothing was the only alternative.

As expected, he found little information. Mainly it told him the same thing Father had: that she was a criminal, very dangerous. What intrigued him, though, was the picture. The photo had her from the shoulders up, looking at something to the side, lips apart, hint of a smile. She had smooth black hair that stopped just short of her shoulders. But could she really be the Star-Witch? She looked so young! The page gave no birth date for her, but she could not have been more than twenty-five, and really she might have been twenty. The photo was recent. How could anyone so young have such a reputation?

Could someone like her really get rid of the Impo, even if she wanted to?

He looked up and saw Father standing in the doorway.

"Petras," he said quietly, "I'm sorry. There have been problems, but I shouldn't take them out on you. It's not your fault."

Father did this occasionally. The apologies always put him off balance. He didn't

know how to handle this brief shift in power between them; he tried to smile. "It's okay."

Normally this sort of conversation ended there, but Father paused, shifting from one foot to the other as if collecting his thoughts. After a moment he smiled back. "I really am sorry. I'm turning into a grouchy old man, and it's too late for me to be anything else. But you're still young, Petras, and sometimes I'm afraid I'm turning you into a grouchy young man. You're so serious, so careful about things, and that's good, but if your mother were still alive..."

He was looking off somewhere, eyes unfocused, but he brought his gaze back to Petras. "What I'm trying to say is...you have to start deciding for yourself about things. I was born on Winnoka and I'll die on Winnoka, but you'll leave someday, and when you do, you don't have to be like me. You're growing up. Maybe someday you'll even have a son of your own, and then maybe...maybe you can be a better father than I am. You have choices now. That's what I'm trying to say."

Father shook his head. "Am I making any sense?"

Petras nodded slowly. "I think so."

"Good night, Petras. I love you."

"Good night, Father."

Choices. What kind of choices did he have now?

Petras put away the viewscreen and lay back on his pillow, tugging the sheets up over him. Then – as he often did on nights like this – he pulled Mother's picture from the nightstand and examined it. She seemed pretty to Petras: smiling, with brown hair that curled at the ends. It was a casual picture, not posed, and some building with a lot of steps stood in the background. Looking at her, he tried to draw the reality of her from the

image, imagining her as a real person, as his living mother. As usual he thought he succeeded, and as usual, the success saddened him. Yet this, too, he felt as a kind of duty.

He put the picture away, turned off the light, and went to sleep.

Two weeks later, Petras met the Star-Witch in person.

Chapter 2

The day he met the Star-Witch, Petras was walking through the high, pristine aisles of the Southshire general store, looking for a few bars of sucrose foodstock to finish off Father's shopping list. They already had plenty of protein foodstock bars at home – they bought those in bulk, and their food synthesizer did a fine job processing the bland, multipurpose blocks into a variety of colorful dishes, like veg-and-beef, veg-and-pork, carbs-and-sauce. But the sucrose bars were very exciting because they could be processed into something called strawberry sorbet. He had no idea what 'strawberry' meant, but sorbet was a rare treat that Father had promised him tonight, to celebrate having sold three of their antique Darmian ripguns.

As he headed toward the sucrose foodstock stand, he stiffened, noticing a man at the entrance wearing Impo blue and black. It was the same blond-haired, pale young officer who had stopped him that day in the parking lot. Petras turned away, hoping not to be noticed.

It was a small shop, though, and there were not many customers. The officer sidled over.

"Heeeeyy," the man drawled, "it's the little shit that almost put a dent in my grille the other day. How you doing, little shit?" *How yoo doing, leet-uhl sheet?*

"I'm fine, sir," said Petras, looking down.

"Oh, pay me no attention to me. I'm just shopping, same as you."

"Yes, sir." Swallowing, Petras reached for a foodstock bar. The man's eyes followed his motion intently, the exaggerated grin never leaving his lips. As Petras moved to put the bar into his bag, the man spoke suddenly.

"You know what? That was the one I wanted. Going to make me a nice piece of pie for lunch. You'd better give it to me."

Petras gave him the bar.

"Thanks, kid!"

Petras took another foodstock bar from the stand. "Oh, actually, I want that one too," said the man. "I was just going to take it and you got it first. Give it to me." Petras looked up silently. "Give it to me, you little shit!"

"Yes sir." He handed it over. The officer's nostrils flared, this politeness seeming to anger him even more, but he said nothing. A third time, Petras reached for a bar.

Abruptly, the man slapped Petras's hand downward. Petras shouted, more in surprise than pain. The bar fell. Petras looked at it, then back up to his attacker's face, questioning.

"Well, *pick it up*."

Petras did so. Its wrapper had split a little, but he placed it in his bag nonetheless. Swallowing again, he reached out for another.

"Get the hell out of my store," the man said quietly.

Your store, thought Petras, a current of anger cutting through his fear. Aloud, voice trembling, he said, "Sir, my father sent me to get more than one."

"Do I look like I give a *fuck* what your daddy sent you for? I told you to *get the hell out of my store!*"

And Petras knew he should do just that – knew that Father, were he here, would want him to do just that – but he could not. It wasn't right. That's what had made him so angry the last time he'd met the man: the way the Impo treated native Winnokans, it wasn't merely unjust, it was *unreasonable*. How could you come to somebody else's planet and act like it was yours? How could you stir up trouble when your duty was maintaining the peace? They weren't even *thinking* right!

Father would have wanted him to obey. But Father had told him something else, too. *You have to start deciding for yourself about things. You have choices now.*

Yes, he did.

"Sir," he said, almost choking in his fear, "I can't leave until I get another bar."

The man seized him by the throat and pulled him up till only his toes touched the ground. "Listen, you shit-stained little Nokie, if you think you can walk in here and – "

"Excuse me," said a woman's voice, and the officer looked. A second later the fingers loosened on Petras's throat, and Petras fell back to his feet, doubled over and gasping. When he could breathe again, he looked up – and stared.

As in her picture, the Star-Witch had dark brown eyes and straight shoulder-length black hair. And young – so young. She was shorter than he'd expected, and her clothes seemed rather ordinary for someone so infamous: a plain brown long-sleeved blouse and tan pants that ended mid-calf.

The Star-Witch smiled.

"Sorry," she said, "I don't mean to interrupt. Just wanted to grab my afternoon

snack. Please," she nodded at Petras, "by all means, continue choking the little boy."

"So you're the Star-Bitch," said the officer, breaking into a slow grin at his own cleverness.

"Uh – no," said the Star-Witch. "You are mistaken."

"Hey, don't fuck with me, okay?"

"No. I would not do that."

"All right, look." He pulled out his pistol, a nasty little ripgun with a ridged silver barrel, and stuck it in her face. She regarded it with interest. "You're under arrest."

"Oh," she said.

"Get your hands up."

"Oh, well – "

"Get your hands up!"

Slowly, she obeyed. "I'm just not sure about this. I don't feel comfortable – "

"Shut up."

"It makes me nervous – "

"I said *shut the fuck up!*"

"And when I get nervous sometimes I – "

"I'll fucking shoot you right in the fucking face!" he screamed, and he pushed his weapon forward.

What happened next was never exactly clear to Petras. The Star-Witch did something very fast with her hands – some kind of sweeping motion, but more complicated – and metal glinted in the air. All he knew for sure was that by the time she finished, the pistol was on the floor and a wicked-looking knife stuck quivering in the

wall, millimeters from the man's face. The Star-Witch held a second knife in her left hand, the blade-tip just touching the man's Adam's apple.

"When I get nervous," said the Star-Witch, "sometimes I miss." She glanced at Petras. "Are you going to get the rest of your groceries, or what?"

Hastily he picked out two more foodstock bars and placed them in his bag. As an afterthought, he put back the damaged one.

"So," continued the Star-Witch, returning to the Impo officer, "listen carefully. I know everything. I am everywhere. If you touch this child again, you will drown in your own blood. Get out of this store, and try very *very* hard to pretend this never happened."

The officer muttered something angrily.

"I'm sorry?" She pushed the blade in slightly, drawing a bead of crimson.

"All right! I'm going!" And he did.

She wiped the knife on her pants, plucked the other knife out of the wall, and made both disappear in her sleeves somewhere. She waved to the other customers, who by now were all staring. "It's over," she said. "Continue your shopping experience!"

Petras grinned. It was true! He'd hardly dared hope, but it was true. She really was here to get rid of the Impo!

"Thank you," he said.

"Oh, it's nothing. You know what's strange, though? These Impo, they're Darmian, right? You know what Darmis is, kid?"

"Darmis is a landgraviate, the second-biggest in the Empire," he recited. "It's far away from here." He had learned all about this in school last year. The whole Empire was organized into landgraviates, each with millions of planets. Winnoka, for example,

belonged to a landgraviate called Bergschrim. Each landgraviate was ruled by a person called a landgrave, and the landgraves, in turn, were ruled by the Emperor.

"That's right. You're pretty smart, kid. Now these Impo, they're supposed to be servants of Emperor Monifice, but they don't even wear the Imperial green and white. They're all blue and black, Darmis colors, because they're Darmian by birth. Now isn't that odd?"

He blinked. "I guess so."

"I mean, if I were Emperor Monifice, I'd want them wearing my own colors. Wouldn't you?"

"I'm...I'm sorry?"

"I said, if you were the Emperor, wouldn't you want your police wearing your colors, instead of their own?"

"Well – yeah, I guess I would."

"Sure you would." She bent down, examining him. "Hey, you were pretty brave, standing up to him like that. You ought to get a reward." She reached into her satchel, which he hadn't noticed till now, and handed him something. "Here you go, kid."

The thing she handed him was...well, he didn't know what it was.

It was ball-shaped, bright silver, big enough to fill both his hands but surprisingly light. An intricate pattern of switches and latches covered the outside, so ornate and mechanical that it looked like a miniature city on the surface of the ball.

"What is it?"

"It's an Egg of Columbus."

"A what?" He had never heard of 'Columbus' before, and 'egg' was something you

synthesized from protein foodstock, fluffy and yellow and quite unrelated to this object.

"A puzzle. See? You flip a switch, all the latches next to it switch positions – they open if they're closed, or close if they're open. Like that – see?"

He tried it. "Uh-huh?"

"If you can get it open, I'll give you something good."

"What?"

She winked at him. "Something...really...good. Hey, that reminds me." She tapped her netlink to bring up its display, and small bright digits hovered millimeters over the skin of her finger. A few more taps, and his own netlink chirped.

"That's my number," she said. "Call me when you solve it, and not before!"

And before he could say anything else, she was gone.

Chapter 3

Three years passed before Petras saw the Star-Witch again.

In all that time, he never told Father about that meeting. It had felt strange, at first, to keep anything from him, but Father would never have understood. And after all, hadn't he said that Petras needed to start deciding things for himself?

It had seemed like a great exciting secret in the beginning, but little by little that turned to frustration. He could not solve the puzzle ball, though he still tried most nights, carefully hiding it afterward in an obscure corner of his closet. He took notes as he worked, scribbling his stylus over sheets of digital paper. Before bed he would store the notes in a secure directory on his netlink, and clear the notebook. His netlink held hundreds of such pages, and he knew by heart the complex rules of the ball's switches

and latches, but he was no closer to getting it open.

Meanwhile the Star-Witch made no further moves against the Impo, and never contacted him. Southshire was not a large town, and he expected he would run into her sooner or later, but he never did. It seemed few others did, either; he still heard occasional rumors of a sighting, but nothing more. The town's initial excitement, like his own, had long since died down. Some days he even wondered if he might have imagined the whole thing. But no, that was silly; his memories were clear. And besides, he still had the puzzle ball.

He longed to call her, but she'd been very explicit: he could call her when he solved it, and not before. That was that.

Not long after his fifteenth birthday, Petras took a part-time job helping to run the computer networks at a local arena that hosted *maka rhan* matches. He began to pay for some of his own things: meals, new shoes, school supplies. Father didn't argue. They both knew the shop was going through a bad time. Petras's extra income helped, but it couldn't fully compensate for declining sales, and Father's suppliers charged more than ever.

As money dwindled, they cut out more and more luxuries. No more trips to the movies, no more strawberry sorbet. Petras knew things were serious when Father sold their food synthesizer and they began eating unprocessed protein foodstock bars for most meals. But he never complained. The bars were tasteless, but not so bad after a while. It was better than starving. They were Winnokan, and they would survive.

In other ways, they were fortunate. The Empire had not come down hard on Southshire yet. Southshire lay at Winnoka's south pole, where things were still calm. At

the north pole, he'd heard, the Empire had set up a base, and some districts were under martial law. It was tough to get reliable news – the official channels reported little of this – but the situation sounded bad. Petras had an uncle up north who used to write to them often, but it was six months now since he'd returned a letter. Petras could tell Father was worried. And they heard other rumors, ugly rumors, of prison camps, beatings, and torture.

If the Star-Witch really was planning something, her delays came at a high price. But in Southshire, at least, the Impo officer never bothered Petras again.

One winter weekend he had nothing much to do, so he put on his red hat, turned up the insulation on his shirt, and walked to the park. It was a long walk, over two kilometers, to the western side of the city, and the snow had fallen thick last night. None stuck to the sidewalks, streets, or buildings, whose flash-vapor surfaces dispelled rain and snow alike; but snow accumulated in the bushes, over the grass, on the naked branches of the trees like an otherworldly manna. He left downtown and strolled among the long neat rows of houses, their walls gently curved in the Winnokan style. No Impo officers lived here; they all resided in the southern district, in their squat, blocky Darmian-style houses. Ugly. Petras smiled, thinking how much better Southshire would look without them.

As he reached the edge of the town, the snow grew bolder, blanketing the yards, smoothing over all edges like a crystalline carpet. He breathed deep, savoring the wintry air as he pulled it into his lungs, exhaling coiled clouds. His boots on the sidewalk were the only sound.

He had come to the park with no plan but to walk the trails through the forest, enjoying the snow and letting his mind drift. But after a few minutes of this he grew tired

of his thoughts. He wandered into a wide clearing of pristine snow and began – with no particular design – to pack it together on the ground. As he worked, his creation took the shape of a tower: thick at the bottom, narrowing up toward a fragile spire, irregularly smooth where his fingers packed its surface. The tower grew thicker and taller as he trampled an ever wider area in search of material, revealing the green of the ragged grass beneath. He had not brought gloves, and his fingers quickly grew cold, then painful, but he did not stop his work; he only paused occasionally to rub them together, or blow on them, or hold them in his pockets.

He had gotten the tower to nearly his own height when he noticed another boy walking toward him out of the woods, and he stopped, instinctively suspicious.

The boy looked a few years older than him, a little taller, with curly brown hair and a dull, flat face, reddened from the cold. Petras saw him at school occasionally but didn't know his name. An offworlder.

"Hey, man," said the boy, "whatcha doin'?"

"Nothing."

"What are you making? Like a tower or something?"

"Yeah, I guess. Just messing around."

"That's cool. You want some help?"

"No. Thanks."

"Let me help you," he said, and began packing snow into the base of the structure.

Petras frowned. "What's your name, man?"

"You're breaking it."

"What?"

"You're breaking it, look!" It was true. He was packing the foundation too hard, making cracks in the snow. The top was leaning. "Just let me do it."

"What's the matter with you? I'm trying to help." He began slamming snow into the top, compressing it downward, breaking off small chunks of the structure. He spoke with righteous indignation: "My friends won't even talk to a Nokie like you, but here I am helping you and talking to you, and you start complaining. I'm trying to be your friend."

Petras scowled at the boy's incoherent logic. "If you want to be my friend, then leave it alone and let me work on it. I started it, it's mine. Go make your own."

"I'm trying to help you," he said again.

"Go make your own!"

"Fine!" said the boy, and he planted his foot deep into the foot of the tower, smashing it. He turned away. "Fucking Nokie."

"Hey! Why'd you do that?"

"You want to mess with me? Huh?" The older boy turned and pushed him down; Petras felt snow under his shirt, up in his pant legs. The boy spat on him. "Fucking Nokie."

Petras got up, growling; the boy shoved him again, but this time he shoved back, and from their tangled arms he extracted a fist to punch the boy in the face. "*Fucking Irth-killer!*" the boy screamed and punched back viciously, splitting his lip.

Irth-killer? What did that mean? He thought he had heard it at school before, in occasional whispers when the teachers couldn't hear. No time to ponder, though.

The boy's attack had hurt, but Petras was stronger, and he knew it now. He landed another blow, and another, till at last the older boy turned to run. Petras tackled him,

punched him twice more, pinned him down.

"Why'd you do it!" he screamed again.

"I'm sorry!" The boy's right cheek was bruising; his eyes were wide and earnest.

"I'm sorry, seriously! I'll leave you alone!"

"I don't want your apology! I want to know why you did it!"

"I don't know! I'm sorry!"

"You're sorry?" He shook him. "Everyone does this, you understand? They come here and they start trouble and we don't need it! You do it, the Impo do it, there's no sense to it at all! Now give me an answer!"

"I don't know, man! Seriously! It was dumb. I'll leave you alone. I'm sorry!"

"Tell me why you did it!" Petras screamed, but it was no use. The boy didn't know.

At last he walked away, still furious, licking his split lip and wincing as it began to swell. He left the park and started to walk home, but he soon wandered down a side street. He didn't feel like seeing Father yet, explaining his bruises. His rage cooled to a simmer.

Suddenly he stopped, tapped his netlink, and called the Star-Witch. A second later she answered.

"Petras! You solved my puzzle?"

"I want to talk to you."

"So talk."

"In person," he said.

"Ohhh," she said, infuriatingly amused. "You sound mad."

"I want to know what this is all about."

"Well, then, I suppose. My place or yours?"

"Yours," said Petras. She might have been joking, but he didn't care.

"Right. I don't suppose you know where my house is?" She gave him the address.

"When can I expect you?"

"That's over an hour's walk from here," said Petras. "I could get there quicker if you came and picked me up."

"Walking is good exercise. See you in an hour. Oh, and bring the puzzle." She hung up.

Petras growled a curse, but he trudged back to his house to retrieve the puzzle, then began the journey north, to the Star-Witch's house.

Chapter 4

The Star-Witch's house stood alone at the edge of town, almost half a kilometer from its nearest neighbor, and it was as strange as she was.

It stood two stories tall, a simplistic rectangular structure. He had always thought of Darmian-style houses as blocky, but even those had some complexity to them: oblique angles, alcoves, square projections. He had never imagined a house could be so...plain. The walls were beige, accented by a few crisscrossing lines of darker brown. The second story extended a meter or so over the entrance; oddly, a series of thick rods rose from the ground to the bottom of this second floor, almost as if the house couldn't support its own weight and needed to be propped up. He couldn't imagine why; polycore was extremely strong, never bent or cracked, and certainly didn't need extra supports.

And yet, looking closer, he wasn't sure the walls *were* made of polycore. They

seemed...rough. Polycore could take an enormous variety of textures, of course, but he'd never seen anything quite like this.

But what could you possibly make a house from, besides polycore?

Strangest of all, the roof consisted of two black rectangles that slanted up and met at a peak in the center. Petras didn't think he had ever seen a slanted roof before.

He walked up a little path to the front porch. A cheap statue of a brown toad, sitting on a pile of coins and holding a coin in its mouth, guarded the door. He tapped his netlink, signaling the doorbell to chime his arrival. As he waited, he noticed the words on the doormat: 'We Have An Understanding. You're Standing, I'm Under.' He grimaced.

The Star-Witch opened the door, and she looked much as he remembered her: *exactly* as he remembered her, in fact. She had her black hair in precisely the same style, smooth to the shoulders, and she did not seem to have aged at all. He was surprised all over again at how young she seemed; she hardly looked old enough to be out of high school!

She regarded him with bright black eyes, an unreadable expression on her lips. "Come in, then. Before you freeze." She didn't mention his bruises.

The inside was all straight, flat walls like the outside, all corners running parallel or perpendicular to each other. The first room she led him through seemed to be a kitchen, judging by the dishes and table, but many objects were unidentifiable, such as a pair of round, metal bowls with handles and flat bottoms. And where was the food synthesizer? Was she, like him, too poor to afford one? That was hard to believe.

She led him into a living room, where she gestured to a wide cushioned seat. He took it, and she sat a few meters away, watching him again with that same odd half-smile.

"Well – did you solve it?" she said.

The strange house had distracted him, but he focused again. "That's not what I'm here for. I want to know – "

"No. That is what you're here for. First give me your answer, then we can talk."

Even in his anger, Petras knew he was powerless. He scowled. "I haven't solved it."

She held out her hand, and he gave it to her. She set it carefully on the floor, raised one leg, and kicked the puzzle with her heel as hard and swift as a gunshot. The thing cracked in half; confetti burst out of the core; a little tune played, and ended.

"That's how you open it."

Petras was too furious to speak.

"You think I cheated you," she said. "Right? You spent all that time twiddling latches and you didn't try that, and now you want to blame it on me. Well, go on."

"I spent three years on that thing," Petras growled.

Chiyoko knelt and pulled from the rubble a black disc, the size of a fingertip.

"This is a transmitter," she said. "Motion-activated. It sent me a signal whenever you played with the puzzle, which is how I know you are not exaggerating. You did indeed spend three years trying to solve it." She stood slowly, examining the device. "Over three whole years, you spent an average of fifteen minutes per day, and some days you tried for as long as six hours. I've conducted this test over a hundred times now, and I've never seen such persistence. And so I have to ask, Petras, what it was that made you try so very hard."

"You promised me *something good*," he snapped.

Chiyoko moved the disc-shaped transmitter deftly across the slender knuckles of her right hand, flipping it from one finger to the next so quick it appeared to be rolling.

"What did you think it would be?"

"Can't you guess? I wanted you to get rid of the Impo so me and my father and the rest of Winnoka could live free!"

She waited. In the silence of her waiting, he heard his own breathing, fast and hard.

"I never said that, Petras."

"What was the prize, then?"

She ignored the question. "You want me to get rid of the Impo. What does that mean, *get rid of the Impo*? You're old enough now you can understand these things. The Imperial police force covers half of this spiral arm of the Milky Way Galaxy. Do you really think I could keep them out of Southshire? *All* of them?" She flourished and produced a knife in each hand. "With *these*?"

He scowled. "You're the Star-Witch, you have powers..."

"Yes, I do. And I will tell you something. No matter what you heard at school, I'm even more powerful than the stories. Walls are doors to me. I can travel like breathing, I can fight like blinking, every Impo officer with half a brain is terrified of me. I am the most dangerous person who has ever lived, Petras, but listen to me now, I cannot – cannot – give you freedom, because freedom isn't something you give. It's something you *take*, if you're willing to die for it. When you're strong, Petras, when you want it enough to die for it, that's when you'll have it. Maybe. But not before."

He had no answer for this fortress of words, so he fell back to his earlier question.

"What was the prize going to be?"

She pulled another small metal disc from her pocket, and now the two discs rolled back and forth in opposite directions over her knuckles, each by some trick missing the other when they crossed. The motion was mesmerizing. "I can't tell you," she said. "You failed the test. But then, most of my students fail, and you tried harder than most. I'll give you another chance. A new challenge. That is, if you want."

"Why?" he demanded. "So I can work on some other silly puzzle for another three years, while things at the north pole get worse every day? When you won't even tell me what the prize is?" She began to chuckle. "What?" he exploded.

"The north pole of Winnoka?" she said, her laughter gradually subsiding. "That's really your biggest concern right now? There are over three million other inhabited worlds in Bergschrim alone, and Bergschrim's not even big for a landgraviate; and there are almost two thousand other landgraviates. In an empire that covers a third of the Milky Way Galaxy, the number one worry on the mind of Petras Fairburn...is Winnoka's north pole."

"Winnoka is my home," he snapped. "I don't know what planet you're from, but what would *you* think if something terrible happened there?"

All traces of a smile disappeared from her face. "And what would you know," she said quietly, "about *something terrible*?"

He sensed he had entered dangerous territory, and retreated. "I didn't mean – " Yet she did not seem angry as she raised a hand to silence him.

"I'm saying, Petras, this is bigger than you seem to realize. Even if you somehow freed Winnoka, Emperor Monifice could retake the whole planet with a single heavy

cruiser. Not that he would actually *hear* about a rebellion on a puny planet like Winnoka. I'd be surprised if that news even rose as high as his Secretary of Domestic Affairs; and believe me, that is a man whose attention you do *not* want."

He had nursed these dreams of freedom for years, and how casually she tossed them aside! But he found no flaw in her reasoning. He felt a little silly, in fact, for not thinking of it this way before. His scowl became a doubtful frown. "So what do we do?"

The Star-Witch passed her left hand close to her right for only an instant, and both discs slipped onto it like living things, resuming their motion in their new home. She never even glanced down. "You want to topple a galactic empire? There are ways. But if *we* are going to do anything, *you* will learn at *my* direction. I chose you because you're brave, and you don't give up. But you failed to open the Egg of Columbus for the same reason you failed to consider the universe outside Winnoka: your thinking is too narrow.

"My hobby is this, Petras: I improve people, I *make them better*. If you can pass my trials, you'll be improved, too. You'll be the kind of person who can push out the Impo yourself.

"Now, since you failed with the puzzle, your next challenge is to get a fully-paid scholarship to the University of Winnoka North. You'll need excellent grades, but you can do it. And of course, Winnoka North is where the violence is, so you'll need your courage too. It's up to you. Succeed, and I'll give you something good."

Petras leaned back in the cushioned seat, trying to think. He liked things to be clear; he liked each element of a problem to be neatly defined so he could line them up, analyze, and find a solution. Get the Impo off Winnoka. Simple.

But she was right: the Empire was much, much wider than Winnoka. If anything

was going to change, it would have to change *big*. And he was only one person, who had never left his little planet. What did he know about such matters? The Star-Witch talked about revolution so lightly, but Petras had never planned on anything as lofty as a revolution. He had never thought much about having a *plan* at all.

He felt suddenly lost. Was he getting a scholarship or overthrowing an empire? Was he chatting with a young woman or joining a rebel conspiracy? He couldn't decide what to think of her. She claimed to have incredible powers, and a part of him even believed her. But what did she really want?

"Why do you make everyone call you Star-Witch, anyway? I know your real name is Chiyoko."

"Call me Chiyoko, then."

"But why use the title? What exactly *are* your powers? Where did they come from? Who are you, really? If you want me to play your game, I want some information first."

She shrugged. "No."

"I need to know – "

"No, Petras, you don't. Call me whatever name you want, but don't make the mistake of thinking I owe you anything. I already saved you once. Are you doing this or not?"

It wasn't much of a commitment; he had been planning to try for a scholarship anyway. More importantly, he needed to sort things out, to understand Winnoka's place in the larger order. He needed clarity.

And despite his anger, he was still curious about that *something good*.

Finally he nodded. "I study a lot already. But I have a hard time with exams."

She smiled.

"I'll teach you myself," she said.

Chapter 5

But Chiyoko's lessons were strange.

He came to her house often now, sometimes to talk, mostly to listen. He shuddered as she told him about nirvana badges: expensive devices that gave unlimited pleasure, whose users stopped living for any other reason and lay endlessly on broad cushions, moaning, the switch flipped permanently on, as nutrients and water were injected straight to their veins.

Nirvana badges, she told him, were only the beginning. The mind could be manipulated in other ways, too: compulsions and suggestions and implanted commands. But these were for the most part very expensive, difficult to implant, and wore off in a few years. Lifewords, on the other hand, were simple and permanent; that was the advantage, she said, of being Emperor.

"I don't really understand lifewords," he told her one day. "The Emperor puts a lifeword on you, and then if someone says it out loud, you're dead? What if someone says it by accident?"

"It only works if the Emperor says it," she explained. "And it's usually a short phrase, not just a word, something that's easy to remember but would never come up by accident."

"But what's the point? If the Emperor is close enough to someone that they can

hear him talk, why not just shoot them?"

She grinned. "Think about it. The Emperor controls the media. Every time he plays a recording of the lifeword over the Net, it's like shooting magic bolts across the galaxy that only hurt his target."

That sounded pretty strange to Petras.

He listened to her stories about the little landgraviate Vorne, at the center of the galaxy, birthplace of the Church of the Infinite God, and the growing messianic fervor of their prophecies. She told him about the planet Aberdale, home of the only alien race ever encountered, where suicide had spread among them like a virus weeks after contact, ending them forever.

The stories might all be lies, of course, but he didn't think so. And if they were, they were at least entertaining lies.

Outside these private revelations, life moved on.

Petras began high school, accepting without fanfare the novelty of its pressures and responsibilities. He got along with the other students well enough, but he was slow to make friends, and none became close friends; he did not fit into any of the cliques or counter-cliques formed by his classmates and felt a curious apathy toward their daily maneuvering. His athletic strength, reasonably good looks, and benign personality earned him a little experience with the opposite sex, but he seemed to lack some crucial quality girls found attractive, and his relationships didn't last. Academically he did well, owing to his dutiful studiousness more than any particular aptitude (with the exception of his planning and logistics classes, at which he excelled). The knowledge he gained from Chiyoko was unhelpful in the classroom, though, as it dealt with topics that were outside

of (or contradicted) the history they taught.

Meanwhile he continued to work at a variety of part-time jobs, earning the appreciation of his co-workers because he often covered their shifts and rarely complained. He saw less of his father these days, though he made it a point to spend time with him. But something was wrong, he could tell. Father was changing.

The father Petras knew was serious, hard-working, and absolutely dedicated to the shop. But lately, Father talked more and more about the Net programs he watched during the day, and about various projects he was planning: trips he would make, old friends he would visit, investment ideas. Occasionally there was talk of a woman. All were transient; few survived more than a month or two, and if Petras mentioned them after that, his father would nod, brow furrowed, and say that he had not forgotten. Often, now, he repeated his old mantra that Petras should get off the planet after college.

It was apparent the shop was failing.

Fewer customers came, and fewer still bought anything; near the end, if Father made one sale in a day, he would report it to him as something special. When at last Father was forced to sell the store, Petras was relieved. In fact their fortunes rose after that; the money from the sale was more than anything in recent memory, and Father soon found a good job assisting the manager of the offworlders' variety shop. At first he loathed the necessity, but before long he was reporting that these offworlders paid well and did not look down on Winnokans. Yes, he said, they bribed the Impo – but they were not so bad, for that. He bought another food synthesizer.

Petras had thought Father might return to normal now that he was free of the failing shop, but as the years passed, he only seemed to drift further away from his old,

determined personality. Even his eyes seemed to wander, now, and his fingers tapped mindlessly on the table when they ate meals together. *He's given up*, Petras realized. *The shop was his way of proving to himself that a Winnokan could survive on his own, but it failed, and now he's given up.* Petras wanted to save him from this, somehow, but he didn't know what to do. His one thought was that if he could find a good career after college, perhaps he could get his father a job with the same employer. Maybe if they were working together on something exciting, father and son, that old determination would come back.

Father's decline made it painful to stay around the house, so he spent more and more time with Chiyoko, although these days he had less faith in grandiose visions of ousting Emperor Monifice. He hadn't forgotten her challenge, however. High school was drawing to a close, and none of his applications had yet secured the necessary scholarship. Would she still talk to him if he failed again? Spurred on by this impending deadline, he barraged her with all kinds of questions. She revealed little about herself, but she would answer most anything else he asked.

"How did it happen?" he said one day, sitting on her kitchen countertop. "How was Irth destroyed?"

"No one knows."

"*You* don't know?"

Chiyoko amused herself by hopping around the kitchen from tile to tile in some pattern too intricate for him to figure out. "I've been searching for the answer. Why do you think I'm here? On Winnoka, so close to the ruins of the Motherworld? If the trail's twenty-seven thousand years cold, at least it's warmest here...where everyone thinks they

know."

Petras nodded slowly, thinking back to his fight in the snow, and what the boy had called him: *Irth-killer*. "They think the Winnokans did it."

"A lot of people around here think so. It's just a local thing, though. Do much traveling, you'll find most people have never even heard of Winnoka. It's just the Emperor's way of keeping peace in this little corner of his domain. The myth that Winnokans destroyed Irth was around long before the Impo came, but they strengthened it, fanned the flames of prejudice. When you get to Winnoka North, among the bigger cities, you'll see it there."

He frowned. "Is it true?"

"Winnoka?" she laughed. "In those days, the colonies could barely feed themselves."

"I just can't believe *that's* why the offworlders hate us. That was twenty-seven thousand years ago!"

"Oh, you're right, of course. That Irth-killer business is just icing on the cake. The real reason they hate you is much bigger, and much older."

He leaned forward with interest. Every one of her stories seemed to peel back another secret. "What is it?"

"They hate you because they're with Darmis, and you're with Senris. It's as simple as that."

"What do you mean, I'm with Senris? I don't care about Senris. I'm Winnokan."

"I told you before, you have to think bigger. Look, the Empire's balanced between three main factions: Darmis, Senris, and of course Emperor Monifce himself. Now,

Darmis and Senris – " she held up a fist to represent each, " – both pretend to be loyal to Monifice, but they constantly struggle for control." She wagged her fingers to demonstrate. "And Monifice likes it that way. It keeps them busy. But he can't afford to stay neutral; he's not strong enough for that. So he has to play favorites."

Petras nodded, brows furrowed, trying to keep all this clear in his mind. She was talking rather fast. "And right now his favorite is Darmis?"

She nodded approvingly. "Has been for a long time. Darmis keeps the Senrians in check. And of course, Darmians make up most of his Impo forces, which keep the local populations in check, too. In return, Darmis has more than its share of influence."

He dropped from the counter and paced around the kitchen, thinking. "What about the little landgraviates, like ours? Don't we have any say in things?"

"All the other landgraviates together are collectively called the Thousand, though the actual number is nearly two thousand now. But they're small and weak, so each one of the Thousand allies itself with one of the three major powers. They're split pretty evenly among the Big Three."

"And we're with Senris," he said. The familiar name sounded suddenly alien. What loyalty was he supposed to feel toward this vast territory he'd never seen?

"Don't get too cocky about it. It's a pretty one-sided alliance, and I don't just mean politically. Winnokans watch Senrian movies. Winnokan architecture is Senrian architecture. You're talking with a Senrian accent and you didn't even know it."

He had never thought of himself as having an accent before. He realized then that she didn't have an accent either. "So are you."

"For now. I switch it around occasionally. Talking like a Senrian is fun – I like to

piss off the Darmians." This last sounded exactly like an Impo: *Ah like too pees ohff the Dahrrmians.*

He nodded again, slowly, beginning to understand.

Meanwhile the political storm up north seemed to be lulling, at least for now. Father was getting letters from Petras's uncle again, and he confirmed there had been trouble, but conditions had improved. Some high-ranking Darmian had chosen a new custodian-general for Winnoka, and martial law at the north pole had been lifted.

Petras applied to Winnoka North University and was accepted. But despite graduating high school at the top of his class, he got merely a half-tuition scholarship, not the full scholarship Chiyoko required. Government money was tight, and he was only a native Winnokan.

On his last night in Southshire, he went to see her.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," he said.

"I know."

She still did not look any older. He was taller than her, now; by all appearances, they might have been the same age. She was pretty, in a way, but he never felt anything romantic toward her. In spite of her youthful appearance, something about those bright, dark eyes was alien to him.

"I didn't get the scholarship." He thought this would be the end, that she would set him aside and move on to practice her...hobby...on someone new. He was disappointed, but also somehow relieved to be free of her. It was time to move on. It was time to go out and become an adult, become successful, so he could return and help Father be successful too.

But she merely smiled. "You can have another chance. Again. If you still want something good."

Petras blinked in surprise. "What do I have to do?"

"Fall in love."

He frowned. It was nonsense; surely she was just playing with him, now.

Wasn't she?

Yet if she was, he supposed he could play along a little further, too. Why not? She hadn't asked anything outlandish or dangerous. And she was the Star-Witch, after all; perhaps this strange journey he'd begun as a twelve-year-old might yet lead to some reward.

"All right," he nodded.

"I'll be here. Call if you make your goal. When you come back home, visit me."

"Look, just tell me. What do I get if I do this?"

Chiyoko smiled.

"Something good."

The next day he and his father boarded the train together and sat through the three-hour trip across the Central Desert, from the south pole of Winnoka to the north. They spent the next five hours riding buses, signing forms, tugging carts of luggage, traversing new corridors and opening new doors. When at last everything was ready and it was time to separate, Petras's father hugged him.

"Work hard," he said. "Do well in your classes."

"I will."

"I know you will. But I have to tell you anyway. That's my job."

Then he left; and for the first time in the nineteen years of his life, Petras was alone. And though Father had assured him the trouble in the North was over, Petras couldn't shake the feeling that something terrible yet remained.

Chapter 6

They put him in Azure, the monumental dormitory at the extreme northern tip of Winnoka North: sixty stories of semitransparent blue polycore, roughly pyramid-shaped, built in the blocky Darmian style – a sign of the Impo's greater influence here. It overlooked a vast, grassy campus dotted with older buildings, mostly in the curvy Senrian style. A river cut through the middle of it all.

Weekends were free time, but weekdays were rigidly scheduled: waking and sleeping, meals, classes, even Reverences. The Reverence was a new thing he was required to say with the other students before breakfast and supper each day. It went like this:

Praise to the Emperor. He is wise; his wisdom leads us through uncertainty. He is strong; his strength shepherds us to cool waters. He is loving; his love warms us among the icy stars. He is the one true Emperor. Praise him.

He soon memorized the Reverence. He hated saying it, but it was only words, and even the floor director didn't seem to take it too seriously.

Petras had decided on a basic six-year course in mechanosphere management, learning the tools that kept a planet's myriad technological systems linked up at a high level, both to each other and to the galactic Net. He had little passion for the subject, but it was useful, and would open many job opportunities with Senrian corporations. He

smiled, imagining the pride and excitement on Father's face when he got a job like that.

Classes were difficult. In high school he had overcome his lack of aptitude simply by working harder than everyone else, but he found that extra effort was no longer enough. Before, one or two hours' preparation might earn him the highest marks in the class, but now he could spend all his free time studying and still get grades barely above average. It was frustrating. Not quite unexpected, but frustrating.

He did not get along with the other men in his dormitory. There were no arguments, no fights; but in his quiet, unobtrusive way, he found he was not a part of the bonds they formed. Plans were made without him; they shared inside jokes he didn't get. His conversations were pleasant and superficial. He was not the only one excluded – there were a few others – but these others were so focused on their own exclusion, almost proud of it, that Petras couldn't stand them either. Surrounded by other students, he remained alone.

He often returned to Southshire on weekends, and Father always hugged him warmly when he walked in the door. But Father had his own problems, and Petras could never quite articulate this odd loneliness, which anyway seemed so immaterial when he was home. So they spoke of other things.

And then there was Chiyoko.

She still lived in Southshire, at the blocky little house with the slanted roof and the cheap toad decoration by the door. He saw her on every trip home, sometimes twice. She would ask, winking, if he'd made any progress yet toward his *something good*.

And still the mystery around her deepened. Often he would stay with her past midnight, and the dim lamplight left half her face in shadow as she told him stories about

old Irth, the early colonies, the first interstellar Gates. More and more he wondered who she was, really, but those questions she always refused to answer.

During one visit, he mentioned that he often felt alone. He never forgot her answer.

"I am the loneliest person alive," she said.

It wasn't the words that struck him, but the *way* she said them – because when she spoke, it didn't sound like self-pity. It sounded like simple fact. Of all the people in the galaxy, like grains of pollen in their uncountable vastness, she was the most alone.

But most of the time she was cheerful. She kept him up-to-date on politics, the various powers and their tangled allegiances, Monifice's waning command over his own empire, and the talk about a coup – from Darmis, or maybe even Senris.

That got him interested. "You really think Senris could do it?"

But his enthusiasm only annoyed her. "Does it matter so much? Empires come and go. Humanity has bigger problems than Monifice."

"What does that mean?" he asked, getting annoyed in turn.

"Have you heard of the Plateau?" He shook his head. "If your professors ever stopped regurgitating each other's pet theories, they'd have taught you this already. The Plateau refers to the fact that there hasn't been a major scientific discovery or technological breakthrough in twenty thousand years."

"I don't understand," he said. "We can travel between stars in seconds, synthesize food, control the weather – what else is there to discover?"

"That's exactly what I'm talking about!" she cried. "You don't even see it anymore. Humans aren't just supposed to multiply, Petras, we're supposed to *grow*. Back

before Irth was destroyed, there used to be new breakthroughs every year, every month! Physicists raced each other to see who could figure out the Grand Unified Theory first! There was *progress!* And not just in science, but theology, art, philosophy – "

"There's still progress," he said peevishly. "I have a philosophy class this semester. There are new theories all the time."

"No, there aren't. There are just old theories, turned on their heads, mixed with other theories, and given a new paint job."

"What's *paint*?"

"Petras..." She sighed. "Do you know why my house has a slanted roof?"

He shrugged. "Decoration, I suppose."

"It keeps the rain off. Houses didn't always have flash-vapor surfaces to get rid of rain. People used to kill plants and animals to eat them for food. We used to write information down on paper – real paper, made from trees – because there was no Net to store it in."

He frowned. "First you complain there's no progress, and now you want us to go back to eating biofood and writing on trees?"

"Not trees, paper *made* from trees. That's my point. We're so advanced, we don't take the time to figure out how things work anymore. We have so much art, we don't create anymore, we just reinterpret. I read history now, and it's nothing but rulers and dynasties, moving lines around on a map. Where are we *going*? We should be *gods* by now!" She shook her head. "That's why I want to know how Irth was destroyed. Twenty-seven thousand years ago, something obliterated a whole planet so quickly that nobody had time to alert the colonies. We can't even do that with current technology. Somebody

made a breakthrough, and I want to know who, and what – and how."

Petras didn't say anything; but if nobody had figured it out in twenty-seven thousand years, he didn't think much of her chances now.

** ** *

One day during his third year at Winnoka North, he met somebody new.

He and twenty-odd other students sat in a hot, stuffy room whose decorator apparently had a special fondness for the color brown. The students formed two concentric circles around the lecturer, a quick, balding man who seemed eager to justify his existence. Petras took careful notes. In spite of his boredom, he still put in the hard work required to achieve his mediocre grades. He still hoped to save his father one day.

"Riaadika is the third-largest landgraviate, behind Senris and Darmis," the professor was saying. "No major exports, relatively few natural resources, pretty unimportant besides being the home and seat of power for...let me see..." He pretended to check his notes. "Oh yes. Emperor Monifice, ruler of the universe." His favorite students laughed from the front row.

"We cannot understand Riaadika without understanding Monifice, and that is a difficult task. Our usual language is inadequate to describe His Majesty." He spoke in hushed tones, now, as if talking too loud might draw down the Imperial Presence from on high. "When we say 'the Emperor,' we actually mean one of two different things. The first meaning is of course the Emperor himself, the person. The second meaning is the Emperor as an establishment: his advisers, his policies, his institutions, his collective will, a force greater than any human alone. For this reason, in political science, we have two different phrases to distinguish between these two meanings. The first is E.P., the Empris

Persona, which refers to the human being; and the second is E.E., the Empris Edificia, which refers to the establishment. Now, as we'll see in Chapter Nineteen..."

The Empris Persona, thought Petras. *To become so monumental that you require a separate word that refers merely to you.* What could that do to a person?

This thought so distracted him that he did not take many notes the rest of the lecture; nor did he notice the blue-eyed girl who kept glancing at him. When the lecture ended, as he got up to leave, she stopped him.

"Do you understand this stuff?"

He had seen her in class, and come to think of it, she had spoken to him a few times, but he'd never paid much attention. She was short, at least a full head shorter than him, and pale. Her long dark brown hair was drawn back in a thick braid. She pressed her thin lips together and knotted her brow, as if she was not sure whether she was angry.

She seemed different. He liked her.

"I think so," he said.

"Did the part about the...Riaadikan-Centrism...theory, or whatever it's called – did that make any sense to you?"

"Sort of." He showed her his notes, and they talked for a minute. She said she had to leave for her next class, but asked if she could have his Net ID in case she had any questions tonight. He gave it to her.

Her name was Jienne.

She called that night, and he discovered that she lived in Azure also, up in the women's rooms near the top. At the end of a two-hour conversation (the second half being whispers after lights-out) he asked if she wanted to get lunch with him that

weekend, at the Bread Basket Cafe by the river. She said yes.

By the end of that lunch it was obvious what they both wanted, and standing by the edge of the wide gray water, he kissed her. Her lips were no softer than other girls' he had known, but she kissed like she meant it.

Things moved quickly after that. She would send him messages throughout the day; at night, during their hour of free time, they would talk, holed up in their respective cloisters, smiling in the dark. Three months to the day after their first meeting they said I Love You, and that night they lost their virginity together, in the same bed where previously for months on end he had stared at shadows of ceiling tiles, as if somewhere in those patterns the answer to his loneliness was hidden. When he woke the next morning and found her naked beside him, her slow, measured breaths full of the careless trust of sleep, it was the happiest moment of his life; and in that moment he really believed he could be happy for the rest of his life on the strength of that memory alone.

But he didn't tell Chiyoko.

He had been planning to; but he'd made those plans before meeting Jienne, and things were different now. He wasn't about to hand over her love like a token to claim a prize. Let Chiyoko keep her *something good*. He had known her for ten years, and Jienne for only three months, but he knew where his loyalty lay.

Chapter 7

She was Winnokan, like him – from the north pole, though, not the south. She had grown up during the bad times that Petras had only heard about, and she told him the stories: the ration cards, the early curfews, the gangs of Impo who wandered the streets at

night looking for anyone without a uniform, eating for free at whatever restaurant they felt like terrorizing that day. Everyone over twenty-two who didn't want to attract attention joined the Order of the Gardenia, the Imperial cult.

"My parents used to go to church," she said. "Senrian Orthodox. But when Monifice made atheism the official policy, they just...stopped. I don't just mean they stopped going to church. They didn't even pray anymore!" Jienne never prayed either, but Petras didn't mention that. "All they did was go to those meetings – the Order of the Gardenia. My mother took me to a few of them when I was a little girl."

"What were they like?"

"They say a Reverence every fifteen minutes at those meetings," she told him, her blue eyes widening earnestly. "I'm not exaggerating. Literally, they had someone watching the clock, and every fifteen minutes they would interrupt whatever they were saying – in mid-sentence, even – and they would all say a Reverence. Nine in one meeting!" She couldn't believe he had never heard of Reverences before coming to the university.

And they had books, she told him, little books full of pictures of the Emperor, drawings and photos, and wise things he had said. You were supposed to meditate on them. "And they *did*," she said scornfully. "My parents slept with a copy under their pillows every night. Because they'd check, you know. They'd come at night, really late at night, and knock on your door, just to see if you had a copy of the book, and if you didn't, they'd take you off for questioning with the Truth Scanners. After that, who knew if you'd come back, or when. They never had Truth Scanners before Monifice."

It must have been terrifying, Petras thought, but when she spoke of it there was

only anger in her voice. The anger came out most when she talked about her parents. "They arrested my dad when I was nine," she told him one day, "while I was at school. When I came home my mom was lying on the couch, and she didn't speak a word to me all day. Finally, that evening, I asked her where Dad was and it wasn't till then that she told me. He spent eight years in prison, and for eight years, she drove to work every single day with big stupid cow eyes like nothing was wrong in her little world. And for eight years she never missed a single fucking Gardenia meeting. Not *one*. I hate her," she finished savagely, and then again, as if hearing herself for the first time: "*I hate her!*"

Petras's childhood stories were boring, compared to hers. His father had never been arrested. The Impo had left him alone, with a few exceptions. The only really interesting thing he could have told her about was Chiyoko, but he kept silent. He had never told anyone about Chiyoko, and he did not tell Jienne. He wanted to; hardly a week passed that he was not on the verge of telling her; sometimes he would even open his mouth to speak the words, but he'd say something else. And he would stroke her dark hair as she slept beside him in the early hours of the night, and wonder what it was about her or him that held him back.

Petras loved Jienne because she was like him. Whatever odd, indefinable quality kept him from making friends, she seemed to possess it also, and he had thought this would give them a common understanding, that they could be separate from the world together. But over their first year together, he came to understand that she was also very different, and that difference seemed to grow wider on a weekly basis. Her anger toward her parents – vented out one day, retracted tearfully the next, only to reappear again – that was something he simply could not relate to. Even her fierce pride in being Winnokan,

and her delight in ridiculing the Emperor – which at first he had loved – eventually grew to seem childish. She bore scars he did not understand.

Their first real argument did not come for four months, but it was an explosion. Later he could not even recall what sparked it; but he remembered the screaming, the flush in her pale cheeks, the surreality of seeing her fierce anger finally directed at him. They made up, but he was left with the unspeakable thought that he might not love her as much as before. Petras did his best to fight this idea. He told himself that relationships were about more than similarities, and that if they both worked harder at understanding each other, their differences could be resolved.

Petras felt that most problems could be solved by working harder.

He began talking to Chiyoko about the things Jienne said. "Is Emperor Monifice evil?" he asked Chiyoko once. It sounded silly to say it out loud, but he didn't worry about such things with her anymore. "I mean, I know he commands the Impo, I know all the things they're doing in his name, but...the Empris Persona himself. Is he evil?"

Chiyoko closed her eyes and stretched back on her couch. "Do you think people can be labeled that way, sorted out, like marbles? These marbles are red, these are blue. These people to be praised and these to be shunned."

"You know what I mean," Petras said impatiently. "What sort of person is he?"

"He's an emperor," she said. "You wouldn't invite him to tea, if that's what you're asking. He's killed a lot of people."

"But, I mean...was it justified?"

Chiyoko wagged her finger at invisible targets. "Red marble, blue marble, red – "

"You know what I mean!"

Chiyoko sighed. "He has done bad things and he is a bad person."

Petras nodded, aware she was baiting him, too annoyed to care.

Another time he asked: "What does Monifce want? What is he working toward?"

"What do you think he wants?" said Chiyoko. "Power. When he has it he wants more of it, and when he loses it he fights to keep it. And for a man like Monifce, power is the same as control."

"One of my friends says that's why university life is so rigidly scheduled – to get us used to being controlled." *One of my friends* was Jienne.

Chiyoko smiled. "Could be."

"But he's losing his control now, isn't he? She says Senris is cheating him out of his Imperial taxes, but he doesn't do anything about it. She says he's even losing control of his own Impo, that loyalty to the Emperor is dying out on a galactic scale."

"True."

"So what's going to happen? Is he going to be deposed? Or resign?"

"Or else he'll die."

"Die?"

"They always do, you know. Sooner or later."

Chiyoko often said odd things like that.

Petras and Jienne continued to fight, and they continued to make up, and in this way they spent three whole years together. On the evening of their third anniversary, they exchanged expensive gifts, ate dinner at an expensive restaurant, and had long, wonderful sex in her bed afterward. A few times during the evening, Jienne seemed distracted, worried, but if he asked, she said it was nothing. The rest of the time she seemed happy.

When he fell asleep that night, he was happy too.

The next morning, as the earliest rays of red light fell streaming through his bedroom window, Petras opened his eyes and was surprised to find Jienne already awake. Normally he woke up at least an hour before her.

"What's wrong?" he asked. Jienne was sucking on her lower lip, which meant she was trying not to cry. She shook her head.

"Honey, what is it?" She rolled over against him and nestled her face in his neck, crying softly in short, sudden bursts like sighs. He knew of nothing to do except to stroke her hair gently, drawing his arm around her bare waist. At last, whispering against her ear, he asked her once again what was wrong.

"The Compass interviewed me – " she began, then broke down. The Compass was the campus newspaper, university-funded, student-operated. Mostly they reported local news. They were harmless.

"You know how they do those random interviews each day with someone on campus? They ask you a few questions, get a quote from you..."

"Yeah."

"They interviewed me, and I said some – something about Monifce, I don't even remember what, but it was stupid, Petras, it was some *stupid* joke I made, about...I don't know, I don't know what I was thinking...but they printed it – " Here again she broke down and could not continue.

"Well, how bad is it? If it's just a joke I'm sure nobody will care. I know how bad the Occupation was, but it's over, things are a lot better now – "

"No they're not, Petras, that's what I've been trying to tell you for three years, and

you never understand, they're not better, they're *not*, the Impo – " She swallowed. "They found me – "

"Found you! When?"

"Two days ago. They used a Truth Scanner on me."

"Jienne, why didn't you say anything?"

"I thought...well, you always act like the Impo are nothing to worry about, and I thought maybe I should be like you, just let it go...and I didn't want to ruin our anniversary."

"I never meant..." He shook his head. "What happened?"

"The Truth Scanner was so strong...it pushed so hard into my mind...it *hurt* me!"

"Did they learn anything?"

"I don't know. I don't know. They asked me so many questions – are you loyal to the Emperor? Do you want to break up the Empire? Why was your father arrested? Sometimes they screamed in my ear, other times acted like they were sorry – I *hate* them!" she shrieked with sudden venom, in the same tone she'd used about her parents. "Why can they do that? What makes them special, what gives them the *right*?"

"All right. All right. So what happened?"

"Nothing happened, they just let me go. Most of the questions were just ambiguous enough I thought maybe I fooled their scanner, I really did, but I think they had it silenced so I can't be sure...fuck, Petras, *fuck*, what am I going to do?"

She clung to him, crying freely, as he thought it over. In the end, there was only one solution. It was something he'd avoided till now, something he wanted to avoid still...but after all, what else could he do?

"There's someone I can ask to help us," he said. "Someone I've never told you about before."

"Who?" she asked, inspired to faint hope.

"I can't talk about it now – maybe afterward. But I have to call her first. Alone."

Bemused, she rose from the bed like a pale ghost and dressed in the red dawn light. When she was gone, he called Chiyoko. Although it was early, he knew she would answer. She always answered.

"Petras."

"There's a problem."

He told her all that Jienne had said to him. When he finished, Chiyoko said, "You know they'll come after you next."

In fact this had not even occurred to him, but it made sense – if they thought Jienne was hiding something but didn't know what, they would surely track down those close to her. And as far as he knew, he was the only one who fit that category. He felt a sudden spike of pity for Jienne and her terrible loneliness. Jienne, Chiyoko, his father – everyone he knew was lonely.

"She never did anything wrong. She hates the Emperor for what the Occupation did to her family, but – "

"You don't think that's enough for these people? They'd arrest her on that alone and make up a charge. She's lucky they haven't already."

"And if they got to me, and used those Truth Scanners, they'd know how I feel about Monifce too. Shit."

"It's a lot worse than that. How much of the information I've given you do you

think a good Imperial citizen is allowed to know? Petras...if they get to you...it's over. For her, maybe. For you, definitely."

Petras gazed out the window at the sprawling Winnoka North campus, thinking of the students waking up warm and safe in their beds, wondering how it could all fall apart so quickly. Part of him wanted to be angry at Chiyoko for drawing him into this, but clearly that wasn't fair. He had always known that her lessons carried risk. Mostly, he was just scared. Those dreams of revolution seemed childish in the face of this cold new reality. "So what do we do?"

"When you first came to the university six years ago, I took some precautions in case you ever got into trouble. Listen carefully. The president of the university has his own private shuttle on campus. It's parked in the airfield behind the community center. Do you know the place I'm talking about?"

"Yes."

"I can give you the passcode to get into the shuttle. From there, you can fly to a safe place that I know. I'll give you directions when you get there. They might not suspect the president's shuttle."

"Wait – you want me to hijack a *shuttle*? Chiyoko, you can't be serious – "

"You've been safe most of your life, Petras, so you don't understand this, but if they find you they will suck you dry and then *they will kill you*. I can't make it any clearer than that. Now there's no reason to be scared as long as you do what I tell you, but you have to trust me. I've stayed by your side a long time now. Do you trust me?"

No, he didn't. Stayed by his side? She had helped him only once, over a decade ago; the rest had been listening to stories that might all have been lies, and some heavy-

handed language about improving him as a person. His childish awe had worn off.

And yet, she was right; they would come for him soon. What choice did he have?

"Yes. I trust you."

"Then you have to do this."

He turned away from the window, pulled his pants on quickly. "I don't know how to fly a shuttle."

"It's easy. They're mostly automated. I'll walk you through it when you get there, but you need to hurry. Now listen carefully. I'm going to tell you exactly what you need to know to get on that shuttle."

When she'd gone over it, he said, "What about Jienne?"

"She can come too. Hurry!" Chiyoko hung up.

Fully dressed now, he opened the door and found Jienne waiting just outside. He pulled her back in and quickly explained the plan he'd been given.

"But who is she?" Jienne asked. "What's her name? Why haven't you ever told me about her?"

"It's complicated. I can't explain it all now. But we need to get moving."

"Petras."

"What? Honey, we have to go."

"Who is...she?"

"She's a friend, an old friend..."

"That you never told me about?"

He stared at her, realized what she must be thinking. "You can't be serious. There's no time!"

"Petras, this is crazy. We can't steal the president's shuttle. I probably overreacted about the interview anyway," said Jienne, without much conviction. "Maybe nothing will happen – "

"She said you were in trouble and that I could die, and I believe her. She said this is the only way."

"But how can I trust someone I've never even heard of? That you've never even told me about?"

"It's the Star-Witch," he blurted.

They paused, watching each other warily.

"There's no such person," she said slowly. "It's propaganda, a tool Monifce invented to justify his police state – "

He replied in a rush. "I can see why you'd think that, Jienne, but I've met her and she's real and we don't have *time*, they might be watching us right now, you have to trust me, and we have to go!"

"I..." She turned away, lips parted silently, clutching at her heart as if trying to hold it inside her. "I can't. I can't just – go, like that. Without knowing what's going on. Go, if you have to, if you trust this...person, whoever she is. Maybe you're right. But I can't."

She looked so frail in the dawn's red light, thin lips quivering. "How can I convince you?"

"Petras, I love you, but you're acting crazy. Even if they do arrest me, I'll be a lot better off cooperating than running. Everybody knows you don't run from the Impo." Her brow furrowed. "I'm so scared right now. You're scaring me..."

He realized then that he wasn't going to make this work. She wasn't coming.

He kissed her as long as he dared, wondering if he would ever see her again.

Petras tried to preserve the moment in his mind, to keep the kiss and its terrible sweetness with him forever. But even that failed, because when he looked back on the moment later, he didn't remember the kiss; all he remembered was himself, trying to preserve the memory.

"Goodbye," she said.

"Goodbye, Jienne."

A short bus ride took him to Eighth Street, and from there it was only half a block to the community center. The sun rose low and silent in the east, attended by narrow, puffy clouds like cotton candy dipped in blood.

Ahead was the airfield.

Chapter 8

There were no guards; all the security was automated. Chiyoko's security code got him through the high polycore wall, and inside, flanked by a trio of empty landing pads, sat the president's shuttle.

It was a Darmian shuttle, boxy and fat with short, pointless-looking wings, but it seemed sturdy enough. Three great rectangular engines extended the length of the craft and terminated in wide squares at the rear. Petras approached the side of the shuttle, found the panel Chiyoko had told him to look for, and keyed in another code. For a few terrifying seconds he thought it had failed, but the door opened with a sigh and he was in.

The interior was cramped. Two rows of three seats filled the back of the craft, and

a single pilot's seat occupied the front, surrounded by a broad semicircle of buttons, dials, and gauges. It did not look, as Chiyoko had promised, "easy." He tapped out her number on his netlink.

After three rings, a man's voice came through.

"Hello, Petras. You've found something that doesn't belong to you."

Petras said nothing. His pulse pounded in his temples and his skin went suddenly cold.

"I know you weren't expecting to talk to me, Petras, and I know whose voice you expected to hear instead. But she can't help you anymore."

They knew where he was. Too late to change his mind now. He surveyed the mess of controls, searching for anything that looked "easy," and pushed a switch labeled with a power symbol. The lights came on; he heard a low hum that must have been the engines. The door shut automatically.

"It's not you we want, Petras. It's Chiyoko.

"We know you haven't done anything wrong. We know you think what you're doing is necessary. And we know you're probably very frightened right now. But there's no reason to be frightened, because you're not in any danger as long as you cooperate."

A wide rectangular touchscreen had lit up with two options: AUTOMATIC LIFTOFF and MANUAL LIFTOFF. It didn't take much thinking to decide which sounded better.

"Even now, it isn't too late. All you have to do is walk out of that shuttle. We are on your side, Petras. She is the criminal. This can still end well. Walk out now, and you will not be harmed. If you launch that shuttle I can no longer promise your safety."

The liftoff was so smooth that at first he didn't even notice he was rising. A moment later he looked out and saw the ground ten meters below his feet, twenty, thirty. He found a gauge on his left that seemed to be the altimeter. At thirty meters the shuttle stopped, and a pair of dark gray joysticks emerged from the center panel. By tugging on both he quickly got the hang of how to move the thing in the air – forward and backward, port and starboard, up and down, accelerate, brake.

"Petras," said the voice, "we have Jienne."

At these words, the chill on his skin twisted deep inside him, but it was too late to save Jienne now. Petras shut off the netlink just as three Impo shuttles approached in a delta formation directly ahead. He banked the shuttle sharply to the right and gunned the accelerator, but he could see by the rear monitor they weren't far behind. They were smaller than the shuttle, blue and black, still blocky in the Darmian style but leaner, more predatory. A moment later they flanked him – one on each side, one behind. He pulled up sharply, then dove, trying to lose them.

He had no idea where Chiyoko's "safe place" was, which meant there was only one place to go: Southshire, toward Chiyoko herself. Once he got there, maybe she could come up with something to save him. Maybe. The map on his console labeled cities by name, so he thought he could get there. Just a matter of flying to the other side of the planet, with three Impo on his back. How fast did these shuttles go, anyway?

His netlink rang. It was Chiyoko.

"How did you get through? They intercepted the signal!"

She ignored the question. "Petras, as long as you stay on Winnoka you're in danger. You have to get to the Gate."

He tilted the nose of the craft up till it was vertical, then pushed the accelerator to maximum. The shuttle's artificial gravity kept him anchored to his seat. "What happens then?"

"There's a panel on the upper left labeled GATE. Once you get in range, the blue button will light up. Hit it to bring up a list of destinations. You don't have enough power to jump very far, but that's okay. There's a planet called Ekko where you'll be safe. Once you make your selection, the Gate and your shuttle will do the rest."

A loud sound like an explosion rocked the shuttle; at first he thought they'd shot at him, but then he realized he had crossed the sound barrier. The altimeter read 45 kilometers. He was still accelerating.

"I've got three – make that five Impo trailing me. I can't shake 'em...hello? Hello? Shit."

70 kilometers up now. Still accelerating. The shuttle still bounced around, but it was settling down as the air thinned out. Underneath him, the vast spread of the horizon began to curve. The sky faded from blue into black, and stars winked into existence. He was entering space. 100 kilometers – 150 – 200. Still accelerating. The map of Winnoka changed into a chart of the space around the planet, and he found the Gate there, orbiting at an altitude of 900 kilometers. He adjusted course to intercept. 300 kilometers up. 400. The shaking had stopped completely; the last wisps of the Winnokan atmosphere had faded behind him, and through his terror came a sudden spike of exuberance. Winnoka appeared in his rear monitor as a wide orange ball. He was doing it. He was flying into the stars.

The shuttle rocked again, and this time it was no sonic boom; they were firing on

him. They must be getting desperate as he approached the Gate – still trying to capture him alive, probably, but taking no chances on escape. He threw the craft into wild gyrations, pulling up, veering port, then starboard, slowing suddenly, accelerating again. He couldn't shake them, but they didn't land any more hits, either. And he was almost in range. He could see the Gate now, an enormous mottled brown sphere, an artificial moon, attended by thousands of specks – starships. Real, honest-to-goodness starships. His finger hovered over the blue button, waiting for it to light up – just a little closer...

Suddenly the five Impos veered away, abandoning him. He barely had time to wonder before his own shuttle began to decelerate, slower and slower till it reached a dead stop – just outside Gate range. A loud voice over the speakers startled him:

"Winnokan civilian shuttle, this is the Senrian heavy cruiser *Malta*. We have repelled your attackers and are preparing to take you into custody. Do not resist."

I don't need your help, he thought, but he didn't know how to operate the comm system to tell them so. It probably wouldn't have mattered anyway. Something told him Senrian heavy cruisers didn't pick up shuttles just to be friendly.

He felt his shuttle being pulled upward – an artificial gravity well. All the big ships had them, Chiyoko said. The overhead monitor gave him a good view of the *Malta*. It was a deep space vessel, clearly not made for atmospheric flight; clusters of long, curving projections like claws covered its ovoid, red-and-gold body. The cruiser grew as he approached, and slowly its enormity sunk in – the thing must have been ten kilometers across.

He had never imagined a ship could be so big.

The shuttle was pulled to the center of a wide hangar that opened directly to

vacuum, and from there, a spindly crane arm set it gently on the hangar floor. The space doors closed, and Petras heard a soft rush of air as the cabin re-pressurized.

The voice came through on his speakers again: "Stay where you are. Do not exit the shuttle."

That was fine with Petras.

Half a dozen soldiers in red-and-gold uniforms rushed through a side door armed with wicked-looking rifles, which they aimed at the door of the shuttle. One raised his hand to his mouth and spoke into some kind of intercom. "Open the door and come out slowly with your hands on your head. If you do as we ask, you will not be harmed."

He'd heard *that* before, but it wasn't as though he had a choice. He walked out into the hangar, hands folded on his head like a prisoner of war. The hangar was a high, wide room, mostly empty, oppressively gray. Two men approached him in an odd sideways gait, knees bent, and searched him efficiently for weapons. "Clean," one announced.

"Let's move."

They escorted him back through the side door and into a hallway. The hallway was the same utilitarian gray as the hangar and was lit by long glowing white lines on either side of their path. The soldiers led him through a long, bewildering maze of halls and elevators till they stopped at last in front of a door marked 117-A. One of them hit a few buttons and it slid open. He gestured inside.

"Not much space, but it's a hell of a lot better than the brig. Make yourself at home. Don't try to leave. Someone will come see you when it's time."

Petras stepped inside, glanced around. "How long will that be?"

The soldier snorted. "Just be glad you're not dead."

The door slid shut, and once again, Petras was alone.

PART II: ASCENSION

Chapter 9

Petras took a deep breath and collapsed on the sofa, head between his hands. He had to think.

Chiyoko was still in Southshire, as far as he knew, and he had to assume he was beyond her help. Jienne was captured, if he could believe what that Impo had said; she'd be in a prison cell soon if she wasn't already. He felt terrible about Jienne. If only she had listened...he should have thought harder, found a way to *make* her listen. But then, what if she had? Was he any better off now, locked in a cell of his own?

How, how could this have happened? He thought of the Winnoka North campus, all those students yawning to start their ordinary days, or still asleep beside the ones they loved. Yesterday that had been him. It was impossibly surreal. All those stories he'd heard in his high school days, the terrible things that happened to people at the Winnokan north pole: that was him now. He was one of *them*.

His prison was luxurious, as prisons went. True, the walls and floors were bare gray, but overall it was actually a bit bigger than his tiny room at Winnoka North. He had a bathroom with a shower, a bedroom with a narrow bed, and a kitchen with variable-temperature storage, a food synthesizer, and a sanitation unit.

The exit was locked, of course.

He synthesized a plate of veg-and-fish for lunch, and around suppertime he ate again. No one came to see him. At midnight he went to bed, couldn't sleep, got up and paced around the sofa for an hour. His netlink had automatically synced up with the ship's local time, he realized; back at Winnoka North it would be even later, about three in the morning. Yet he still paced. He finally did fall asleep, and woke a little after seven.

Someone came at noon, wearing a red-and-gold Senrian uniform and a smile. All the stale nervousness he had pent up since yesterday flooded back in a sickening rush.

"Special Lieutenant Astor Minnick. Pleased to meet you." It was strange to hear someone in a uniform speak without a Darmian accent. Chiyoko was right; Senrians and Winnokans sounded about the same. *Good. Keep thinking like that, keep processing.* He couldn't let the fear drown him.

They shook hands, sat down at the little table in the kitchen.

"According to your shuttle's registry, your name is Velmer Wattico, and you're the president of Winnoka North University. Sixty-one years old." That smile of his widened, as though they were privy together to some harmless joke the Impo would never understand.

"Petras Fairburn," he said, regretting it immediately. This man, Minnick, hadn't even asked for his name; why volunteer anything? Too late, too late. He wasn't thinking. Bergschrin was a Senrian ally, and the *Malta* had saved him from the Impo, so in theory they should be on his side; but the Senrian soldiers who'd taken him in yesterday had not seemed so welcoming.

He was out of his depth, here.

"Petras Fairburn, good." Special Lieutenant Astor Minnick looked about thirty,

shorter than Petras, leaner. Petras thought he could take him in a fight...maybe.

Immaculately parted blond hair. He wore his smile like a fashion accessory. "How do you like your rooms? I see you found the food synthesizer. Are you comfortable?"

"Yes." He had lost the *sir* his first year at the university, soon after the Reverences began.

"Good, good. Petras, I'd like to ask you a few questions. When we found you, you were running from no fewer than five Impo craft, with eight more on the way. They were firing on you. We were happy to help you out, and I'm sure you won't mind if I ask: why did they want you so badly?"

Again he felt he was losing ground. Think! He tried to push to the offensive.

"Actually I'd like to ask a question first. If I may."

Minnick somehow drained all pleasure from his smile without moving his lips.

"Certainly."

"Why did you pick me up?"

"Of course. Good question. And I could tell you that we were just helping a friend in need, but you're too smart to believe that, aren't you?" Again that knowing expression, as if they were part of a secret club. "The truth is simple. We don't trust Darmis, and they don't trust us. So anyone Darmis wants to kill that badly...well, we figure maybe we have something in common. The enemy of my enemy, right?"

"The Impo may be Darmian, but they work for the Emperor."

"Well, now. Twenty years ago that was true, but these days the Emperor has his hands full just keeping up appearances. The Impo do what they want. They wanted you. We want to know why."

Should he tell him? The man seemed friendly now; did he really want to antagonize him? Of course, that was probably just an interrogation tactic. But if they really were trying to help him – but no, that's what they'd expect him to think...

Perhaps, for now, the truth was simplest.

"They thought if they got me, they could get to Chiyoko."

"Chiyoko," the man repeated dully. "You mean *the* Chiyoko? The Star-Witch?"

"You don't believe me?"

"I do, I do. Go on."

"There's not much to tell. She and I, we've been friends a long time, but I think they just found out." He shook his head. "Even if they'd captured me, it wouldn't have done them any good. In all the years I knew her, Chiyoko never betrayed a weakness."

"How did you first meet?"

One question led to another, and they talked for over an hour, covering everything he knew about her – where she lived, what she talked about, what she looked like, what kind of accent she had, what she knew, what she might not know. Petras did feel a certain loyalty to Chiyoko for helping him escape – though her plan was not going extremely well at the moment – and he didn't wish to betray her. He didn't think he was. It was true what he'd said: Chiyoko had never shown him a weakness.

So he answered the questions. Yes, he'd heard she was a criminal, but he didn't know anything about her past. No, he didn't know why she seemed never to age. Relativistic effects? He couldn't rule it out. Yes, she had extraordinary reflexes. But Minnick began asking other questions too – questions about things that Petras had dismissed merely as legends. Could she turn herself invisible? Did she really have a

lifeworld on the Emperor? Was it true she could not be killed? Petras thought these must be jokes, but the man was deadly serious – and as Petras listened, he realized that Chiyoko was a mystery not only to him, but to the rest of the galaxy as well.

"You've been very patient," said Minnick. "Just one more question, and we'll be done for today. In all the time you spent with this woman...did she ever give you any hint of what she's after? What she wants? What her agenda might be?"

Petras shrugged. "She didn't say." It was his first and only lie; something told him it would be best to keep her interest in the Plateau, and Irth's destruction, a secret.

"Maybe she doesn't want anything. Maybe she just wants to be left alone."

"People with power always want something, Petras." *And what is it you want, Special Lieutenant Astor Minnick?* "You're sure she never hinted at her intentions?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry."

"Of course. Well, then, I'll let you have some peace. Let me give you my Net ID...there. Call me if you need anything."

"Wait – when do I get out of here? Where are you taking me?"

"Sorry, Petras. Too early to say. Don't hate the messenger!"

Minnick came back with more questions the next day, and the day after that. Each time Petras thought he'd told everything he possibly could about Chiyoko, the man came up with something new. How did she style her hair? Did it ever change? Could it be a wig? Was she right- or left-handed? Had she ever told him her surname? (She hadn't.) Then, too, they asked about the challenges she'd given him, pushing him to remember as much as he could about each one, trying to pin down what interested her. And no, he had no idea what "something good" would have been.

At the end of each session, Astor would ask what she wanted. Petras always said he didn't know, but he had little practice lying. Was he convincing? Minnick gave no sign one way or the other.

Three weeks passed like this: shower and breakfast in the morning, interrogations at noon, the rest of the day a strange cocktail of fear and boredom. But what was happening with Jienne? It was maddening. Three weeks – and then one day, everything changed.

He knew right away that something was different, because Minnick wasn't alone. The man who came with him was older – in his forties, maybe. His face was hard, and he had several extra rows of colored bars on his shoulder. Command. The uniform was Darmian blue and black. But he wasn't Impo, either.

Chiyoko had told him stories, shown him photos. Petras knew who this person was. He wished he didn't. When the man spoke, it sounded like crushing gravel. He had a Darmian accent.

"Petras Fairburn."

"Yes, sir?"

They stood facing each other by the little kitchen table, while Minnick quietly took a position off to the side. "My name is Padrian Werner. I'm the Imperial Secretary of Domestic Affairs, which means I report directly to Emperor Monifice himself. Lieutenant Minnick has told me about you – you're the one they rescued at Winnoka."

"Yes, sir."

"I find myself in a very unusual situation, Petras, and I am going to explain it to you the best I can. I'm going to tell you some things that will sound bizarre, but you need

to listen and try to understand. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir." What else could he say to a man like Padrian Werner?

"A little over three years ago, the Empire discovered a nonhuman intelligence. We met them in the Sagittarius spiral arm of this galaxy, so we call them the Sagittarians. Since then we've been in continuous contact. They've more or less deciphered our language, which is good, because we haven't been able to figure out a damned word of theirs. They're big, ugly sons of bitches, and the only thing they breathe is methane, so if we want to meet face to face, they come in breathing tanks. Nobody's ever seen the inside of one of their ships. Obviously it's all been very, very classified. Have I blown your mind yet?"

"You mean space aliens – like on Aberdale?"

At the mention of Aberdale, Werner glared, then glanced at Minnick. That must be something else Petras wasn't supposed to know.

"Space aliens, Petras, but not like on Aberdale. It's been a long time now and they don't much look like they plan on killing themselves."

So. Chiyoko had been telling the truth with that story, too. His trust in her grew a little stronger.

Werner continued. "Now, contact so far has been limited, carefully controlled by the Emperor. We've only ever seen one of them face-to-face – a single alien from a single ship that's been parked on one of our Imperial cruisers for the past three years. The scientists talked to it every day. Very controlled, very careful." His perpetual scowl deepened into something evincing genuine distaste. "A few months ago that all began to change. The Sag stopped talking, seemed dissatisfied with our scientists. Said it didn't

like talking to the same people all the time, thought it wasn't getting anywhere, whatever that means. Eight days ago the *Malta* was passing through that region of space – " He saw Petras's expression and glanced at Minnick. "He doesn't know where we are?"

"No, sir."

"Senrian space. Twenty thousand light-years from Winnoka. You're a long way from home, son. As I was saying, the *Malta* happened to be nearby, and the Sag somehow detected there was another ship in the area. Well, it got excited at the idea of meeting someone new, kept asking to visit, and we got the feeling it wasn't just asking. We weren't thrilled with the choice, but eventually Monifice allowed it. Two days ago it came onboard, and it's on this ship right now. I've come along with it, to supervise. And much to the consternation of this little Senrian traveling circus, I've taken command of the *Malta* as well."

At this barrage of information, Petras could only blink stupidly. Finally he said, "Why are you telling me all this?"

"That is an excellent question, Petras, because believe me right now when I say the very last thing I need in this godforsaken mess is more civilian involvement. But the Sag is here, and it wants to see you, of all the people in this galaxy, you, Petras Fairburn, God knows why, and I'm being told that I must agree. And so," he concluded, "here we are. Now what I want to know is just what makes you so goddamned special."

"I – " He was completely overwhelmed; he noticed Minnick studying his reaction but was too shocked to care. "I have no idea. Really. I promise."

Werner's tone dropped all pretense of civility. "You know we have Jienne, don't you, Petras?"

"Yes sir," he said quietly.

"Did you know we have your dad, too?"

Petras felt like an icicle had slid down his throat.

"We do. Both of 'em. We know all about you and Chiyoko, too." Petras noticed Minnick scowling. "And let me show you something – "

Werner held up a short green ribbon. At the end of it hung a gardenia, beautifully crafted from silver, with a monstrous diamond affixed to the middle. "Monifce gave me this personally," he said. "Do you know what this is? An Imperial Mandate. It means I have full authority to act on his behalf. As far you're concerned, it means I am the fucking Emperor in the flesh. Do you understand that? Do you understand what that means? What I can do?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you still mean to tell me – " he slapped the table, " – *that you have no idea why they want to talk to you?*"

"I'm sorry."

"Bullshit!"

"I don't know!"

"Bullshit!"

"I don't know!"

Werner scowled at him and finally snorted. "Well. We'll see." Just like that Petras realized the anger had been an act.

"One of my scientists told the Sag that the *Malta* had taken on a prisoner – well, that was the first time they'd used that word, 'prisoner,' and it didn't translate right, so they

had to explain it. They said 'prisoner' means someone who is kept apart. When the Sag heard that phrase, 'someone who is kept apart,' it got very excited, demanded to see you in person. And so here we are. Now listen. I'll take you to meet this thing, but before I do, there's something you need to understand. This meeting is as important as they come, and I'll be right behind you watching every move you make, so you will not, I repeat, you will *not* fuck this up. Because I can hurt you just as much as I want, and I am not a nice man. Do I make myself absolutely *transparent* to you, Petras Fairburn?"

"Yes, sir," he said.

Petras had never known it was possible to hate a person so much.

Chapter 10

The broad doors opened into a vast gray hangar like the one where Petras had first landed. Padrian Werner strode in like history in the making, accompanied by Petras, Minnick, dozens of soldiers, and about thirty other personnel whose purpose was not clear – scientists, perhaps. No one spoke as they fanned out into position, but everyone looked as nervous as Petras felt. Except Werner.

The center of all attention was the Sagittarian ship itself – an expansive monstrosity that took up nearly half the hangar. It certainly *looked* alien, thought Petras. Its main body was shaped like a conch shell, black and purple; on either side of the vessel, fat, curved protrusions jutted out like fangs. The surface was mostly smooth but grew knobbed and pitted near the center, where a short, oblong fan spread open. The whole surface shimmered faintly silver in the glaring artificial light. It looked, actually, a little like a croissant – a giant, metallic, evil alien croissant. In other circumstances, the

thought might have been funny.

The doors behind him parted again, and he turned to see someone else enter the room. The newcomer was a grandfatherly man in a red and gold uniform, with extravagant eyebrows and hair like snow. A young woman followed him, also in red and gold, but civilian clothes: trousers and a jacket.

Petras stifled a gasp, because her long dark brown hair had made him think, just for a moment, that she was Jienne. But it wasn't her, of course; this newcomer's hair was smooth rather than wavy, her skin was much less pale, and she looked at least five years older. She was rather beautiful, but her vapid brown eyes held none of Jienne's intelligence.

Padrian Werner cut them off. "What the hell is this?" he demanded. "Lamendo, I told you not to come. This is above you."

"Above me?" The white-haired man – Lamendo – flashed a grandfatherly smile and glanced at his companion. "Karminy, what is my position?"

She furrowed her brows in concentration, then recited, "You are the Imperial Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Father."

"The Secretary of Foreign Affairs?" he said, in mock surprise. "Why, that would mean that talks with the Sagittarians would fall under *my* jurisdiction. Isn't that right? I would think the Secretary of *Domestic* Affairs would have no reason to be involved in – "

"Enough bullshit. Do you recognize this, Lamendo?" Werner brandished the Imperial Mandate.

Lamendo chuckled. "I heard a rumor the Emperor has a price for those. I heard that anyone who gets a Mandate, gets a lifeword too. And since Monifice approved my

visit personally, well..." He made a show of weighing this in his hands. "I would be careful. You'll find my blood harder to wash away than others you've murdered."

Careful silence fell for a few seconds. "Stay, then," Werner said finally. "But tell your little whore to get out of here."

Karmindy looked hurt, and rather confused, but she obeyed.

Not for the first time, Petras realized he was in over his head.

"Dr. Bernabie," said Werner, "tell the ambassador we're ready."

The man who stepped forward was old, lanky, his short gray beard trimmed neat. "We are ready to receive you, Ambassador."

A long silence followed. Petras glanced around. Bernabie caught his eye, and his doubtful frown seemed to echo Petras's own fears. The whole situation was so bizarre. What could they possibly expect him to say?

The vessel's main doors slid apart like plated armor, and the Sagittarian emerged.

The breathing tank stood eight meters tall, a sheer, angular construction of clear polymer and metal. Inside floated the Sagittarian, wreathed in streaming jets of sandy-colored gases. Werner was right – it was ugly. Its mass was concentrated in what might be thought of, with some imagination, as its head: a swollen, sagging, tumor-like sac the color of pus. It alternately collapsed on itself and puffed up again in a slow, regular rhythm. Three long feelers extended from the bottom of the sac, elaborate and thin like moth antennae, the same sickly white color as the head. Where the feelers connected was a sort of bulbous mass, covered in gills that pulsated in time with the expansion of the sac.

"Welcome, Ambassador," said Bernabie.

A halting synthetic voice issued from the depths of the tank, pleasant and feminine, an absurd contrast to the creature itself. "Which of – they are – prisoner?"

Werner gestured, indicating Petras should answer. "I am the prisoner," said Petras.

The great tank turned slowly by some unseen mechanism till its front face was directed squarely at him. "You?"

"Yes."

"You are – speaker?"

"Yes."

The Sagittarian's expansions grew quicker. Its gills and antennae turned pink, then a deeper red. "Speaker," it said. "At last. I have waited – much long – for this – you – speaker."

A short silence followed.

"I am honored, Ambassador."

A longer silence followed.

"Ambassador," said Werner, "you have seen the prisoner. Are you satisfied?"

"Why is someone – speaking toward me – who is not the speaker?" said the Sagittarian's pleasant female voice.

Bernabie stepped forward and bowed slightly. "Forgive us, Ambassador, I think he merely wants to know – "

"Why is someone – speaking toward me – who is not the speaker?"

"Speaker?" said Werner. "What does that mean? Who's the Speaker?"

"The ambassador said he was," said Bernabie, pointing at Petras. "I don't know

what it means. The ambassador has not used that term before."

The tank began to turn back toward the ship.

"Wait!" said Bernabie, to no effect.

A moment later, Petras spoke.

"Ambassador."

The tank stopped.

"What the *fuck*," growled Werner.

"Do not delay – longer," said the Sagittarian. "We will speak again – soon – alone." The tank resumed its motion back toward the ship.

"What the hell just happened?" shouted Werner. "Bernabie, what just happened?"

"I'm not sure."

Werner grabbed Petras by his shirt and shook him. "What did you tell that thing? *Speaker*? Who the *fuck* told you to say you were Speaker, and what the *fuck* does that mean?"

Panic rushed into him like a stifling fog. "I just – I thought it was just asking – if I was the one who talked? I just thought – " But in his terror, he could not remember exactly what he had thought. *Speaker*? It seemed like such a simple question – yes, he was the one who had spoken. "I never meant – "

"This meeting is over," Werner shouted.

As the breathing tank entered the ship, Petras heard in his mind quite distinctly:
<*Don't make me wait much longer, Speaker.*>

"What?" he said.

He experienced the words as if he had thought of them himself, but he knew

somehow they had come from the alien. And there was something else, something odd: a thumping in his ears, a deep pulsing in time with his heart. That wasn't just nervousness. He'd never felt his ears pulse like that before. How –

Werner's fist flew at him in a blur of motion, and his world exploded in pain and color. His vision swam, collapsing into darkness. He fell. Voices surged, swelling and receding – he thought Lamendo yelled something. Werner shouted orders and swore. More shouts...the darkness grew...

Some time later he regained consciousness and tasted his blood, hot and bitter on his tongue. The left side of his face felt like a shuttle had hit it. More orders. Strong hands lifted him, rough fingers seized his hair, raised his head. He blinked unsteadily. Slowly his vision returned. And there was Werner, cruel eyes burning dim.

They weren't in the hangar anymore. It was a small place now, a meeting room with a short rectangular table and a few chairs. He flinched as Werner raised his arm, pressing a contact on the wall. A viewscreen appeared.

It was Father, kneeling on the floor of a cramped gray prison cell, his eyes covered with a thick red blindfold. Two men flanked him, each blue and black, like statues.

"Oh no," said Petras. "Oh no, no, no...Father – "

"He can't hear you."

"Please, he didn't do anything, it's not his fault – "

"No, Petras, it's your fault. Your fault."

"I didn't know! I didn't know what I was saying! I didn't know!"

Werner briefly pressed another contact. "Do it."

"No!" he shouted, rushing toward the intercom, but the soldiers caught him and held him as he struggled. Onscreen, one of the men pulled out a small pistol and shot his father in the head, and they dragged out his body together. A thin red smear trailed the corpse.

Petras's jaw moved silently, gaping on its hinge.

"That was to punish you," Werner said in that rough, rocky voice. "We agreed, Petras, that you would not fuck this up. And you fucked it up. I don't know if you did it on purpose or if you're really that fucking *stupid*, but you absolutely, definitely fucked it up. That has consequences. Are you listening to me?"

"Yes sir, yes sir..."

But already the screen had changed and it was Jienne now, the same as his father had been: blindfolded, kneeling, flanked by her executioners.

"*NO!*" he roared. "No, no, no, no, no, I'll do anything!"

A long slow grin slid across Werner's face like a snake.

"Anything?" Werner glanced at Jienne, back at Petras. "Really anything? You'll do exactly what I say from now on? Exactly, exactly what I say? You will never again think? You will never again question? You will live every second as my servant, forever, from now until the end of your miserable life? This is what you promise?"

"Yes, yes," he said. "Yes. Please don't hurt her. Anything you want. Yes."

"Are you *very* sure?"

"Yes," he said, between short, hard breaths. "Sir. Yes, sir. Please."

"Oh good. I was hoping you'd say that," said Werner. He snapped his fingers.

They took him to his quarters and left him alone. And all that night he screamed

and screamed and screamed.

Chapter 11

"Petras?"

He groaned, blinking in the sudden light. He didn't want to wake up. He wanted to go back to sleep, to oblivion, and never face the universe again. He wanted to die.

Only, he couldn't do that either. Because somewhere out there, deep in the cold blackness between stars, Jienne was still alive.

"Petras? I'm sorry to wake you."

It was Dr. Bernabie.

Petras sat up in bed, touched his cheek gingerly. It hurt like hell, and his lips were split pretty bad, but nothing was broken. His throat was raw from yelling. He wanted water, but not badly enough to get up.

"Secretary Werner sent me, to, ah...clarify some things...he says it's important..." Bernabie coughed and looked down at his notepad as if embarrassed. "I apologize, we've never been introduced. My name is Yindel Bernabie, I'm the lead xenobiologist for the mission. I've been around almost from the beginning – the, ah, first contact that is...well, I'll get right to the question, then."

Bernabie picked up a pen with bony fingers, set it down again. His gray beard, so neatly trimmed yesterday, looked ragged now, and his fingers were shaking. Petras wondered if Bernabie was nervous because Padrian Werner controlled someone he cared about, too. The thought made him hate Bernabie a little less for his intrusion.

"Ah...we...noticed a long time ago that the Sagittarians...or their breathing tanks,

we don't know which...emit a certain kind of radiation that we call J-waves. They're, ah, harmless to humans. It's not very much radiation, but J-waves are a rare kind of thing, and...well, we never knew what was causing it. Them. The J-waves, I mean." He wiped his mouth with his hand. "And with all the other questions surrounding the Sags – Sagittarians, we didn't give it too much thought...Now, I confess that I still don't know what the ambassador meant when he called you 'Speaker,' but I recorded a sudden spike in J-wave levels...twenty-two seconds later. And when the spike occurred, ah, in the J-waves, looking at the recording I can see it is the same moment you said 'What?' as if something unexpected had happened. And so I just wondered...that is, the Secretary was wondering if you, ah, experienced anything at all unusual, or had any insight into what might have caused the, ah...anomaly."

Oh – that. With everything that had happened, he'd forgotten about that.

He rubbed his eyes slowly. Yesterday's horror still writhed inside him, but it was no longer the roaring cataclysm that last night had pounded his fists on the walls, ripped breath from his lungs long after he'd thought he could scream no more. But his personal apocalypse had left him still able to speak, still possessed of his faculties. And for Jienne's sake, he knew he had better answer Bernabie's questions.

"It was bizarre," he said, rubbing his eyes slowly. "I could hear words in my mind. I don't know how else to explain it. It was talking to me. Like – telepathy."

"I, ah...how odd. Are you...telepathy? Are you quite sure you were not...?"

"I didn't imagine it, Doctor. Believe me," he sighed, "I'm in no position to lie right now."

"Of course, of course, I...ah. What did the ambassador, ah, communicate to you?"

"He said...that I had kept him waiting a long time, and that I'd better not make him wait much longer. That was all."

Bernabie nodded, the creases in his forehead deepening. He said something else, but Petras didn't listen, because right at that moment he discovered something new.

He could still feel the alien.

The presence was miniscule but unmistakable, flitting around his consciousness like an insect. No words this time, but the same feeling as before – that same odd sensation of a thought he somehow knew was not his own – and again that thumping in his inner ear. He could feel the impatience, the *need* to connect, the mission so long unfulfilled, now on the cusp of achievement. Very soon – very soon now –

It was gone, abruptly as it had come.

"I felt it again," said Petras, interrupting Dr. Bernabie. "It was in my head again. Just now. I couldn't quite hear what it was saying, but...it's out there."

Bernabie fumbled through his pockets and produced a little silver and white device with a tiny screen. "The J-waves are spiking again," he murmured, tapping a button. "Even higher than before." He looked up and after a long time said, "We need to get you closer."

The guards outside Petras's quarters let them through together unchallenged, and Petras blinked in the corridor's bright light. They took an elevator to their destination: a tiny dark room, where one whole wall was a window to the stars. There they sat down uncomfortably on the hard floor, facing each other silently.

"Why don't we just go into the hangar again?" said Petras. "What is this place?"

"Secretary Werner does not want us attracting attention," Bernabie replied. "This

is a storage facility. Secretary Werner commanded it to be this way. We must all do as we're told, you understand? Now, ah, focus, see if you can make your contact again. This room is very close to the Sagittarian."

Petras closed his eyes and tried to listen.

But the darkness behind his eyelids became a vision of his father, and he watched all over the casual gunshot, the lifeless slump of the body. He opened his eyes, looked through the window at the wide expanse of stars. Father, who had worked so hard all his life, only to give up at the end. *I could have turned things around, I could have made you care again...if only I'd had more time...* But how hard had he tried, really, while Father was still alive? How much more could he have done?

Once more he thought with terrible jealousy of the Winnoka North students in their warm beds, who even now were going about their comfortable lives, missing him not at all. How unimaginably pleasant, to read about the spectacles of violence and politics from a distance, like rumbles of faraway cannon – to shiver perhaps with imagined terrors but always, always go to bed and sleep whole at night. The stars ran together, glimmering and sliding through his tears. Was he grieving at all, or just feeling sorry for himself? No, he couldn't afford that right now. He had to –

<Are you ready now, Speaker? You have kept me waiting too long among these others. Are you ready, at last, to begin?>

Petras was so shocked by the sudden intrusion that he answered without thinking: "I'm here." Audibly, but also mentally: *<I'm here.>* Bernabie heard him, and Petras knew the alien had heard him too. He wiped away his tears quickly, daring Bernabie to comment.

<Are you ready now, Speaker?> His ears thumped wildly.

"What is it, Petras?" said Bernabie.

"It's the Sag," he answered, clearing his throat. "It's asking if I'm ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Ready...to begin. I'm not sure what that means. I...I think I can communicate back to it."

"Tell it you have other business before you can begin this...thing, whatever it wants. Tell it you need some questions answered first."

"I don't think it's going to like that," said Petras. The thought of angering this creature, which could project into his mind at will, made him nervous. But then, so did losing Jienne.

"Just...just do it," said Bernabie, trying to sound forceful and failing badly.

Even so, Jienne won.

<I can't begin yet,> thought Petras. <Soon, but not yet. I have questions first.>

Communicating back to the alien was easy, instinctual, like working a muscle. And the alien understood.

<Foolish to delay,> it replied. <Dangerous to delay. What questions?> The impatience was unmistakable now.

"What questions?"

"Ask it...ask it how many meetings it has had with the humans so far."

Petras relayed the answer: "Two hundred twelve."

"That's right," Bernabie answered. He sounded surprised. "That's exactly right."

"You didn't believe me? You didn't think I could really do it."

"Ask it...ah...what it wants."

<What is it you want with me?>

<I want to begin.>

<Begin what?>

<You are the Speaker. I want to begin.>

"I can't tell. Something with me."

"Will it let us aboard its ship?"

<Can I come inside your ship, then?>

<Yes.>

<I have companions also.>

<Yes, yes.>

"The Sag says it's fine."

"Would it be willing to, ah, relocate? The ship, I mean. Would it take us somewhere if we, ah, if you asked it to?"

He asked. It answered:

<If I do this, we will begin? No more delays?>

<If you take me where I ask, we can begin.>

Suspiciously: *<Is this a web?>*

Web? Something had clearly been lost in translation. *<What do you mean?>*

<Have these humans formed a web? If so, I can get you away so that we may begin.>

He still didn't know what it meant, but it seemed the only way to get what Bernabie wanted. *<Yes.>*

<Get to my ship, then, and we will go elsewhere. But after that, no more delays!>

"It'll do it."

"Oh, ah, good. One...more question, ah...could it...that is to say...if anyone here tried to prevent us from leaving, could it, ah, overcome the resistance?" Petras's eyes narrowed as he watched Bernabie fumble sentences. "Not that I would expect any such...ah...it's only that..."

Suddenly Petras understood.

"Padrian Werner didn't send you at all, did he?"

"What? Petras, there is, ah, no time to waste. He will be very displeased, if we do not obey...you know what he could do if we, ah, disobey."

"Bullshit. We both know you haven't told Werner about any of this. If he finds us..."

"I, ah..."

If he finds us... The potency of the uncompleted sentence hovered between them.

"We should go," Bernabie said at last.

The trip back seemed to take hours, Petras fearing each time they rounded a corner that he would meet that terrible blue-and-black uniform, those blank, casual eyes. *I can't live this way*, thought Petras. *How can anyone live this way?* But they were not discovered.

Inside his quarters, though, he found a surprise: the white-haired old man – the Secretary of Foreign Affairs – and his daughter, both dressed once again in Senrian red and gold. They rose together to greet him. Karmindy smiled stupidly, looking at him with her pretty eyes, and Lamendo took his hand warmly.

"Petras, hello," said the old man. "My name is Lamendo Quince, and this is my daughter, Karmindy. I'm delighted to finally meet you."

Petras glanced back in surprise at Bernabie, but Bernabie had already left. When Petras spoke, he knew he sounded scared, and he tried to control his wavering voice – without much success. "I saw you at the meeting with the Sag. Both of you."

Lamendo and Karmindy sat down, prompting Petras to find a seat too. "Petras," said Lamendo, "I heard about your father. Terrible. I have known Padrian Werner a long time, and he has killed so many people that I cannot say this surprised me, but nonetheless, you have my condolences."

"It wasn't my fault," insisted Petras. "I didn't know what I was doing. I just said it without thinking, I didn't know what it meant, but he wouldn't listen..."

"Of course," said Lamendo. "You must know, Werner is an animal, chained to the Emperor. Which of them controls the other?" He shrugged. "Who can say? Perhaps both. But there is no reasoning with him, not while he carries the Imperial Mandate."

"But you rank just as high as he does," said Petras. "Can't you stop him?"

A sad smile wrinkled Lamendo's face. "Darmis, not Senris, is the hand of the Emperor. He will do as he wishes. My position – Secretary of Foreign Affairs – is a relic, from the days when the Empire still had rivals in the human universe. Today, my only real power is in dealing with a handful of the Outer Provinces. I assure you, any jurisdiction I have over the Sagittarian affair is a technicality at best. My title is a scrap which Emperor Monifice tossed me, a gesture to please Senris." He sighed, a profound exhalation. "But I am an old man now, and grateful for scraps."

Petras looked to the carpet helplessly.

"Petras," said Lamendo, "I owe you an apology. Dr. Bernabie's deception was my idea. It was a necessary lie, but a lie nonetheless. I am sorry."

He looked up again, mouth opening. Understanding dawned, and he felt silly now for not seeing it before. "Bernabie works for you!"

"Not so. Say rather, at the moment, we both want the same thing. We want you and the Sagittarian out of Werner's grasp, and the Emperor's, forever. But we feared you would not help us if you knew our intentions."

"You're damned right," said Petras. "If Werner had found out –"

"Padrian Werner is not on this ship right now," said Lamendo. "He has returned to his own vessel for the moment."

"His own vessel? There's another ship with the *Malta*?"

"Oh, yes. You don't think Werner would come on a Senrian vessel without some sort of protection, do you? The Darmian dreadnought that follows us, the *Rothgar*, is more than a match for the *Malta*. But I digress.

"The point is, his attention is diverted. Now, I confess I used Bernabie's netlink to listen in on your conference just now, and I believe we have an opportunity. If you can indeed speak to the Sagittarian, and it has agreed to transport you anywhere you wish to go, then this is the perfect moment to act. Once Werner is back onboard, he will discover this telepathic link sooner or later, have no doubt. And when he does...who can say? I shudder even to imagine."

He was right, of course – it was the only outcome. Thinking of it turned his insides to ice. And oh, how easy it would be, to let these people carry him away to safety, to a warm bed and a sleep undisturbed by the distant echo of other people's problems. For

a moment he was even tempted.

Only a moment.

"I can't. He has Jienne."

"It's a big risk, I know," Lamendo said gently. "But nothing great is accomplished without risk. You must understand, if you don't escape – if Werner and the Emperor get control over this power of yours, and the support of the Sagittarians – what that would do to the Empire. The galaxy's balanced on the point of a needle, held in check by an intricate deadlock of politics and arms. If Darmis and the Emperor gained the Sagittarians as allies, they would crush that balance and wash the history books in blood. And Petras...how long do you think Jienne would survive in a world like that?"

And what happens if the Senrians get that ally instead? Is that really any better?

Still, he would have accepted, if not for Jienne.

"No."

"The risk – "

"No, there's no *risk*. If we do this, they'll kill her. That's not a risk, it's a price. You want me to sacrifice her. Right? Go ahead, then. Look at me and say it. Say, I want you to kill her." He rose and stared down at them. The strange new confidence he had found here rushed through his veins, laced with terror and despair. "Say it!"

Lamendo nodded slowly. He stood.

"I see there is no more to be done for now," he said. "Think about it, yes? There is more at stake than you realize."

Chapter 12

Petras passed the rest of the day alone; but as he lay in bed that night, still trying desperately to sort out this confusing, nightmarish jumble, his salvation arrived. He heard it before he saw it, and what he heard first was his own name.

"Petras," said a voice. "Stand up."

He looked up. It was Chiyoko.

Her youthful face was serene as she stood watching him; her black eyes gleamed faintly in the dark. He rose and took her hand, to be sure he was not dreaming; for all that night, the line between dreams and reality had blurred.

She was real.

Relief surged through him like a physical wave. Despite all the times he'd mistrusted her, he nevertheless believed in her power. In that moment, he was certain she could save him.

She hugged him.

"I can't stay long," she said.

"Chiyoko, they killed my dad, they – "

"Shh. I know. I've come with a miracle – just one, to get you started in the right direction. Don't get used to it."

"What?"

"I can get Jienne free."

"What? How?"

"It's a miracle, Petras. There isn't any 'how.' Listen. I can get Jienne free and safe by tomorrow morning. After that, the rest is up to you."

Petras cried wordlessly. "Chiyoko – "

"Listen! There's a price – miracles always have a price, you understand? In the old days it was faith. Today the currency is different. I don't need your faith. What I'm asking from you, in payment for this miracle, is duty."

"Duty," he echoed. "What duty?"

"Very soon, I expect, an opportunity will come to you. You will have the chance to assume a duty. It will be a heavy burden; it will seem impossible. But you must agree to it. That is the price."

His eyes narrowed in confusion. "What? Why?"

"Because it's necessary, Petras. Because I'm not done improving you yet. Does it matter? I'm saving Jienne, and this is my price."

He nodded. It made as much sense as anything else she said, and if she could really do it... "How will I know this opportunity when I see it?"

"You'll know." She nodded once, her black hair swaying almost invisibly in the dim light. "I'll have her taken to a Senrian planet called Coreau." She spelled the name for him. "It used to be a trading outpost, but most of the corporations are gone now and only about fifteen million people remain. Look her up when you get out of this mess."

"I will."

"By the way, I hear you've had some contact with the Sagittarians. Did you learn anything interesting about them?"

Could the Star-Witch really be asking *him* for information? He'd spent so long listening to bits of her seeming endless knowledge that the reversal felt strange. But when he told her what little he'd learned – the telepathy, the J-wave spikes, a few other details –

she only nodded, as if none of it was new.

Maybe it wasn't.

"That's great, Petras. I wish you the best. Listen, I have to go now, all right?"

"Wait!" he said. "This...miracle...it was the *something good*, wasn't it? This was my reward, for falling in love. You knew about Jienne all along, didn't you?"

Chiyoko sighed.

"What you have isn't love, Petras. What you have is a conscience."

"That's not true! I mean, things haven't always been perfect, but..." He trailed off, frowning. Why did it matter what Chiyoko thought about this? Hadn't he decided he didn't care about her prizes anymore?

"I'll give you one more chance at this," she said. "One more hoop to jump through, and then you can have something good. Close your eyes."

Despite his uncertainty, he did.

"Have you ever heard of a thing called Dimmerok?"

His eyebrows narrowed invisibly in the dark. "I don't think so."

"Find out, and then we'll talk. And we'll see where it goes from there, huh?"

"Why do I have to close my eyes?" he said. "Chiyoko?"

It was not until he opened them again, and found she was gone, that he wondered how she had gotten into his quarters in the first place.

** **

Petras inhaled carefully. They were going to do it: they were going to smuggle him and Bernabie off the ship, onto the Sagittarian vessel, and out of Padrian Werner's power forever. That was the plan, anyway. Lamendo had made it sound so simple when

he explained it last night in his soft, methodical way. But Petras thought Lamendo would sound confident at his own execution, and now that the escape was under way – really and truly happening – nothing seemed simple at all.

He reached out with his mind in that odd new way he had learned, feeling for the Sag’s presence – so far, without success. Phase one of the plan was complete. Lamendo had already left the *Malta*. Bernabie had escorted Petras to a seldom-used corner of the ship – a wide, low, poorly lit room that looked like an abandoned hydroponics bay – which they judged would be close enough for telepathy. Once Petras explained to the Sag what they were planning to do, Bernabie would give the signal to Karmindy, and the escape would begin in earnest. He was surprised they’d entrusted Karmindy with any part of this plan; she did not seem very, well, intelligent. But it wasn’t up to him.

He paced across the slate-gray floor, eyes roving thoughtfully over the expanse of hexagonal tiles, as Bernabie anxiously regarded a fixed point in space. He felt *stretched*: pulled between the need to hear from the Sag and the awful danger that lay ahead, between the joy of Jienne’s freedom and the terror of uncertainty. His footsteps quickened, back and forth, back and forth.

He noticed something else, too.

His inner ear was thumping.

<My patience is at an end, Speaker.>

<Ambassador.> His heart tried to pound out of his chest as he recalled the words he was supposed to say. *<I have a question.>*

<No. My answers to questions are at an end. Your actions are irregular. We will begin now or I will name you anathema to me.>

<I'm ready to begin, Ambassador. That's why I'm here. My questions are about how we can begin.>

A brief, unreadable silence.

<Proceed.>

<I will be coming to your ship soon. You will allow me onboard?>

<Yes.>

<You will take me where I ask?>

<Yes. Once you are onboard, we will begin?>

<Yes,> answered Petras. <But we must leave immediately. And the others on this ship, or on the other ship, may resist our departure. You must overcome resistance if necessary. Can you do this?>

<I will break them.>

<You can navigate our Gates?>

<Yes, yes.>

<I have several companions. We will arrive shortly.>

<I expect you.> The link severed like a snapped cord.

Petras halted his pacing, and Bernabie looked up expectantly.

"We're in."

Bernabie muttered something into his netlink.

Petras followed him through a maze of corridors, echoes of his earlier escape from Winnoka pounding in his skull. Now, as then, he knew he could go on in spite of his fear; now, as then, that knowledge didn't make it any easier.

They met Karminy, who towered like a lioness over the unconscious forms of

two blue-and-black uniformed guards, flanked by eight men in red and gold who bristled weapons in every direction. His gaped in astonishment. She looked so confident now, so different from the timid, silly woman he remembered. She held her own pistol casually in her right hand; with her left, she reached into a hip pocket and extracted a silver marble, which she tossed to the floor. A firecrawler. This was the first time he'd ever seen one, outside of the action films. For the price of one firecrawler you could buy all of Southshire. Twice.

The little sphere transformed into something like a metal scorpion and scuttled to the hangar door, where some microscopic tool carved a neat, firecrawler-sized hole. The thing disappeared efficiently. Two seconds later he heard a low, singular sound like a drumbeat. Half the Senrian men rushed in at once, followed by Karmindy; a moment later the remaining soldiers ushered in Petras and Bernabie, then brought up the rear, dragging the bodies into the hangar with them.

Inside were more unconscious blue-and-black uniformed bodies, and the ship.

"Tell it to open up!" snapped Karmindy.

He didn't need any reminders. *<Ambassador!>* Creating the link was easy this time – the alien's presence was overwhelming.

<I'm here.>

<We're ready to board. Open up!>

A long, terrible silence followed.

<We?>

<My companions and I. I told you about my companions.>

<You said nothing about them entering my ship.> An icy wave passed through

him as he realized it was true. *<Never has more than a single Sagittarian boarded a human ship. Never have we placed so low a value on your territory. This is intolerable. Dangerous, to have so many so close together!>*

"What's taking so long?" demanded Karmindy.

<I'm sorry. Please. Our customs are different, I meant no disrespect. But this is an emergency. Unless you allow this, we can't begin.>

<Outrageous. A Speaker needs no companions. Unacceptable. Outrageous.>

"Petras!"

"The Sag won't let anyone else onboard. Only me."

"Start talking, Bernabie. What's going on?"

He answered in a tight, rapid voice, blinking compulsively. The pressure was breaking him. "We...we have long hypothesized that the Sagittarians place an extremely high value on acquiring and keeping territory, and they are very picky about it, but I never expected – "

"How do we make it let us onboard?"

A klaxon shattered the air, making Petras jump.

"*Bernabie!*"

"I don't – I don't know!"

The Sag ship faced away from the door they'd entered, and they were all hiding behind one of its inward-curving wings. Petras heard rather than saw the door opening, the Darmian soldiers rushing in. "Senrian rebels," said a loud voice, "your illegal actions will not be tolerated. In the name of the Emperor, drop your weapons and surrender now, and you will not be harmed."

"Bullshit!" yelled Karmindy. "Any closer and we'll shoot!" The enemy would not want to risk shooting, Lamendo had explained earlier, for fear of hitting the Sagittarian ship.

Somehow, that had seemed a lot more comforting at the time.

"Petras," said Karmindy, "at least get yourself onboard first, then try and talk it into letting us on too."

"No good. All it wants is me. The moment it gets me onboard, it'll take off, I know it."

Petras was never sure which side opened fire first, but apparently someone wasn't worried about hitting the Sag's ship, because crimson suddenly blazed in the air overhead. The distinctive ozone smell of ripgun fire crept into his nostrils, wraithlike. Screams came to him as if from a great distance, first one, then another – and then the next scream was very close, and a man fell right beside him, blood trailing his face in an arc. Now Karmindy stood to take his place, firing over the edge of the craft, and she looked tall, like a goddess of war, the stark red light of battle gleaming off her cheeks and her fierce brown eyes; and watching her, Petras marveled again at how she'd changed. The dull, confused expression from before was replaced with crackling intensity.

Reaching out with his mind, he reestablished the link.

<Come alone, Speaker, or not at all.>

<Ambassador, how can I convince you? Let's have an exchange. Surely there is something you want.>

<Nothing,> answered the Sag, but Petras sensed at once it was a lie. He was inspired to wild hope. Two more Senrians fell.

<What do you want?> he insisted. <Money? Technology? Weapons? What?>

No answer.

A bolt tore into Karminy's chest, and she fell shrieking, clutching her wound with bloody fingers. He shouted her name, knelt beside her helplessly as she moaned.

"Go," she said through gritted teeth. "Go alone. Go!"

What could he do? If only Chiyoko were here with another of her miracles. But there was no more magic this time. Two more Senrians fell. The Darmians were advancing now. Karminy screamed again, her back arched, her lips contorting horribly. What could he say?

Then he knew.

<Territory.> That's what Bernabie had told them, wasn't it? <You want territory? You can have it. A planet? A star system? What do you want?>

Only two soldiers were left standing now. The Darmians were almost here. <A whole system?>

<Yes!>

<You are sure?>

<I'm sure!>

<With no intrusions from your kind?>

<None. I promise!>

<I will expect it,> answered the Sag.

The center doors unfolded sinuously.

Petras got Bernabie to help him lift Karminy into the opening, while the one guard who remained standing dragged a fallen comrade in with them. <Close,> ordered

Petras, and the door shut just as the Darmians arrived; looking through a narrow window, he could see them firing uselessly at the Sag's ship. The ship rose gently, rotated a quarter turn toward the main hangar doors, which were decidedly closed, and tore through them like blades of grass. Anyone left in the hangar must have been sucked into space, Petras thought.

How fast were they moving? Looking only forward, at the veil of stars, it was impossible to say; he had felt no acceleration.

<Head for the nearest Gate.>

Karminy lay in the middle of the room, limbs splayed out ungracefully, her dark hair spread to a halo on the floor. The soldier who'd made it through the battle unharmed had taken off his uniform jacket and was pressing it against her chest. Nearby Bernabie attended to the fallen soldier. The latter had been shot in the stomach and looked to be unconscious; Petras did not think much of his chances.

The room smelled faintly of something like formaldehyde. Its sides rose from a broad floor and converged more than ten meters overhead, making the room bell-shaped. Some light source clung to the apex of the bell, its dim rays exposing a dreary architecture: a mix of curving, sickly white walls and oddly shaped protrusions, none of it having any identifiable purpose.

Ugly.

"How is she?" said Petras.

The soldier looked up, eyes hidden in shadow. His powerful figure had made him intimidating at first; but now his tousled blond hair and brave grimace rendered him merely human, and Petras realized the man was not much older than himself. "Stable for

the moment. The ripgun bolt missed her heart, and the wound was partly cauterized by the heat of the blast. That's usually how it goes. I think I can control the bleeding, but she needs a doctor. She'll make it if we hurry. She's tougher than she looks." He nodded.

"Thank you, by the way."

"What for?"

"You didn't have to wait for us."

Petras knelt and took Karminy's hand. Sweat dotted her pale face, and her lips moved with hidden agonies. She searched his face for comfort.

"You're going to be fine," he said, feeling stupid saying it, hoping desperately it was true.

"Don't want...a nirvana badge," she gasped. "Nobody use a nirvana badge on me! I can take the pain!"

The soldier frowned in confusion, but Petras remembered the term from Chiyoko's lessons. A nirvana badge would flood her with pleasure, but would be so addictive, she might never do anything else again.

"Don't worry," he said. "Nobody here has a nirvana badge."

A section of wall rolled away opposite the window, and the Sagittarian ambassador glided into the room in its enormous breathing tank, wreathed in methane.

<No more delays,> it projected. *<Now we begin.>*

Chapter 13

"Is it saying something?" asked Bernabie.

Petras nodded. "It wants to start with this...thing, whatever it is."

"Are you going to do it?"

"We don't have much of a choice anymore, do we? This chauffeur service won't last much longer if I don't do what it wants."

"Be careful," said Bernabie, his voice still quavering nervously. "Don't do anything, ah, rash. Please. The consequences..."

Petras nodded and returned his attention to the Sag, its pale bulk still pulsing lazily as it floated in its cage. *<I'm ready.>*

<At last.> He sensed a profound satisfaction, like a thirst finally quenched; and as always, he felt the pounding deep in his ears. *<If you are ready, Speaker, then begin!>*

Petras paused. *<What should I do?>*

<Are you truly the Speaker? Begin!>

He didn't answer.

<Tell me your history,> it insisted.

<The history of what?>

<My patience wavers, Speaker. You bring companions aboard, and now you delay! Tell me your history.>

After all this – all it wanted was a history lesson? Well, he hadn't listened to all Chiyoko's stories for nothing. If history was what this alien wanted, he could certainly give it that.

Bernabie was right, of course; he was dealing with something he didn't understand, and caution was paramount. There might be some danger in telling the ambassador too much. But couldn't it be even more dangerous to anger it by withholding – or lying? Anyway, he wouldn't reveal any major secrets.

He took a long breath and started his lesson.

<My species began on a planet called Irth, our Motherworld. Irth was destroyed twenty-seven thousand years ago, only a millennium after our first tries at space exploration, just centuries after our first extrasolar settlements. We lost many things with the Motherworld's death, but we salvaged what we could and moved on.

<Once we realized how dangerous it was to concentrate ourselves on a single planet, our population, and our territory, exploded. We had discovered Gate technology a mere decade before Irth's annihilation, and we saw that we would be able to travel freely anywhere we created a Gate; but of course in any other kind of travel, we were limited to sub-light speeds. Our expansion, then, was limited only by time, and ever since then our boundaries have expanded in all directions, more or less constantly, at a rate just under the speed of light. Consequently our empire today is essentially spherical, with a radius of about twenty-seven thousand light-years.

<But of course we weren't always an empire – >

A long, low groan from Karminy stopped him. He stared at her miserably, slightly sick, trying to imagine such pain. He himself had suffered grief and terror, but never physical anguish like this; and he felt instinctively that the worst tortures of the mind were nothing compared to the horrors of the mammalian nervous system. The stars in his window stayed maddeningly still, but then, stars always appeared still at sub-light speeds. How could he be sure they were moving at all?

<We're heading to the Gate, right?>

<Do not stop your history, Speaker. I have waited.>

<We had an agreement. You said you'd take me anywhere I asked. I want to know

for sure we're going to the Gate.>

<Yes.>

<As fast as we can?>

<Yes.>

<Two of my companions need medical help. They're dying. Can you help them?>

<No. Continue the history.>

<Can't you try to help?>

<Continue the history.>

He knew he was running out of leverage. *<If they die, I'm not going to help you anymore.>*

Anger flashed through the link. *<I can do nothing for them. If you cease your story, I will cease carrying you.>*

<You'll tell me when we reach the Gate?>

Furiously: *<Yes.>*

Yet when he settled back into his story, he sensed the Sag's ire fading at once. The sudden shift was almost childlike.

<We weren't always an empire. For over twenty thousand years we were a shifting conglomeration of alliances, federations, and small kingdoms. We expanded our territory, but little else; with the invention of Gates, we reached what came to be known as the Plateau. Our mastery of science, mathematics and technology had increased for centuries, apparently without limit, but within a very short time we reached the ends of our seemingly endless lines of advancement.> He wondered belatedly if that was revealing too much, but pressed on anyway.

<In the end, three great landgraviate powers emerged – Senris, Darmis, and Riaadika. All the other little landgraviates are collectively called the Thousand, and for the most part their allegiance belongs to one of the big three, whether they like it or not. For four millennia, the three powers vied to unite all mankind under one banner. Finally, two thousand years ago, Riaadika succeeded. And here we are today – the Riaadikan Empire.

<So that's it,> Petras projected. It seemed like a good place to stop; the closer he got to the present, the more likely that he might reveal something compromising. <Is that what you wanted?>

The alien was silent for so long, he feared the link had been severed. <Strange history,> the Sag answered at last. Another pause, as if it were seeing something for the first time. <A strange history for a strange people. I do not understand you. You gather many without making webs. You are slow to erase your webs when they form. You do not respect territory, yet you barter with it. And you, Speaker, give the history of all your species, when I expected merely the history of your group.> Pause. <Is it perhaps that all the species is a single group, with only one Speaker, only one Ruler?>

Petras could make little sense of this, but he answered as best he could. <We are all one group, yes. All one empire, with a single ruler.>

<So you are the only Speaker for all your species. Now I see. We have many, but you have only one.>

<Ambassador. Are we done? Is that all you wanted?>

Anger. <You do not ask about my history?>

His eyes fell to Karminy again. <Are we getting close to the Gate yet?>

<Yes, yes.>

<Tell me your history, Ambassador.>

Its tentacles curled like cat tails in the tank; Petras sensed pleasure.

<I am the wisest of all Sagittarians. I have thoughts that no one else has had. I avoid the trap of the planetary webs, the foolish webs of dreaming Sagittarians who all dream the same dream together, bound to their planet for all time. I move among the stars, free of the webs and the little groups. I talk with the others who move freely, but never too long, never too many together. It is dangerous to be too many or too long together. I will not be snared in the webs.>

Petras waited, thinking there must be more. Karminy's breathing was fast and shallow now, like sandpaper over flesh, her eyes distant and white.

<So, Speaker? Are you satisfied?>

He noticed a small brown circle among the stars and realized it was the Gate. It grew as he watched.

<I know your history and you know mine,> the Sag projected. <That is necessary. But I have come for a purpose.>

Another pause. <What purpose?> he finally prompted.

<Your species expands recklessly, consuming territory, spreading webs. I request that you expand no further toward us. Will you ask your Ruler about this?>

Ask Monifce to halt the Empire's growth?

It was ludicrous, of course. But why not agree, if the Sag could help Karminy? Later, he could always just claim he had asked, and been denied. *<I will ask.>*

Now the link projected something like ecstasy. *<I am pleased.>* Kindly: *<We*

have come to the Gate. What is your destination?>

<The star called Sacadoor,> he told it, just as Lamendo had instructed. <Do you know it?>

<Yes.> Now it sounded amused. <A ship follows and moves to intercept. Is this your 'resistance?' I will break them.>

The stars wheeled downward like a sky full of meteors till he saw it: the vast bulk of the Darmian dreadnought *Rothgar*. Padrian Werner's ship. Starlight gleamed on its endless angular layers and levels, its gray panels and oblique buttresses; the *Malta*, now far behind them, would have been a toy beside this creature.

<What are you going to do?>

Again: *<I will break them.>* Exultant.

Werner's ship grew to monstrous size, filling the window.

"We're ramming them!" shouted the soldier.

Bernabie leaped to his feet. "Petras!"

Just then Karminy screamed, a horrible, piercing shriek like a soul ripping in two, and Petras looked up only once to see the Sagittarian, its gills and tentacles red as dawn; then he turned again and saw one last glimpse of the *Rothgar*'s hull before the view turned to fire, nothing but fire and flashes of things like twisted metal. From all directions came an indescribable groaning and rumbling and tearing even as Karminy's scream went on and on through the tunnel of fire. And then nothing; only stars; and the scream sank low as if drowned by the emptiness. Petras swallowed, unable to speak. But he knew what had happened.

"Fucking fuck," said the soldier. "We went through the fucking ship." He looked

at Bernabie. "We went through the fucking ship!"

"Not only that," said Petras. "The stars are different now. We made the jump."

"Hold on," said Bernabie. "That's Sacadoor."

"Can't be," said Petras. "Karminy said Sacadoor was at least seven Gates away."

"It is," said the soldier. "But Bernabie's right – that's Sacadoor. See?"

They all stared through the window for a long moment, struggling to process what had just happened. Bernabie said at last in a low voice: "This man is dead."

Silence.

"Well," said Petras, "what do we do?"

The soldier began explaining what had to be done next, and Petras relayed his instructions to the Sag.

They had come, indeed, to Sacadoor, a vast red giant star that had swallowed its worlds eons ago. Despite having no planets, this behemoth was the de facto capital of Senris. For deep within the fires of its corona, Sacadoor concealed a secret: the Sun Palace.

Legendary across the galaxy as the most expensive living quarters ever constructed (aside from the Imperial Palace, of course), the Sun Palace was home to the Landgrave of Senris – currently, a man named Rikter Faze. But in the grand tradition of the Senrian monarchy, the Sun Palace wasn't just outrageously lavish; it was also an invincible fortress, nestled in an inferno of stellar plasma and radiation. It survived in this hell by cocooning itself in some sort of energy field, a technology as closely guarded as the Emperor's lifewords. This protective field could be extended and retracted at will, so that it functioned as a sort of drawbridge, and visitors passed in and out of the Palace

gates at the sole discretion of its lord. Promised a welcome by Rikter Faze himself, and guided by the soldier's instructions on descent protocol, they entered the Sun Palace and landed in one of its countless docks.

The door opened and Petras raised his arm, shielding his eyes against the onslaught of golden light – as if they had arrived in fact on the very surface of the star. "Welcome, fugitives," said a voice, rich with the warmth of confidence. "I hope you enjoy my house – it's not as cozy as Winnoka, I'm sure, but – "

"Karminy's dying," said Petras.

The owner of the voice – a man with a thick golden beard – betrayed astonishment only in his eyebrows, which lifted gracefully for the barest moment. He was Rikter Faze, of course; Petras recognized him at once from his pictures on the Net. Rikter switched at once to crisp efficiency, and with a few words summoned a group of young women who lifted away Karminy and the corpse of the fallen soldier. No one looked at the Sagittarian, which still lurked inside its ship.

"The doctors here are the best in the Empire, and I understand not one iota of what they do," said Rikter. "But I pay them vast salaries, and they are content. If Karminy can be saved, they will save her. Did she suffer?"

"Yes," said Petras and the soldier at once.

Again a quiver of displeasure crossed those thin eyebrows and was gone. "But here we are talking as if we had been introduced already, and me the worst of all. My name is Rikter Faze, and I am the master of this place. You, Petras Fairburn, I have heard much about; and likewise you, Dr. Yindel Bernabie, though we have never met. But you, soldier – your name I think I had better learn."

The soldier tapped his own forehead with his right hand, then clasped his left shoulder, as prelude to a deep bow. "Second Field Lieutenant Calum Dorn, of the four thousandth Nebula Division, sir. I am honored to serve."

Rikter returned the bow, though less deeply, and his hand did not move. "We are honored both, Lieutenant Dorn."

His eyes turned back to the Sagittarian ship, and its own master, still waiting inside like a disapproving shadow. "What of our other visitor, Petras?"

<Ambassador, this is our host, the landgrave of Senris, Rikter Faze.>

<Are you leaving?>

<For now. I'll be back.>

<Do not be gone too long. It is stifling to be near so many minds. I wish to return to the space between the stars. I wish to hear your Ruler's answer.>

<What do you mean, 'too long'? I don't know how long we'll have to stay here. Ambassador?>

But the door to the ship was already closing.

"Petras?"

"The ambassador is...reserved, by nature. He will wait here until I return." The door to the ship slid shut behind him. Rikter nodded, his expression pleasantly neutral.

"Come. I am sure you all need rest. I will show you to your quarters. Please be at ease about Karminy, I assure you she is in the best possible care. Come."

He was a tall man, powerful, and hard as if carved from stone. But this was no rough granite; his was a face that had been polished to smoothness by the flow of immeasurable years, which had sculpted his father and his father's father, all the way

back to the earliest days of the Sun Palace. His suit, like the Sun Palace, blazed red and gold – all but his boots, which were black. He talked the whole time they were walking, but never rambled. Everything he said sounded important or relevant, and he was unfailingly courteous.

The massive pillars of the hallway rose around him like strange trees, stretching up, up to an impossibly distant canopy; broad black friezes clung to the middle regions, elaborately worked into curving patterns like overlapping flame. As Rikter explained a little of the history of the place, Petras tried to imagine living here, walking every day along these monumental corridors, listening to the echo of his own boots. What a lonely life it must be on the surface of a star.

Presently they reached their destination, and Rikter showed Dr. Bernabie and Lieutenant Dorn – his first name was Calum, Petras remembered – to their rooms. Finally he guided Petras to his quarters, and after he had shown him in, he paused by the door.

"Rest now," he said, "and enjoy it, because your adventure isn't done yet. As I am sure you can imagine, we have a lot to talk about."

"Yes, we do," said Petras. *And a lot to wonder about*, he thought. *Like: can I trust you any more than Padrian Werner?*

"Good night, Petras Fairburn."

Petras watched him go, listening to the precise sound of his footsteps as he retreated through those lofty chambers, and wondered just what sort of sanctuary he had escaped into.

Chapter 14

Nightmares of his father plagued him for hours after he went to bed, but at last he fell into a comfortable sleep – so comfortable, in fact, that when he finally woke the next day, it was afternoon.

Magnificence drenched his guest quarters like perfume. His bed was wider than it was long; its golden sheets felt soft as milk on his fingers. His entire bedroom from Winnoka North would have fit inside the shower here.

After cleaning up, he checked on Calum Dorn and Bernabie, but neither were in their quarters. None of the soldiers or other uniformed personnel in the halls could direct him to Rikter Faze, and locked doors kept him from his other destinations: the hangar and the Sagittarian, the hospital and Karminy. Eventually he found himself wandering the Sun Palace for lack of anything better to do.

He stood now in the middle of a vast chamber that the palace map had labeled "Holographic Garden." He'd wandered the Garden for over an hour, following the sinuous yellow-tiled paths. Bursts of digital flame curled and swooped through the air, sliding up the spectrum through red to yellow and green and purple then out of sight, only to reappear. All around, bands of color curled into vortices, twisted through fiery knots, and exploded, or merely simmered on the ground like lazy fountains. Now he had stopped, gazing at a hologram titled "Lapis Lazuli," a thick, twisting pillar that extended from the floor to the distant ceiling, pulsing from blue to black – Darmian colors, oddly enough – orbited by a thousand winking spheres.

He didn't care about the holograms, but wandering the Garden was better than sitting in his rooms. It was three days now since Padrian Werner murdered his father. He breathed hard, fingernails digging into his palms in helpless fury.

But who was he angry at?

Werner, of course. Lamendo, for not finding a way to stop it. Himself, for telling the Sagittarian "yes," he was the Speaker.

And he was angry at his father, too. For giving up, back on Winnoka. For dying before Petras could save him from that. For dying, and leaving Petras alone.

Jienne was safe now – if Chiyoko could be trusted – but how much longer would she stay that way? He had to see her, to hold her, to know that *she* was real and all this was the dream he would eventually wake from. And he wanted to see Karmindy, too: the pretty-eyed girl with the vacant stare, who was apparently something more. Whoever she really was, she didn't deserve what had happened to her on the *Malta*. She could be dead now, for all he knew, her and Jienne both. He had to find out. Clarity was everything. The ignorance, the confusion, were almost worse than the fear.

On that point, the Sag was worst of all. He didn't begin to understand his own relationship with the creature. That single muddled monosyllable, "yes," had somehow made him the Speaker, the sole representative, of the entire human race. That must be the duty, the "heavy burden," that Chiyoko had warned was the price for saving Jienne – which meant he had to accept it. But the ambassador had tasked him with stopping the growth of the Empire on the side that faced the Sags, which was simply impossible. Yet the thought of telling it so – of facing that colossal, hideous breathing tank, those volatile moods, that grim starship that had torn through Padrian Werner's dreadnought like a ripgun into flesh...

All this madness sparked by a simple "yes."

But that wasn't true either, he realized. In fact, it had all begun in a little store in

Southshire, when he'd told an Impo officer he wasn't going to leave.

"Hey," said a voice, and Petras smoothed his features before turning around.

The speaker was a man his own age, perhaps a little younger, clean-shaven, tall and golden-haired. The man frowned, seemingly embarrassed, and nodded greeting.

"Didn't mean to interrupt. I heard you were here, thought you might want company."

Petras turned back to his pillar. "No, thank you." Then, not wanting to be unkind: "It's nice of you to offer."

To his annoyance, the man somehow took this as an invitation and stood beside him. "Isn't this place great? I come here a lot when I need to think, or relax. You see that one?" He pointed at a tall, yellowish-orange spout leaping continuously over the pathway. "They added that one specially as a gift for my Majority. I designed it myself."

"Look, I don't mean to be rude, but – " He paused as his thoughts caught up with his irritation. "Your Majority?"

"Sure. You know – the age I became an adult. In Senris, when you turn twenty-two, you – "

"No, I know what Majority means. But they gave you *that* for your birthday?"

"Don't you like it?"

"I used to work in a shop where we sold these things. They're expensive. Really, really expensive."

He shrugged, looking even more uncomfortable. "I suppose."

"So? Do you have rich parents or what?"

"I'm so sorry – I should have introduced myself. My name is Tamil Faze. Rikter Faze is my father." Again he looked away in embarrassment. "I thought you knew. I do

apologize, it's just that my dad thought you could use some company, and I thought – but it's okay, I'll leave you alone." He was leaving before Petras could speak, but he turned back at once, as if seized by an invisible hand. "Oh! I'm sorry, I forgot the whole reason I was supposed to find you! I mean aside from – well anyway – I have good news! Ms. Quince is healed! She wants to see you!"

It took Petras a moment to realize he was talking about Karminy. He smiled his first real smile in days. "Really? She's okay?"

Tamil nodded, obviously relieved to be helpful at last. "Come on, I'll take you there, I can get you into the hospital!"

He did, and after leading Petras through several white hallways, past strolling patients and hurrying nurses, he stopped at a door. "This is her. I...I won't come in."

"Thanks, then."

Inside, Petras found Karminy reclining in a hospital bed, her father Lamendo and Rikter Faze sitting in chairs by her side. She smiled when she saw him. Uncanny: all trace of the brave, fiery woman he'd seen in the battle on the *Malta* was gone, replaced once more by this dopey, grinning, brown-haired girl.

Yet he couldn't help smiling back. He didn't trust her – not yet – but whoever she was, whatever game she was playing, he was glad she'd survived.

"Petras!" she called. "Just the man I was looking for!"

"Hi." He looked around awkwardly for a nonexistent third chair, but Karminy patted her bedside and he sat down obligingly. "You're all right?"

"I've felt fine for a whole day now, but they're keeping me here for observation. How much longer is this 'observation' going to last, anyway?" She grinned at Rikter.

"Sounds kind of perverted if you ask me."

Rikter grimaced at the joke. "Let us not forget that eight of my men died bravely to get you here."

Karmindy frowned, as if she'd forgotten that any such thing had happened. It was surely an act – but how convincing she was!

Lamendo gazed at Petras from under his bushy white eyebrows. "Karmindy tells me she would be dead too, had you not risked your own life to save her. Lieutenant Dorn says the same. You waited to board the Sagittarian ship, when you could easily have boarded alone."

"We all worked together," Petras shrugged. "But what happened to the *Rothgar*? Was it destroyed? Does anyone know I'm here?"

"My sources say the *Rothgar* sustained major damage, but it was not destroyed," said Rikter. "Padrian Werner survived, much to my dismay, though I hear he has lost his Imperial Mandate. His bungling of the situation has put him in disfavor with both the Emperor and Nasir Asemeian."

Nasir Asemeian – he was the Landgrave of Darmis. Officially he ranked no higher than the eighteen hundred other landgraves in the Empire, but in fact he was one of the most powerful men in the galaxy.

Lamendo spoke up. "As to your second question, my Imperial contacts all say the same: they haven't been able to trace your jump trail. They can't even tell where you jumped from the very first Gate, much less the ones after."

"That's because there weren't any after," said Petras. "We jumped straight from the *Rothgar* to Sacadoor."

"That's impossible," said Rikter.

"Impossible or not, it happened."

"Petras," Rikter explained patiently, "the energy cost of a jump increases exponentially with distance. Therefore every long trip must be a series of short hops. The energy it would take to jump that far all at once would power half the galaxy's stars for a year."

"Maybe that's what the Sags have, then."

"Or maybe," said Lamendo, "they've figured out a way to jump that doesn't increase exponentially."

"Impossible," Rikter said again. "We've been trying to achieve a linear-energy jump for millennia. It can't be done." But he sounded much less sure now, and he stroked his golden beard thoughtfully. "Yet if they've really done it..."

The Sags have broken the Plateau, Petras realized suddenly. They've found a way past this technological ceiling we've been stuck under for twenty thousand years. That's why Chiyoko asked about them.

"All the more reason to tell him why he's here," said Lamendo.

Petras glanced at each of their faces in turn, but none of them looked as confused as he felt. "What?"

Rikter, who had obviously been waiting for this moment, settled back in the chair.

"Petras, we're going to make you Emperor."

Petras stared at him a second, shook his head. "What do you mean?"

"You," said Lamendo. "Emperor. You know – that thing Monifice does? Ruler of the galaxy? That."

Another pause. "I don't get it."

"There's nothing to get," said Rikter.

Slowly – as if approaching some distant, shadowed world – he understood that they really were serious. He laughed.

"You won't have to *do* all that much," Lamendo said. "We know you don't have any experience in politics. That's okay. We don't want you to govern. We just want someone to sit on the throne. The decision-making will be taken care of for you."

After a few tries, words came out. "By whom? You?" Meaning Rikter.

"That's right," said Rikter.

"Okay, look." He raised his palms defensively, lowered them, covered his eyes as his brain performed a kind of mental reboot. Then he looked at the three of them again.

"What the hell are we talking about here?"

"We'll start with the basics," said Lamendo. "Introduction to Galactic Politics. When an emperor leaves office, either by death or resignation, the Assembly of Worlds meets on the planet Laussaral to choose a new emperor, right? They vote on a successor, and keep voting till one candidate has a majority."

"Sure," said Petras. "But the Emperor can nominate his own successor, and whoever he picks only has to get a third of the vote. So he usually gets who he wants."

"Exactly," said Lamendo. "The Darmians have bullied Monifice into nominating a successor they've chosen, and they have enough votes in the Assembly to guarantee the necessary one-third. In other words, the galaxy is one Imperial heart attack away from another Darmian dynasty."

"I thought Darmis basically controlled the Emperor already," said Petras.

Rikter scowled. Lamendo explained: "They have a lot of control, but believe me, Monifice isn't making it easy for them. A semblance of balance remains. If the Darmians get full control, the balance is gone for good, making a Darmi-Senrian war all but inevitable. And if that happens..."

He didn't have to finish. A war on that scale was unthinkable. "I'm surprised the Darmians haven't killed him already."

Rikter spoke up. "In galactic politics, there's a saying. 'The best thing about being Emperor...'"

"...is that you're the fucking Emperor," finished Lamendo. "His personal bodyguard detail has more people than your entire hometown. He's pretty hard to kill. Besides, the Landgrave of Darmis – Nasir Asemeian – he isn't a monster. He finds assassinations...distasteful, and he's not keen on civil wars, either. Not all Darmians are as cruel as Padrian Werner."

"Fine," said Petras. "But what makes you say I'm going to be...?" He trailed off, unable to say the word aloud.

"Like I said," continued Lamendo, "when an Emperor leaves office, the Assembly chooses a new one, either by a simple majority, or by a one-third consensus for an heir. But there's a third option. They don't have to wait for him to leave."

"Right," said Petras, as more of his college political classes came back to him. "A challenger can force out the incumbent if he gets a two-thirds majority to back him."

"Exactly."

"And that's going to be *me*?"

"We believe so, yes."

He couldn't help it – he laughed again. The absurdity had continued too long not to be funny. "Well, go on. You've got me curious now."

"Senris has twenty-seven percent of the Assembly vote. And since Rikter appoints the Assembly reps, they vote for whoever he tells them to. Besides that, almost half of the Thousand vote with Senris, for another twenty percent or so. So, all told, we can get maybe half the Assembly behind us."

"So? What good is that?"

"None, of course, or we would have acted long ago. We're going to need Darmis's support, too. That's where you come in."

Petras's expression lost none of its blankness.

"You really don't understand your position in all this, do you?" said Rikter.

"I told you, he doesn't think that way," Lamendo said gently. "Petras, you have to understand – the Empire is balanced very delicately between Darmis and Senris, each side grabbing at the slightest advantage. And then along come the Sagittarians, potentially the biggest piece in this game in fifty centuries, only nobody knows what the hell to do with them. It would be like...two swordsmen dueling, and suddenly they come across a gun lying in the road, only neither of them knows how it works."

"But you, Petras, you can make it work. You can talk to the Sags. You, and nobody else. Are you starting to see now? Petras – " He leaned forward like a white-haired praying mantis. "For better or worse, right now you are the single most powerful human being in the universe. Monifice included. Do you understand that?"

Petras sighed. Still he said nothing.

"Rikter, will you excuse us, please?" said Lamendo.

Rikter Faze seemed about to speak, thought better of it, and left.

"Now," said Lamendo. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"Well, first of all, I want you to promise me this isn't some kind of stupid joke."

"You know it's not," he said gently.

"I can't be – Emperor."

"Like I said before, you wouldn't have to govern. It's a figurehead role, Petras. You'd be a mouthpiece for the Senrian government. A symbol, that's all. People love symbols, you know? You'd give toasts, christen warships, talk with other figureheads...and never have to worry about money again." That pleasant grandfatherly smile narrowed to a thin line. "We're talking about throwing out Monifice. No more Reverences, no more Order of the Gardenia, no more Impo. No more Padrian Werner."

"I do want all those things." It was true. Of course, he also felt little loyalty to Senris, and had no idea if Rikter would be any better than Monifice, but best not to mention that. "But I don't know how much influence I really have with the Sagittarians. I can coax their ambassador into certain things, but I'm not sure it likes me that much."

"So maybe we'll fail. Nothing is certain, Petras. But we're very, very good at this."

Petras stood up slowly. "I don't think I can talk about this anymore right now. I need some time to think. Is that okay?"

"Of course. But Petras?"

"What?"

"Don't take too long," he said. "The galaxy's waiting."

Chapter 15

Tamil waved affably at the librarian behind her wide half-oval counter as he led Petras through to the back of the library. Petras took in the steep, austere walls, the smooth red carpeting, the careful silence, with a kind of detached interest. He had never been one of those people for whom libraries held a special place in the heart – as they seemed to for Tamil – but this place did feel almost like a temple. He found himself walking differently, stepping down with his toes first rather than his heels, to avoid disrupting the quiet.

They soon reached the private room in the back. Private, and – according to Tamil – soundproof. That was good. He needed to talk to someone who wasn't Rikter or Lamendo.

"This is my own personal reading room," Tamil explained, running a hand through his golden hair. "I have it reserved permanently. I used to come here after lessons and sit for hours..." He stopped, looking embarrassed – a common look for him. "Sorry. I don't mean to sound like I'm bragging all the time. And it's a big library, actually lots of people have rooms reserved..."

"Under the circumstances," said Petras, "you don't need to worry about offending me with your reading room privileges."

"I still can't believe they're talking about making you Emperor. Not that you couldn't do it," he added hastily. "But I can't even imagine what it must be like, hearing that from somebody."

"Why not? Aren't you going to be Landgrave of Senris someday?"

"Well, sure, but that's a long way off yet, and I've been preparing my whole life."

Someone just telling me out of nowhere would be different. Besides, there are a thousand landgraves. There's only one Emperor. What does it feel like? Knowing this is coming?"

"It doesn't feel like anything," Petras grumbled, taking a seat at the table. "Maybe I still don't really believe it. Anyway it's just a plan, there's no guarantee it'll work...and I haven't agreed to anything yet."

Tamil sat across the table from him, his earnest features troubled. "Don't you think you will?"

"I don't know. Of course I want Monifice out, and Padrian Werner. But this is bigger than them. How am I supposed to decide something like this? There are no guidelines to follow – you can't ask somebody, excuse me, I'm deciding whether to shift the balance of the galaxy as supreme ruler, what are your thoughts?"

Tamil sat silent for a moment, obviously trying hard to think of a good answer. "My father says that duty is – "

"Let's do what we came here for," Petras said. He tried to sound disinterested. Tamil was being kind, but right now Petras found him vaguely annoying.

"Right," said Tamil. He slid his chair over to the computer console. "What did you say you were looking for? Dimmerok? How do you spell that?" Petras told him.

"And you have no idea what it is?"

"Just something a friend was curious about. That's all I really know."

"All right. Well, obviously there are a lot of different results. The system guesses a word's meaning based on its context in the book, then groups the book results by meaning, so we just have to decide which meaning of the word we want. I don't know how we're going to do that if you have no idea what it means."

"I think it's something...important. I don't know. Let me see the results."

Together they examined the viewscreen, and Petras rejected Tamil's suggestions one after the other: Dimmerok was not a flower, a sport, or a metal alloy. Various other meanings, such as a star and a martial art, seemed somehow more plausible, but he passed these by as well. Near the bottom of the search results page, he found it – the legend of Dimmerok, a story that dated back to the earliest post-Irth days. "I'll bet that's the one. Let me see."

He picked up a book from the table, and as Tamil selected one of the choices on the viewscreen, the book's blank pages acquired the text of Tamil's selection. He browsed through over a dozen volumes this way, Tamil reading over his shoulder and repeating interesting bits aloud.

Dimmerok was an event in one of the very earliest myths to arise following Irth's destruction. Details were vague, and varied, but the gist was that some enormous war would eradicate humanity. Apocalyptic myths were rather common (said the books), but Dimmerok was unique in one respect. All other known apocalypse tales led into some sort of rebirth, a new utopia more beautiful than the sinful world before. But Dimmerok was starkly scientific in its post-annihilation outlook.

All life would fall into war and chaos; humans as a species would cease to exist; the planets would burn; the stars would explode, or shrivel to icy spheres; the galaxies would drift apart; and over long lonely eons the entire cosmos – every last tiny piece – would freeze, and break, and die, and be destroyed utterly, till even the dust was no dust at all, but only protons and neutrons and electrons without form or purpose...and finally, finally, emptiness. No catharsis; no second glory; just Dimmerok, the end of everything.

"Oh," said Tamil, "Listen to this. While the precise etymology of the word will likely never be known, there is some evidence that its roots lie in a combination of *arok*, meaning gathering or nexus, and *demme*, a prefix indicating negation. If this hypothesis is correct, then a literal translation of Dimmerok might be something like *the coming-apart* – or, even more literally, *the un-gathering*."

Wow, *Chiyoko*, thought Petras. *You really know how to find a silver lining, don't you?* "Weird stuff," he said noncommittally.

What the hell was he supposed to do with *that*?

"So is that – all you wanted to know?"

"Yeah, that's good." He shut the book and set it down, yawning. "I mean, how can I be Emperor, anyway? I'm not any good with people."

"But you care," Tamil said anxiously. "I know you do. Dad told me how you waited to get on the Sagittarian ship till you were sure Karminy could get on too. And Lamendo said you wouldn't even leave the *Malta* till you knew your girlfriend was safe. Isn't that what the Empire needs? Haven't we had enough of men like Monifice? There's so much good you could do – why, just ending the atheism policy would be incredible!"

Petras frowned. "It's not that easy, though. It isn't just...wanting to do the right thing, whatever that means. Being Emperor – the whole job is about people, right? Telling other people what to do, making other people like you or fear you, or both I suppose. But I'm no good with people. I don't make friends. Ever. It's like...there's some kind of piece in the brain that allows you to connect – and in everyone else's brain that piece is there, but I don't have it. I'm missing the connecting piece." He knew he was saying too much, trusting too much, but he couldn't stop. "What am I supposed to do? It's

not that I don't *care* about other people, but I can't connect, I don't want to connect, I never had to, and now this...I can't be Emperor. It wouldn't work. I can't."

Petras thought this was a fairly impressive speech, but to his annoyance Tamil only shrugged. "I feel that way sometimes too. I don't want to be Landgrave. I don't think even my dad wanted it – not really. But what can you do? My dad says duty is like a puppy. You can ignore it if you want, but it will always follow you, and if you don't take care of it somebody else will have to."

"I suppose." There was more, still, that he knew he wasn't communicating – more problems, more worries, more reasons not to be Emperor – but in the end they all said the same thing: it was going to be an uncomfortable job, even as an order-taking figurehead, and he didn't want to do it.

But there was no escape, was there? This was the duty Chiyoko had meant. Not just being Speaker, but being Emperor! That was the price of his miracle.

That night he went to see Lamendo.

"Petras," Lamendo said, mouth crinkling into a smile. "I was hoping I'd see you today. Won't you come in?"

Petras entered and glanced around the quarters, wide and luxurious like his, not really seeing them. To cut off the quickening of his heart, he said immediately what he had come to say. "I'll do it. I'll be Emperor, I'll follow your plan, I'll do it all. But – "

"Will you?" Lamendo interrupted. "You're willing to obey Rikter without question? To be his slave? His puppet?"

The question threw him off. "We decided he would have the power," Petras said cautiously.

"Oh yes," said Lamendo. "But how much power are you willing to let him have? Suppose he orders you to kill someone and doesn't tell you why. What then? Or make it ten people, if you like. A hundred, a thousand. A planet here and there."

"Would he do that?"

"Oh, well." Lamendo smiled a very different kind of smile than Petras had seen on his face before. "Not at first. He is not by nature a cruel man, Petras, but he has the capacity of convincing himself that his enemies are less than human, that whatever he chooses to do is just. It is a common ability. If you listen only to him, you may in time become likewise. Sitting on a throne leaves you a great deal of time for rationalizing, especially for figureheads."

"Hey, listen, this was your idea!"

"Which does not excuse you from thinking. Rikter is being very careful right now, and you must be likewise. He wants desperately to have the Imperial Crown himself, but he dares not ask you for it. Instead he entices you, letting you have it yourself."

"As a figurehead, while he holds the real power. Not much of an enticement."

"Ah, but he expects you'll be tempted to seize real control once you're officially crowned. And why wouldn't you? You have the Sagittarian, after all."

"But I don't *want* to rule the galaxy. I wouldn't be any good at it."

"I know that. Rikter does not, and he has planned for you to betray him. It's a dangerous thing, you know, to give someone a crown. How long will a servant obey you once he gets the taste of omnipotence?"

"What are you saying?"

"Merely that he has taken a precaution. Specifically, the first night you were here,

he implanted a command in your brain while you slept. Oh yes, it's possible. The technology is extraordinarily expensive, the procedure is rather difficult; and you had to be drugged to stay asleep for fourteen hours. But it worked."

Vaguely now Petras recalled that he *had* overslept that first morning. And Chiyoko had told stories about implanted commands. Lamendo might be telling the truth.

"What command?"

"If you do become Emperor, there will be a ceremony at which you receive each landgrave's lifeword, one after the other. They will all gather in a single vast underground chamber, but each pairing will occur in the privacy of a small, separate room. The act of entering this secluded space with Rikter will trigger a command to put yourself on the wrong side of the lifeword machine, so that he receives your lifeword instead of you receiving his. You will be compelled to be compelled. Circles in circles, as they say."

"How do you know about this?"

Lamendo laughed. "Do you really think Rikter is clever enough to plan all this himself? I suggested the strategies; he took my advice. He trusts me, you see, which sadly for him is a mistake. I hope I do not also make a mistake by trusting you."

"I won't tell anyone," Petras said quickly.

"Of course."

"But why did you tell him to do those things?"

"Because I want *you* on the throne, not him."

Petras shook his head, still not following. "Why?"

He laughed again. "Better you than him."

"Well...so what are we going to do about the lifeword reversal, then?"

"Not to worry. As always, I have a plan." He winked, and his sudden intensity seemed to melt away, leaving only a smiling, white-haired old man. "But you didn't come here to listen to me ramble. What's on your mind?"

"Oh. Yes. I was going to say that I was willing to be Emperor. I...well, I still am. On one condition."

Lamendo listened, waiting with the patient air of someone long accustomed to conditions. Petras supposed that would be him, too, soon enough. But not yet.

There was one piece left of his old life that still mattered.

"I have to see Jienne."

Chapter 16

The planet Coreau filled his viewscreen, a wide blue-and-green mottled arc. His first foreign world, and his first time under a real sky in weeks. He hoped it would rain. Maybe it would start just as he got to Jienne's door, and he would be soaked, and when she came to the door she would be so surprised that at first she would just let him stand there, getting wet – and then he would come inside and she'd dry him off, and they would talk for hours as the windows flowed and flowed with the limitless rain...

This shuttle was a little larger than the one in which he'd first escaped from Winnoka, but otherwise much the same. Lieutenant Calum Dorn was piloting from a seat up front; apparently Rikter felt it best to send someone Petras already knew, and Petras welcomed the familiar presence. Besides Calum there were four other very serious-looking men with guns – one who was the co-pilot, and three whose main purpose seemed to be looking serious, and having guns. It was refreshing, being around such men.

It was nice to know there was *someone* who wasn't trying to work you into his political schemes.

He was still puzzling out what to think about Lamendo and Rikter. He had thought these Senrians were all on the same side, but now it appeared he would have to betray one or the other when he took the throne – if there really was a throne in his future. It felt utterly unreal. If Rikter actually was planning to put a lifeword on him secretly, that inclined him to side with Lamendo – who seemed like he would make a more dangerous enemy anyway. But was it all true, what Lamendo had said, about these tangled schemes and counter-schemes? That Lamendo convinced Rikter to double-cross Petras, and was planning to double-cross Rikter? Could Petras really trust someone like that?

And then there was Karminy. He wished he could spend a little time alone with her, peel back that mask and see what lay below.

The bright arc of Coreau's horizon expanded upward in greeting, and the shuttle landed at a small private airport. He stepped outside to a warm blue sky, rough with papery clouds and slender sunbeams. He exhaled gently.

The next half hour passed in an anxious jumble as they drove him to his destination. He sat in the back of the car, surrounded by his guards, looking out the window but seeing only fragments, interspersed with memory. The only real thing was the cold anticipation in the pit of his stomach as the car slowed and the guard announced that of all the identical houses on the road, this one belonged to Jienne.

He was not expected; they had not dared send a message ahead of time. The trip was dangerous enough as it was. The house was smooth lavender polycore, a narrow rounded first floor that grew into a bulb-shaped second story. Dark grass encircled it;

wide stretches of clouds had massed in the sky for this meeting. He could smell them. His shoes tapped over the pavement in a clean march.

No one answered the first time he knocked, or the second, and long after the third – as he was thinking that she must be away, of course she had no reason to be home, she was not expecting him at all, and despair rolled into him deep like a wet knife – long after the third knock, the door opened, and there she stood.

Her eyes went wide, she clapped a hand over her mouth, took a step forward – and stopped.

"Petras," she said.

"It's you," he breathed, and she shrieked with joy as he threw his arms around her. They hugged each other hard, and he slid his fingers into her hair, her cheek soft against his face. The braid was gone, the hair cut short. When they pulled apart, he saw that she was changed in other ways, too – less pale, the eyes less wide, and in some indefinable way, more serious now. He had often thought of her as a ghost, his ghost, but that no longer fit. She was miraculously real.

"Petras, God, I've waited so long – so long..." She turned away, hot tears sparkling down her cheeks. "I *knew* you would come! You said you would, didn't you? I knew you would!"

Petras didn't think he'd actually said that, but he didn't care. He cupped a palm over her cheek, cradling the warmth of her skin. "I'm so sorry it happened like this. I can't believe – "

"I know, it isn't possible – "

"How did it all – "

"I don't know. I don't know." She clung to him fiercely, making small sounds of contentment. "Oh, Petras..."

"I'm safe now, Jienne. We both are. Come back with me."

"Oh, I..." Her lips made a strange smile. "I can't leave. But you can stay with me, right?"

The fear, that terrible knife, was in him again. "No, I can't stay long, I have to go. But I promise you'll be safe. Where I'm staying now, the Empire can't touch us. Darmis either. I've got a shuttle waiting, and guards..."

Her mouth twisted painfully. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because, I...why...why can't you stay?" She began to breathe very hard, and looked away. "You promised you'd come for me! You promised!" The harshness in her voice was not anger but desperation, and oh, that was so much worse.

"I can stay five, maybe six hours. After that I have to go back...to Sacadoor. To the Sun Palace."

She led him inside, into a smallish room on the left with wide windows, and he sat beside her on a high blue divan as he recounted his story from the moment she had left his arms on Winnoka. He told her about his capture by the *Malta*, his encounter with the Sagittarian and his confusing new role as Speaker, the murder of his father, his escape, and finally, the plot to put him on the throne. Lamendo had warned him not to give away important details, but who was he to give orders? Petras told her, too, about Chiyoko's promise to rescue her, omitting the deal he had made in exchange for her safety. She listened to the whole story without interruption. When he had finished, she closed her

eyes.

"So you're the reason I was rescued?"

"It was Chiyoko that did it. All I did was agree. Jienne, what...what was it like in their prison?"

She shut her eyes tight. He waited, and was about to say it wasn't important when she finally spoke.

"There was one white light," she said, pointing straight up over her head, eyes still shut. "The walls and ceiling were metal. The floor was metal. In that corner" – she pointed again – "was a toilet. There was a mattress there. There a was a slot there, for food, and a pipe there that dripped water I could drink. The water tasted bitter at first but after a while I didn't notice anymore. And there was a door. I never saw it open. Never once did I see it open."

The pointing hand withdrew, curled protectively now in her other palm. "There was a speaker somewhere. I couldn't tell where. It played a Reverence every hour. It was loud, too – it startled me for a long time, but after a while I got used to it, like the water. I couldn't sleep at first, but I got so I could even do that, and not wake up. Once I learned how to sleep through the Reverences, I slept a lot. I would've slept all the time, if I could've."

He grimaced, trying to imagine her like that, wishing he couldn't.

"Once they came into my cell while I was asleep and woke me up, and acted like they were going to shoot me. That was the worst of all, the most scared I've ever been. They didn't do it, though. I don't know why. After that, every day I thought I would die."

"Oh God, Jienne – "

"Listen," she whispered, "I'm almost done. There's one other thing still." Her eyebrows wrinkled tightly over closed lids. "My first day there, even before they played the very first Reverence, the voice on the speaker told me something. It said that I'd been drugged unconscious, and that while I was out, they had done something to my brain. To keep me from escaping. They made it so that if I thought about leaving my cell, I would feel a little bit sick, and if I actually did it, I would feel worse and worse the farther away I got. And I knew it was true, because the first thing I thought about was getting out of the cell, and it felt like...like there was a worm, right here" – pointing at her stomach – "sliding through the walls of my intestines. It was all in my brain, said the voice. There isn't any worm. But that's how it feels. Why would they do that? Why, if I never even saw the door open?"

"How did you get out, then?"

"The people who got me out, they drugged me. I don't even remember waking up – I just went to sleep in my cell and woke up here." Her eyes fluttered open, lovely blue. "I heard birds outside, and the wind. I thought I was dreaming. But when I realized I wasn't, I tried to run out, to feel the sun...that's when I understood. The conditioning is still there. I can't leave this house. Someone brings me food and other supplies I need. But I can't go out the door. It opens now, but I can't go through."

She looked up at him. "You really can't stay?"

He shook his head, mute, and held her as she began to cry. She cried long, slow, quiet tears, and for a long time neither of them spoke, clinging to each other, both wishing it could all be somehow undone, the way nightmares sometimes turn out never to have happened. He started to cry also, and they wept together – he could not have said for

how long. In such moments time behaves differently.

"It's not forever," he said, breaking the spell of silence. "The conditioning wears off after a few years, doesn't it? Sometimes even after months." He thought Chiyoko had once told him something of the sort. "And once I'm Emperor, I can do whatever I want. We'll be together again."

"I hope so," she said, in a voice made soft by tears.

"We will."

"I love you."

"Jienne – "

"I love you so much – "

"Jienne, I love you too – "

Outside the first rain spattered on the windows, and the sounds of a growing downpour mixed with her stifled sobs as he kissed her cheeks. Gradually, as the sky grew darker, her crying died down. He pulled her onto his lap, locked his hands around her waist. Outside, thunder shivered like the footsteps of the sun.

"I'm so glad you're here," she whispered, sighing. She turned around on his lap and kissed him gently. "So glad. I can't even tell you. I wish..." For the second kiss she slid closer, her soft thighs pressing on his legs, her mouth turning to merge with his. He could smell her now, not perfume but a scent all her own. The back of her neck, exposed by her shorter hair, was hot under his fingers. She was warm all over. He held her chin gently, kissing down her jaw, her throat. Her mouth fell open, drawing in long draughts of air.

"What do you wish?"

"This."

He moved his palms up her back, first over fabric then under it, as she arched her spine. The smooth feel of her skin was electric. With no more hesitation he lifted her arms and pulled off her shirt, and she unfastened her bra impatiently, guiding his hands to her bare breasts. He had forgotten how perfect she was, how perfect it was to do this, the soft firmness of her under his fingers. The storm outside hammered at the windows, demanding to be let in, mournful and furious. She moaned. She might almost have been in pain. He pushed her off and she slipped out of her remaining clothes in a single motion, then helped him with his pants as he pulled off his own shirt. He sat down again; pivoting, she hoisted a leg and lowered herself once more onto his lap.

Their faces were close now, the tip of her nose brushing his, her eyes shut, drawing it out. Except for the deep, unsteady rhythm of their breaths, neither moved. He laughed once, and so did she, but neither looked up. He nodded his head, and felt her nose brush past as she nodded too.

Slowly, she raised herself up, and then – with a precise motion of the hips – slid down onto him. As she raised herself again, panting, he laid a hand over both sides of her bottom, squeezed firmly, and pulled her back down hard. Her head rolled back and the sweat glistened on her cheeks as he pulled her down again, pushing deep inside her – deep – again – again...

Too soon it was over. He stayed inside her and she leaned forward, laid her head on his chest. Their rapid breaths slowed, and slowed, and still for long minutes she clung to him silently, and his fingers strayed over the surface of her back. Finally, with a deep sigh, she got up and sat beside him. He found her hand and took it. She stared at the wall.

"Shit," she said.

He knew what she meant because he felt it too: the real world, returning again.

After all that, they were still in the same old house as before, and still she couldn't leave.

They sat together, naked.

"Are you really going to be Emperor?" she said after a while.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I hope not."

"Me too."

"Don't do it," she said softly, watching the windows as they flowed and flowed with the limitless rain. "Don't listen to anyone but me. Just – stay. The rest of the galaxy can go fuck itself, okay? Please? Please just stay."

He squeezed her hand. "You know I'll come back for you as soon as I can. And once this damned conditioning wears off, you can come live with me in the Imperial Palace on Riaad. You can be my Empress. And then if anybody ever comes between us again, you can just lift your finger and someone will push 'em into a black hole. Okay?"

She was shaking her head. "Petras, I mean it. You have to stay. If you leave, you can't come back."

He recoiled. "What?"

"I'm sorry, I know it's selfish, it's not fair to you, but I can't be alone anymore. I can't. Sitting in that room, day after day, you don't know what it was like. It was all I could do to wait for you this once. If you leave now, I have to find someone new. I have to. If you leave, you can't come back."

He stared at her. She was serious. "I can't stay," he whispered. They clung to each

other.

One by one the hours slipped away in quiet conversation, long silences, tears and brief smiles. All the while he let his hands wander over her, moving across the familiar surfaces of her angular hips, the soft curves of her shoulders, her pale breasts, her rain-dark hair. Some time later they crept into her bedroom and made love again in the secrecy of the shadows. Finally he checked his netlink clock, and it was almost time. Hand in hand they returned to the living room, picked their clothes off the floor, and dressed. In the kitchen they waited for the end.

"Petras," she said softly.

"What is it?"

"I don't want you to leave."

"I know, but..."

"I don't want you to leave. I don't want to find someone new. You have a choice. If you love me – if you really love me – you'll stay."

"I don't have a choice. They'll find me, they'll take me back. And Jienne, if I can really do this, if these people can really use me to get rid of Monifice and Padrian Werner..."

"Of course you have a choice." Fresh tears carved new pathways down her face. "You left me once. I can't live through it again."

A knock pounded on the front door and they both jumped, startled. Jienne shook her head violently, launching into a new volley of tears. "Jienne..." he began, but he had no comfort to offer. Again he felt himself starting to cry.

The knock sounded again, louder this time. "Mr. Fairburn! Open up!" shouted a

voice. A moment later the door flew open and three of the guards rushed in. Dampened dark by the storm, the red in their uniforms looked like blood. "Mr. Fairburn," said one, "we have to go. Now."

"Give us a minute," said Petras.

"We don't have a minute." His voice was not unkind, but firm. "There's an emergency. We have to get you back right away. She can come too."

"No – she can't leave."

"Then I'm sorry. There's no time."

"Jienne..."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fairburn," said the soldier.

Strong hands seized him and pulled him out into the drizzling rain. Her face appeared in the doorway, a war of terror and grief. He reached out his hand. "I love you!" he shouted. "Jienne! I love you!"

Jienne watched him a long moment at the door, too stricken to speak, as something inside her stretched and broke. She gave a horrible shriek like an animal and leaped out of the doorway, staggered once, wobbled, stood up again – took another step, another – she fell, clutching her stomach and screaming. He yelled for her again. She advanced on hands and knees, unable to rise – she vomited – crying, shrieking...

Her effort didn't last. Before he was even out of sight she was already crawling back to the safety of the house.

Chapter 17

Back on the shuttle. Those final frames at Jienne's doorstep cycled in his mind

uselessly. He shoved them aside for later. Now was a time for thinking, not feeling.

"The Emperor's figured out where the Sag's ship jumped to," Calum said grimly.

"He's closing in on the Sun Palace. We need to get you there before it's surrounded."

"They're surrounding it and we're trying to get in? We'll be trapped."

"Better to be trapped in the Sun Palace with the Sag than trapped in an Imperial prison without it, Petras. That thing may be your best friend in the galaxy right now. At least in there you'll be safe. Rikter can withstand a siege for years. Out here, it's just a matter of time till they hunt you down."

"But – "

"Look, I don't invent the orders, I just...oh. Shit."

Petras saw it on the scanners at the same time Calum did. Darmian warships – fifty at least – closing on Sacadoor.

"Have they detected us?" Petras asked.

"Destroyers? If we're picking *them* up, you'd better believe they see us. Don't worry, we'll get to the Sun Palace before they do. But if we'd waited thirty seconds longer to get you out of there..."

As Calum eased them toward the serene red expanse of the Sun Palace, Petras watched more and more specks expand into warships: mostly the smaller destroyers, but some heavy cruisers, too. He squeezed his shirt cuffs to dry his sweaty palms. Was Padrian Werner on one of those ships?

They docked.

Karminy met them in the brightness of the hangar, and those dull, cow-brown eyes had been swapped once again for something lean and predatory. "There's a full

Darmian legion up there," she said. "Rikter's convinced the best way to break the siege is by calling in the Senrian Navy. He says Monifice will back down rather than face an all-out war with Senris. But he's insane. Monifice – "

Just then Lamendo walked in. Karmindy hurried over to him, followed by Petras and Calum. "What happened? What did he say?" she asked.

"He's willing to let things sit for a few days, on one condition. Petras, he wants you to talk to the Sagittarian. If you can extract some sort of advantage, something we can use to help us..."

"Like what?"

"A weapon, a show of force. Whatever you can. But Rikter is impatient. He knows what the Sagittarian did to the *Rothgar*. It makes him...optimistic that it will help us."

"It only did that because it saw the ship as an enemy. It would have done the same to the *Malta*. It doesn't understand – "

"Who knows what it understands, Petras? Remember, Rikter sees everything as political. It's time you began thinking that way too, if only as a tool to understand men like him."

Karmindy spoke up. "Rikter is right about one thing, though. We need to use the Sagittarian. We can't put you on the throne without at least some help from it, and now is a perfect time to see what it's willing to do for us. Do you have any leverage with it? Anything you can use to negotiate a favor?"

Petras nodded. "I know what it wants. Territory. Back on the *Malta*, I promised to give it a star system in exchange for letting you, Calum, and Bernabie onboard. I don't

know how we'll do that, but I couldn't think of anything else to say at the time."

"Damn good idea," said Calum. "Saved my life, didn't it?"

"Mine too," said Karminy. "Promise it more star systems, if that's what it wants. If it works, you'll have the Imperial Crown and all the spare planets an alien could want. If not..."

She glanced at Lamendo.

"Well, it won't really matter, then, will it?"

** ** *

That evening Tamil Faze came to visit him in his quarters. He listened to Petras's story with a kind of awe. His quick nods and constant pained expression might have been funny in other circumstances, but still it was good to talk to him. Petras finished his account and groaned. "It's insane," he whispered. "Absolutely fucking insane. How did this happen? How did it *start*? Do you understand...there are people sleeping in their beds right now who have no idea..." He gestured, searching for the words, and finally gave up, leaving Tamil to decipher the uncompleted sentence.

"So," said Tamil after a suitable interval, "are you and Jienne...I mean...do you think it's over?"

He nodded slowly. "Yeah. It's over."

"I'm sorry."

The door chirped. It was Bernabie. "Go ahead," said Tamil, "I was just leaving." He offered one last lopsided smile as he walked out.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, Dr. Bernabie," said Petras. "I'm not really in the mood right now."

"Yes, the lieutenant said your trip was difficult. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," muttered Petras, "just go away."

Bernabie took a seat, his long legs bent spider-like before him.

"I won't try to comfort you. I'm terrible at comforting. I'll just give my message and leave. But it's an important message, and I think I'd better give it right away."

"Did Lamendo send you?"

"I would have come anyway."

"Whatever it is, it can wait till tomorrow."

"No, I'm afraid it can't."

"Why?" demanded Petras. "Because a thousand Darmian warships are circling up there waiting for us to blink? Because Lamendo's going to make me Emperor and undo the last five thousand years of history?"

"Partly. But that's not what I'm here about."

Petras sighed.

"Did you know," Bernabie continued, "social scientists classify all human conflicts according to an eight-level hierarchy."

"Look...Doctor. I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude. Honestly I don't. But right now I do not give a *damn* about how social science. Okay? I'm not going to say it again. Come back tomorrow. Please. Please."

"You still care for Jienne, don't you? You still want her to be safe?"

Petras bit off the syllable. "Yes."

"This will be very relevant."

For a long moment Petras stared down at his lap.

"Why is it that everyone in my life manipulates me with the people I love? Why is that, Dr. Bernabie?"

"I wonder that myself." His voice had gone very quiet, but in the stillness of the broad red carpets and velvet draperies, the words were clear. "Social scientists classify all human conflict according to an eight-level hierarchy. Each level of the hierarchy is defined by two factors: the scope of the conflict, and the inertia of the conflict. The eighth and highest level encompasses, among other things, the idea of a 'total war' in which each side pours all its resources into the fight. As a species we have engaged in and learned to survive all eight levels for hundreds of centuries.

"Long ago, xenobiologists posited a ninth level of conflict. The theory was that the inertia of all *human* conflict is inherently limited by our commonalities, by the traits we share as a species. Now you and I both know that sometimes this limitation isn't much – we know how cruel our species can be. But though the parties involved in the conflict may not see the humanity in each other, parties *external* to the conflict do – for which reason, even such atrocities as genocide tend to have a limited scope, both spatially and temporally."

Petras listened, his annoyance fading. He was seduced by the clarity, the careful, measured logic.

"Now imagine what happens if we eliminate these commonalities. True communication becomes difficult or impossible. Sympathy disappears. There are no external parties to limit the conflict. Imagine the scope and inertia, Petras, of an interspecies total war. Think of it: what do the peacemakers always say? We should get along, they say, because we are all human. *All human*. Imagine taking that away, so that

even the peacemakers have nowhere to turn. It seems not unreasonable to predict that in such a war, one or both of our species would be annihilated.

"That's what we're up against, Petras, and it scares the hell out of me. For the past three years I have thought about it each and every day. You see, I'm a scientist. I've spent my whole life training myself to be rational and accept what seems foreign, no matter how unusual. And in spite of all that training, I still catch myself hating them. Why? Because they don't think like I do? Because it's so hard to communicate? Partly. But the real problem, I think, is so stupid I can't even stand to think of it. They're ugly. They look *disgusting* to me, physically, and every time I see one I have to remind myself all over again that there is a creature in there worth talking to. Because conflict is all about us versus them, us versus them, Petras, and when I look in that breathing tank, I see *them*.

"That's what *I* think when I look at them. Imagine what our generals would think. Our politicians. Our priests. Imagine, if you can, what a war would be like."

Bernabie looked down. "I do not believe I have mentioned this, but I lost someone to Padrian Werner as well," he said, almost apologetically.

"Bernabie..."

"You see, Padrian Werner had someone I cared about, an old friend of mine, just as he had your father and your young female associate. I obeyed Werner for years, because of this. What I did not realize was that my friend had killed himself some time ago. Partly because Werner had made his life quite miserable, I understand, and partly as a tactic to free me from Werner's power. However, it did not work right away. Werner simply never told me, you see. It was not until Lamendo revealed what had happened that I was able to assist in getting you off the *Malta*."

Petras thought of Jienne and her door that never opened. How much longer would it have been before she tried a similar ‘tactic’?

Bernabie continued. “I tell you this so you will understand that I sympathize with your situation, with your desire for revenge. Remember that as I say the following.” He scratched his beard, an oddly casual gesture. “Petras. You're upset because a lot of bad things have happened to you very quickly, and more may yet. I don't blame you for how you feel. But you must accept that we have very little margin for upset feelings. We are talking about the annihilation of a species. It's happened before, and we don't even know what triggered the Aberdale sentients to kill themselves. Who knows what trifle might set off the Sagittarians? Who knows what form their outrage might take? We need you, Petras. This is real, and we need you. Now.

“Do you understand what I'm saying?”

Petras nodded slowly.

Because, much as he didn't want to think about it right now, he knew exactly what Bernabie was talking about. Duty. And he'd made a promise about duty. He'd promised Chiyoko he'd do whatever it took. That was the price of his miracle.

It occurred to him suddenly that Chiyoko had told him about the ninth-level conflict, too. Only she hadn't used that name. Chiyoko had called it something else.

Dimmerok.

Chapter 18

The next day Petras went to see the Sagittarian again.

The hangar where the Sag's ship lay had been cleared of everything else, ships

and equipment and people alike. Lamendo and Rikter had agreed it would be best to let him try this alone. The Sag emerged from its ship when Petras greeted it.

<It is good to be kept apart from the others, Speaker. I am pleased to have space to myself.>

<I'm glad you're satisfied with the arrangements.>

<Have you returned because you wish to know more of my mind?>

That seemed like a good starting point. *<Yes.>*

He felt pleasure from the Sag now. Pride, even. *<You have recognized the value of my intelligence. Very well. I will give you a gift.>*

A gift? Some new technology they could use, perhaps? A minute went by, and then a low cart rolled out of the ship on small wheels. It came up to them and stopped. On the cart was a black disc, a few centimeters across.

<Receive it, Speaker.>

Petras picked it up. There was not much to see. It was like a large black plastic coin, only it had no markings or patterns. Heavy for plastic, though.

<Thank you, Ambassador. What is it?>

Mild annoyance now as the cart receded. *<It is my ghost.>*

<You ghost? What does that mean? What does it do?>

<You begin to anger me, Speaker.>

With Bernabie's warning fresh in his mind, he dared ask no more about it.

<I wonder if we might make another deal, Ambassador. For additional territory.>

<What deal?>

<Many ships gather above us. Enemies. If you could attack a large number of them at once...>

A thoughtful pause. *<Territory is appealing. But so many ships together risks a web. Territory does me no good if I am caught in a web.>* Another pause. *<And I have not received the territory from our last deal yet.>*

<You will get it. I promise!>

No answer.

He sensed the Sag was willing, if he could find the right goad; it did not really seem worried about this 'risk.' An idea occurred to him. Only –

He frowned. It could work, but if it failed, things would be...bad. He imagined Dimmerok like a black wraith, curling up to choke him if he said something wrong. Like when he'd said something wrong on the *Malta*. Things were still unclear. He couldn't risk it, could he?

But he couldn't do nothing, either. Rikter was set to bring in the Senrian Navy. A Darmi-Senrian war would be inevitable, and that was as close to Dimmerok as no matter. Still – should he ask Lamendo for advice, or perhaps Karminy? No; the Sag was willing to deal, he could sense it. It might change its mind later.

And silly as it was, he still heard Father's voice in his ears: you have to start deciding for yourself about things.

<Ambassador, I have spoken to my ruler. He says he is willing to halt our expansion on your border, if you attack the ships as we ask.>

Suspiciously: *<How many ships?>*

<All the ships above us. There is a full legion. About a thousand.> That number

seemed extremely ambitious, but he projected it confidently. Start high, bargain if necessary. Whatever the Sag did, it had to be big; they had to make an impression.

<Of the same type as the one before?>

<Yes.>

Laughter in his mind. *<Easy. For this you will halt your territory?>*

<Yes. Be ready when I give the signal. But you must not destroy the ships. Only disable them.>

<Explain.>

<Each ship takes its main power from a pair of tau neutrino dynamos, one on each end. They are located not too deep beneath the exterior hull. You can locate them by the tau neutrinos they emit. Destroy only the dynamos. Do not damage the rest of the ship.>

This particular idea was Lamendo's suggestion. It would have been simpler, more dramatic, less confusing, if he'd simply asked the Sag to destroy the ships outright. But those ships held thousands of soldiers each, and Petras didn't want the blood of ten million people on his hands, even if they were Darmians.

<I understand.>

<Then it is agreed?> Petras held his breath, feeling reckless in his hope.

<It is agreed,> the Sag projected rapturously.

** **

"His 'ghost?'" Lamendo's long snowy eyebrows rose and fell as he turned over the disc in his hands. They had gathered in Karminy's quarters. "And you have no idea what it does?"

"No."

He handed it back to Petras. Curiously, Petras felt his heart thumping in his ears, just as he had when the Sag entered his mind; but the alien's presence was gone now. A side effect of the object itself, apparently. But what *was* it?

"And you're sure the ambassador will do this for us?"

"Certain."

"What do you think, Karmindy?"

"It will work," she said at once.

"I know it was risky," Petras said. "This means I have to be Emperor now. If not, we won't be able to follow through on either of our deals with the Sag, and if that happens..."

"That was not lost on me," Lamendo growled. "You should have consulted with us first. We might have – "

"It will work," Karmindy said again, quietly.

As before, she had slipped off the ingénue mask. He was glad. That other girl was a parody of this person. The real Karmindy raised her chin when she spoke, squared her shoulders when she walked, missed nothing with her cool brown eyes. Purposeful and deadly as a ripgun.

"Youth and overconfidence both come free," Lamendo muttered. "But our path is set. We will speak with Nasir Asemeian."

** **

The Landgrave of Darmis, Nasir Asemeian, stood three meters tall on Rikter's viewscreen. A lean, birdlike man, his eyes held none of Padrian Werner's violence as he

considered the four of them, gathered in one of Rikter's conference rooms: Petras, Lamendo, Karminy, and Rikter himself. Asemeian was older than Werner, too, his brown hair streaked with white. Altogether, much less frightening.

But Asemeian still spoke with the same accent as the Impo officer who had seized Petras's throat, back on Winnoka.

"Do I understand correctly, then, that you are threatening me?"

Rikter snorted. "You're the one with a legion of warships hovering over my house. I call it self-defense."

Asemeian folded his arms, puckering his blue-and-black command jacket. Blue and black, too, was the marriage jewel on his left hand. It was strange, somehow, to think of a man like Asemeian as having a wife. "We are apprehending criminals. These two," Asemeian nodded at Petras and Karminy, "are wanted by the Emperor for murdering a large number of my soldiers, along with several civilians, in their escape from the *Malta* and subsequent attack on the *Rothgar*. They have also kidnapped His Majesty's Sagittarian ambassador."

Petras glanced at Karminy, but she had returned to playing the wide-eyed idiot. He had to keep reminding himself that almost no one knew who she really was: not Nasir Asemeian, not even Rikter Faze. What did it mean that he, Petras, had been granted that secret?

Lamendo said, "And will Secretary Werner face charges as well, for murdering Petras Fairburn's father?"

Asemeian frowned. "I have seen no evidence for this accusation, but if Mr. Fairburn wishes to make his accusations in court, we would of course investigate."

"Enough," Rikter said. "These are our terms. Remove your blockade, or the Sagittarian will remove it for you. You saw what it did to the *Rothgar*. You know it executed a linear energy jump. Your ships are toys, Nasir, and the Sagittarian ambassador will have no more dealings with your puppet Emperor."

"I will not deal in these treasonous – "

"Landgrave," Lamendo said quietly. "The galaxy has changed. This is not about threats and rhetoric anymore. This is about a weapon that will cut down your fleet like animals in the next twenty-five hours. Rikter Faze is not blustering; he is trying to let you save the lives of ten million honest soldiers." The plan was to disable, not destroy, but why tell Asemeian that?

Asemeian hesitated. His face remained smooth, but the way his breath slowed made Petras think he believed them, at least in part. Finally he said, "The Emperor wants no dealings between us, no mercy, but the Emperor is a long way from here. I would like to meet in person to discuss these matters further. It may be, as you say, that circumstances have...altered."

"Certainly," said Rikter, "if you wish to come to the Palace, you and I could – "

"No. The meeting will be on my flagship. And Rikter, it is not you I wish to speak with." He turned his gaze squarely to Petras. "It's him."

"Out of the question!" snapped Rikter. "This is a transparent ploy. If you want to speak with him, then here he is, speak! To think that we will deliver him like a gift – "

"On neutral ground, then. I will come out on a shuttle, he will do the same, we will rendezvous between your shield and my ships. Alone. Oh, bring a few guards if you like. But I will speak with him alone."

"Then come to the Palace," Rikter said stubbornly.

Asemeian's mouth twisted. "Rikter. Do you not understand the risk I take by conceding even this much? The man you called my 'puppet Emperor' still holds my lifeword and yours. Do you really believe the Landgrave of Darmis can simply walk into the Sun Palace? You're the one with the omnipotent alien. You have the power, yes? Then make this gesture. I give you my word he will return unharmed. Have I ever betrayed your trust, Rikter?"

Rikter scowled, then looked at Petras. "Nasir Asemeian is many things, but he is not a liar," he said finally. "Not in matters like this. If he assures your safety, it will be so. Are you willing to indulge this...favor, Petras?"

So I am consulted after all, thought Petras. *I wonder how much longer that courtesy will last?* But he looked to Lamendo, who said, "It would not be unwise. The choice is yours, Petras." And finally he glanced at Karminy, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

He addressed the viewscreen. "What is it you want to discuss with me, Landgrave?"

"What I want to discuss with you is *you*, Petras. Somehow you have gotten to the center of all this, yet I know nothing about you."

Petras nodded. "Then you will learn," he said.

** **

Karmindy came to his quarters alone and locked the door. He rose from the viewscreen, where he'd been perusing the Sun Palace's private network, reading Nasir Asemeian's personality profile. She stood beside him.

"You made the right choice, Petras. Nasir Asemeian is a good man. We should all be so lucky as to have an enemy like him."

"But what will I say to him?"

"Tell him the truth. Tell him we want his support to put you on the throne. That the Sagittarians are behind us, that Emperor Monifice and Padrian Werner are at the end of their careers. Tell him that Rikter thinks he'll control you, but that Rikter is wrong."

Here it was at last: the chance to talk to her alone, to get some questions answered. "You and Lamendo...you're trying to overthrow Monifice, but you're not loyal to Rikter, and you're not working for the Darmians, either. Whose side are you on, exactly?"

"We are on the Empire's side," she said. "You've seen how it goes; you've seen what we've become. Factions, plots, dynasties. Monifice wants everything, he wants control, but he's not strong enough to get it. Rikter fancies himself a freedom fighter, but he doesn't really care about anything but Senris. Asemeian is a fair-minded leader, but he honestly believes that the stories about Werner's monstrosities are just a plot to discredit him. Our species deserves better than this."

Petras found himself nodding. "It's the Plateau. There's no more forward progress. Politics are all we have left."

"That's right." Karmindy studied him, her lips parting carefully. "Not many people understand that."

"Why do you pretend to be stupid?"

"Because I'm playing a game that will overthrow Monifice, and I'm very, very good at it."

"And you want me to trust you? Even though you lie to everybody?"

"*Do* you trust me?"

He studied her in turn: the studious set of her brow, the short brown hair that always reminded him of Jienne, the scalpel-fine eyes that were all her own. So much like her father, and so different.

She had saved his life on the *Malta*.

"I trust you."

Karmindy nodded.

"Then you will be Emperor," she said.

** **

Eventually she left, and once more he waited for tomorrow in an empty room.

Maybe that's how it will be if they crown me, he thought. He would never be good at politics, would never find clarity there, but maybe he would master the ways of the empty room, the closed curtains, the ghost of an uncertain morning. *I can do that*, he thought. *I've done it before*. Frightened as he was, he nonetheless fell easily into sleep.

Morning came, as it always did. Karmindy arrived punctually and led him to the shuttle. Only a handful of personnel remained in the wide, empty hangar at this early hour. She stopped him by the entrance.

"Confidence," she murmured.

"I'm confident," he lied, smiling.

The shuttle door slid shut behind him. Calum Dorn, who had the pilot's seat, turned briefly and nodded to him. Petras took a seat across from the other three Senrian soldiers, who formed the remainder of his bodyguard. In the small shuttle, only a meter

separated his seat from theirs.

He could still feel the Sagittarian as a distant presence in his mind; Bernabie had placed a J-wave amplifier near the Sag's ship, so he would still be able to communicate with it even during his meeting with Asemeian. Insurance, in case anything went wrong. Rikter said he trusted Asemeian, but a little extra caution never hurt. Petras's ears had been thumping for over an hour now, so that he barely noticed it anymore.

He tapped his fingers nervously on the armrest, then stopped when he realized what he was doing. For a long, long minute nothing happened.

The hangar doors slid open and revealed the surface of the sun.

As the shuttle glided lazily into Sacadoor's corona, he glanced at the leftmost tactical viewscreen on Calum's console. As expected, only Darmian vessels were on sensors – no Imperial presence at all. A Darmian shuttle, represented by a blue-and-black speck, drifted away from the great blue-and-black mass and headed toward them.

It seemed a very short time later that the Darmian voice came over their speakers, announcing their intention to dock. A shudder as the two vessels connected, a low *ding* when the docking completed, and Petras stood up as the docking-door at the rear of the shuttle opened.

What happened next, happened very quickly.

Hideous dark green gas exploded through the door, filling the enclosed space. He suddenly felt exhausted, too tired even to cough at the noxious tickle in his throat. For a second it seemed there was something he ought to do, something with the Sagittarian, but he lost the thought at once. His knees gave out, and vaguely he realized he was sitting down.

His last conscious impression was of blue-and-black masked men storming in, gunning down Calum Dorn and the others with bolts of crimson; and then everything went black.

Chapter 19

Petras awoke gradually. It was cold, and his bed was uncomfortable. What...?

Memory rushed back and he sat up, eyes wide. They had docked with the Darmian shuttle...and then...some kind of gas...

Where was he? He sat up to look around.

The room was small, the walls drab brown and bare. He was sitting on the hard floor. There was no bed after all, no furniture of any kind. In one corner was a circular hole in the floor whose purpose he could guess; on the far wall was a closed door; around the ceiling ran a dim light strip. Other than that, it was empty. The room had the look of a prison cell.

He got up, wincing, and tried the door. It was locked. He knocked and shouted a few times, but no answer.

The guards were dead. Calum Dorn was dead. Nasir Asemeian had betrayed them after all.

His stomach shuddered queasily.

He was still alive, which meant he was still valuable to them. That was something. And the pounding in his ears reminded him of his unbroken link to the Sag, another comfort. He could still bargain with the Darmians, and if they didn't believe in the Sag's power, he could hurt them till they did.

He began to pace, slowly at first, reviewing what he would say, how he should act. He thought of Karmindy's calm voice, the gentle warmth of his quarters in the Palace which he might never see again. No, don't be foolish. Think! The pacing grew quicker. Then it occurred to him that he was probably being watched, and he did not want to seem nervous. Yet he could not remain still. It couldn't hurt, couldn't matter, just to pace a little...

Lying in his bed last night, he had considered that something like this might happen. He'd thought over his options rationally from the safety of his room. Then it had all been so...abstract.

In a prison cell, everything changed. Looking at the locked door he suddenly remembered Coreau, the phrase Jienne repeated over and over: the door never opened. He imagined spending day after day, week after week in a place like this, plagued by Reverences, expecting to die, waking each morning to the sight of a door that never opened. How had she made it? Somehow, vaguely, he had always thought of her as weak – had even comforted her with insipid, meaningless reassurances, like a child. How could he not have understood? And he, at least, had been prepared for this, and might be Emperor one day. But Jienne...how, how could he have been so stupid?

He stopped pacing, shocked. He had never loved her at all, he realized. Because of that – because of his stupidity. And Chiyoko, for all her self-righteous bluster, had known it all along.

Jienne deserved better than him. Perhaps it was best they were parted now; she would find someone new, if she hadn't already, and she wouldn't be alone any longer. He told himself he would never see her again.

When the door at last opened, he felt equal parts dread and relief. The uniformed woman who entered was short, her thin lips white with disdain. "Petras Fairburn."

"Yes?"

"Mr. Asemeian will see you now."

As she led him through the same maze of corridors that all ships seemed to have, he struggled again to focus on his mission. Asemeian had betrayed him, but he still had the Sag on his side. He was still strong. He would still be Emperor.

"Inside," said the woman.

He did not wait for her but pushed open the door himself. Within he found quarters like those in the Sun Palace – sprawling and luxurious. They were trying to intimidate him, he thought, and this insight buoyed his spirits. He strode forward. He knew exactly what he would say; he would go right up to Nasir Asemeian and...

"Well, look who's here. It's Lamendo's errand boy."

Petras halted, a sick feeling creeping up his throat.

It was Padrian Werner.

The same hard lines still marked his aging face, the same twist of the lips hinting at a general disgust for everything that was not himself. When he smiled, as he was doing now, that was worst of all. Whereas Karminy's virtue was her rationality, Werner was nothing but an animal.

Petras's heartbeat thundered in time with the pulsing in his ears. He was locked in the room with an animal.

The room was dark, lit only by a low lamp in the corner, and a wide window open to the stars. Werner picked up a glass of water and drained it slowly, taking long, careful

gulps. Petras was suddenly conscious of an awful thirst; he'd had nothing to drink since inhaling the gas. With an effort he pushed it all away: the thirst, the terror, the awful certainty that he would not leave this room alive. Now more than ever he had to think.

Werner, not Asemeian, had probably been responsible for the gas and the killings. That left only two possibilities. Either Asemeian was in on the betrayal – which would contradict what everyone had said about him – or Werner was going against Asemeian's wishes. The latter seemed more likely.

Petras might still have an ally.

Werner set down the glass and sighed with satisfaction. "I'm glad you came."

When Petras found his voice, it was surprisingly firm. "I was to meet with the Landgrave of Darmis, Nasir Asemeian."

Werner grinned. "You can talk to me."

"I'd rather talk to him."

Werner pulled out a familiar silver-and-diamond gardenia. The Imperial Mandate. "You can talk to me."

Petras struggled to process this new data. Rikter said Werner had lost his Mandate, but clearly things had changed, or else Rikter had gotten bad information. Either way, it fit the theory that Werner had gone against Asemeian's wishes.

It also meant Asemeian was probably in no position to help him just now.

"I thought the Emperor took that away, Padrian. Something about you losing a valuable prisoner? Being an embarrassment to the Imperial Service?"

"Who told you that?" said Werner. "Was it...?" He feigned astonishment. "It couldn't have been those Senrians at the Palace, could it? Lamendo? Or Rikter? Why,

they wouldn't have *lied* to you, would they?"

He hadn't mentioned Karmindy. He didn't guess her real importance. An encouraging thought. "Why would they lie about that?"

He was still grinning. "They traded you away, Petras. The Emperor wanted you, and they handed you over. Who knows what the deal was? Leniency? Money? Whatever. The point is, they're done with you. You're here now. Talk to me."

Bullshit, thought Petras. Karmindy wouldn't do that to me.

Or would she?

But no – he pushed that thought away too. He'd decided to trust her.

He had to trust somebody.

"I want to see Nasir Asemeian."

"Maybe you didn't hear – "

"I don't care if Monifice gave you a flower. I've got something better. I say the word, and the Sagittarian destroys your fleet."

Werner's grin fell away, and he stared at Petras with rough-cut emerald eyes. "Do it, then."

Petras hesitated. He didn't want to play his only card too early. And something else: despite all the effort they'd made to minimize casualties, the attack would not be a bloodless affair. Tau neutrino dynamos were volatile; they would damage the ship when they exploded. People would die. He would pull the trigger if he had to, if there was no other way to avoid a galactic war. But with Calum Dorn's murder still fresh in his memory, he was not so eager to extinguish any more human lives.

"I will if I must," he said at last. The words sounded weak in his ears.

That terrible, casual smile crept back. "I am imagining," said Werner, "how much you must hate me. I often think of it. You cannot understand, of course, what it means to be a man in my position, to carry the dreams of a people on your back. Who do you think keeps Darmis strong, pressed between Monifice and Rikter like a vise? Asemeian? He can't even control *me*! It's about honor, Petras. It's about pride. It's about survival." He rose to his feet. "You're angry about me killing your father? Very well."

Now Werner's face was a mere arm's length from his own, and with his blank grinning gaze he looked like some demon of the deep. The lamp lay ponderous shadows on his face, on his short black hair, and a host of medals glittered like dim stars over the blue-black expanse of his uniform.

"Hit me."

This, at least, was easy to understand: a distraction. Preferable to silence. Petras's response came easily, its delivery smooth. "No thanks."

"Don't you want to?"

"No."

"I wonder what the Truth Scanner would say about that."

And oh, did he want to – stronger than the burning in his throat, than the churning fear in his stomach, was the desire to smash his knuckles into that complacent face. He wanted to break that wide, ugly nose, that craggy jaw, to scatter those teeth in bloody pools across the floor, to hear them crunch beneath his boots as he crossed the distance to Werner's huddling form to begin the long, slow process of making him really hurt. Petras's own jaw clenched hard. He did not envy those doctors, who would have to rebuild Werner's face from nothing out of polymer.

Yes, that was what he wanted. But Werner was baiting him, and guards surely waited nearby. Instead he merely raised his chin and said, calm and condescending as an emperor, "I'm afraid you are wasting my time, Padrian."

The sudden tightening of Werner's lips was the only sign of his anger before his fist exploded into Petras's cheek, knocking him off his feet. "You can't hit me," Werner bellowed from some distant place beyond the darkness. "Don't say you don't *want* to, liar – you *can't* hit me! Go on, get up! Huh?" A brutal boot impact set his ribs aflame with agony. "I said, try to get up and hit me!" Petras moaned. Werner kicked him again, and again, till Petras lost count of the blows and felt his whole upper body as a wash of pain.

<Attack now, Ambassador. You can sense which ship I'm on. Leave that one alone. Attack the others now.>

<I am going.>

Werner knelt beside him. "Aren't you going to hit me?" he sneered.

Petras twisted his mouth into what he supposed was a smile. "I just did."

Doubt crept into Werner's face, furrowing his brow. He stood, tapped his netlink. A large gray viewscreen turned to an image of the fleet, taken – Petras supposed – from a camera on the hull somewhere. A few ships were close enough to see in detail, but most were mere specks against the starry backdrop.

Nothing happened at first, but Werner was surprisingly patient. They watched together, Werner standing, Petras tasting the iron in his own blood as he lay still on the floor. Neither spoke.

Petras never saw the Sag ship itself. Too small, too far away. But he saw the explosions, brief uncertain things, like soundless candles flaring in the deep. One, then

another. Men and women dying as each candle extinguished. Somewhere, voices must be screaming orders. Somewhere, an inhuman mind carefully picked its targets.

He felt sad. He felt triumphant. His ribs blazed with agony.

Petras sensed the Truth Scanner's presence in his mind and looked up to see it in Werner's hand, a slim gunmetal rectangle that looked no more threatening than a data card. *It's not so terrible*, he thought. *It can't pull information from your brain, and it can't force you to answer. All it can do is beep when you lie.*

Werner slid his thumb on the device, and its presence pressed into and around his mind like a vise, making him gasp. It slowed his thoughts – each action of the mind took extra effort to overcome the awful weight. Not for the first time he thought of Jienne, and that terrible morning when she told him how she'd suffered through exactly this treatment. How could he have failed to understand, to empathize? How had he put himself above her still? No, no, he would never deserve her.

"Can you really communicate with the Sagittarian ambassador?" Werner's voice had lost its toying cleverness. It was a weapon now, rigid and blunt.

"Yes," he gasped, pushing the answer out as if through a sieve.

"Telepathically?"

"Yes." This was another limitation of the Truth Scanner – it only really worked with yes-or-no questions.

"Are you the only one who can do so?"

"Yes."

"You ordered this attack just now?"

"Yes." The spurts of fire on the viewscreen had never stopped, though it looked

like the fleet was retreating. Werner didn't even glance at the image, didn't even bother asking him to stop.

"You plan to use this attack to intimidate us into giving you power?"

"Yes."

"Are they planning to put you on the throne?"

"Yes."

"Do you have an alliance with the Sagittarians?"

He didn't; not an *alliance*, not really. But silence would be a giveaway. He had to try.

"Yes..."

He pushed this answer through the sieve with tremendous force, and it hurt, like a deep, twisted knot in his mind. Dots of sweat formed on his face as he heard the Truth Scanner's dim alarm, *beep – beep – beep* – an oddly neutral sound, which in another time and place might have signaled a food synthesizer that had finished a loaf of bread. Petras breathed heavily. The pressure, the awful pressure in his skull...

"Would they take your side in a war, Petras?"

The knot tightened; he nearly cried aloud. Getting it out was almost impossible this time, his own sweat burning in his closed eyes, but finally, with something like triumph, he shouted again. "Yes!" He worked so hard at this, it almost felt true.

The Scanner beeped once more, louder this time. *The bread*, he thought, *your bread is done, it's almost time for supper*. In the long silence that followed, he felt breath on his face. Still gasping, he opened his eyes. Padrian Werner's plain, hideous face hovered centimeters away, filled with his petty triumph.

"Petras," he whispered, "do you want to hit me?"

Petras roared.

Right then Werner's expression turned to sudden doubt, then slowly into rage.

Petras wondered if his scream had caused this somehow – but no, Werner was looking past him, up – toward the window. The room brightened, the shadows receded slightly, as if fleeing the arrival of some new presence.

Was it coming from outside?

From *space*?

Werner stumbled to his feet and dashed out of the room. Petras tried to stand, but every motion shot lancing pains all through his ribs and back. Somehow he turned and pulled himself high enough to see out the window.

There it was – white on white, big as a city, panels and turrets and hard sleek metal that stretched the whole expanse of the window, reflecting sunlight from the star below. He knew this ship – for it was indeed a ship, though it dwarfed the cruisers. He knew it from photos on the Net, from his awed questions to Chiyoko. It was the Imperial Flagship – the only superdreadnought-class vessel in existence – the personal transport of the Emperor himself.

The *Manticore*.

At least it had upset Werner. That alone gave him hope.

Whatever happened, he wished it would happen soon. Such pain! With an effort, he grasped the short rectangular form of the Truth Scanner – so small, to cause so much misery – hefted it once, and hurled it with his remaining strength at the far wall. It struck a cabinet and clattered to the floor. Pointless; but it felt good.

He could not have said how long he lay there that way, unable to rise. It felt like an hour, but might have been less. At last, the door did open.

Three people walked in. First came Emperor Monifice, then Nasir Asemeian, and finally a gray-hooded figure, his face and hands hidden by folds of voluminous fabric.

Petras had never thought Monifice looked very Imperial in photos, and he seemed even less so in person. Monifice was not a particularly tall man, slightly overweight, thin-haired, pale. The nose was wide and hooked downward; the chin curved inward without much conviction; most unforgivably of all, the eyes were quite ordinary.

These low elements formed the human component of Monifice, what Petras's professor had called the Empris Persona. But of course that was only half of it, for there was also the Empris Edificia, the office of Emperor, which the man could not escape. There was the uniform, white and regal, trimmed in brilliant green. Pinned on the left breast was a large silver-and-diamond gardenia, of the same design as Werner's Imperial Mandate. And of course there was the *Manticore*, white on white, big as a city.

All these thoughts ran through him in a moment, just as the gray-robed figure began ministering to him. He swallowed a pill that dulled his pain almost immediately, and the hooded person – some servant, apparently – helped him into a wide padded chair. Whatever they intended with him, it was getting off to a friendlier start than with Werner.

Monifice stepped forward.

"So you're the boy who can talk to the Sag," he said. "You really hear its thoughts, like a voice in your brain?"

Petras nodded uncertainly.

Monifice grunted. "I came when my spies told me a Darmian shuttle and a

Senrian shuttle were docking. By the time I got here, my entire fleet was...but of course you know that already. Mr. Asemeian, here, admits he tried to arrange a parley with you, but it seems Mr. Werner had other ideas. We see how that worked out."

"What will happen to Secretary Werner?" Petras asked.

Monifice narrowed his eyes, studying him. Finally he laughed, a short, bitter sound. "You really are a puppet, aren't you, boy? Strictly for decoration. You could have made a fine puppet for me, if Werner hadn't bungled things so badly. Well, it doesn't matter. I tore the throne from the last fellow's hands, and now Rikter has torn it from mine. He found a bigger gun, that's all. He's welcome to it. We'll see how long it lasts."

Petras could think of nothing to say. Did Monifice really mean he was giving up the throne?

"Give this message to Rikter," said Monifice. "He's got what he wants, for now. Whether you or he decides to wear the loop of metal on their head, is no concern of mine. I won't stand in his way, and neither will Darmis. Isn't that right, Mr. Asemeian?"

Asemeian raised his eyes for the first time and fixed Petras with a disgusted stare, as if examining an infestation of ants in his kitchen. "That's correct, Sire."

"Werner is somewhere on this ship; my people are looking for him now. He will be arrested and turned over to Rikter. No one else will offer any real resistance to the transition."

He turned away, followed by Asemeian, but paused at the door and glanced back. "If it does end up being your ass on the chair," he said, "enjoy it. Whatever anyone tells you, you only have one job as Emperor, and that's to make sure nobody fucks with you. Not him," nodding toward Asemeian, "not Rikter, nobody. Not even those Sagittarians –

whatever the hell they are."

He shook his head one more time. "A voice in your brain," he said; and then he and Asemeian were gone.

The gray-robed figure, who had been standing rather ominously beside Petras all this time, pulled back her hood.

"Hello, Petras," she said, smiling. "It's good to see you again."

"Chiyoko!" Relief flooded through him as he smiled back in turn. "What are you doing here?"

She took a seat beside him and hugged him. Age had not touched her face at all: girlish cheeks, stark lashes, bright black eyes. "I had to wear the robe to keep anonymous as we walked through the ship, and then once I got here, you know, I didn't want to distract you..."

"But why are you here?"

She shrugged. "It's like Monifice said. He came over as soon as he heard about you trying to meet with the Darmians. Well, on the way, he stopped into his personal chambers on the *Manticore*, and he found me. With these." She flourished, and a curvy-bladed knife appeared in her hand, then slipped back into her sleeve. "You know how I do."

"You threatened the *Emperor*?"

"All I'm saying is, he was in a particularly receptive frame of mind when he got to Sacadoor and found his Darmian legion in a shambles. Very neat work on that, by the way. A few ships got away, but the Sag nailed most of 'em. They were just...drifting, or staggering around on emergency power. Minimal casualties, though. You ask me, that's a

damn sight more impressive than blowing 'em all up."

He found himself nodding. "I see what you mean, now. About the Plateau. We're still stuck, and they've found a way past."

She took his hand eagerly; her small fingers were smooth and warm. "What else have you learned about them?"

"I know what they want. The ambassador's trying to get us to stop expanding. We're running into their territory. We make them nervous."

"We make *them* nervous?" It wasn't often he heard surprise in her voice.

"Because there are so many of us. The ambassador's worried. It thinks that when a lot of people get together, they form something called a web. I don't know what it means."

She nodded, as if that made sense. "Anything else?"

He almost mentioned the black disc – what the Sag had called its 'ghost' – but something restrained him. For all Chiyoko had done to help him, he still didn't quite trust her, and he wanted to be very careful about the Sags.

He shook his head.

"You have to learn as much as you can about them, okay? If you really understand about the Plateau, then you know how important this is."

"I will." He changed the subject quickly; a more pressing question weighed on his mind anyway. "Am I really going to be the new Emperor?"

"Of course."

"How soon, do you think?"

"A month, maybe two. Long enough for Lamendo and Rikter to organize the

transition. They'll move as fast as they can."

"I can't do this."

"You can."

He curled his fingers tighter around hers, not caring anymore if she was a friend or not, just needing skin to touch. He could not even think anymore. It was all too much – too much. He soaked in the silence, treasuring each passing second that did not disturb this peace. Chiyoko watched him, saying nothing, giving him that, at least.

"I found out about Dimmerok," he said. The word sounded cruel and awkward in his ears. "The ninth-level conflict with the Sagittarians. The un-gathering."

"That's on your shoulders now too, you know."

"I know."

"That's my final challenge for you, Petras. Fulfill your duty like you promised. Steer the universe away from Dimmerok."

"Is that all?" He chuckled. "And then, something good?"

"And then, something good. But listen, you're making progress. I want to give you a little something in the meantime. Two things, actually. To keep you motivated. You know, I want you to feel that you're doing well."

She reached into the folds of her robe and retrieved a writing pen. It looked like a pen from the ancient days, when writing was done with pigment on paper – real paper, paper from wood, not the flexible electronic sheets they called paper today. Intricate lines of silver were woven up and down the golden shaft. It shimmered, reflecting the stars and the immense whiteness of the *Manticore*.

"This pen is magic," she said.

"Magic?" His eyebrows raised in disbelief.

She winked. "Call it technology if it makes you feel better. Now listen. If you write a message with it on any surface, I'll receive it at once, no matter how far away I am. Just a reminder you're not alone, Petras, you don't have to do this Emperor thing all by yourself." She handed it to him and he started to thank her, but she cut him off.

"However," she said, "it will only work once, so be careful."

"Only once? Why?"

"Because I said so. I don't want you expecting miracles every week, Petras."

He turned it gently, feeling the fine, cold lines of silver on his fingers. "Can't I just call your netlink?"

"You can try, but you won't get a signal. I've got some things I need to do alone. Don't worry, you'll do fine without me. I'm overrated." She winked again. "And now your other gift."

His other gift turned out to be an odd figurine shaped like a cat. It was white, made of a substance called *ceramic* that she'd shown him examples of before. The cat sat upright on its hind legs, one paw upraised. A collar encircled its neck, and a large oval-shaped coin adorned its belly. Altogether it looked rather cheap and had no significance Petras could imagine.

"My mother gave it to me," she said. "It was made on Irth, in a place called Japan, which is where I was born. It's over twenty-seven thousand years old – even older than I am, though not by much."

"You were born on Irth?"

She nodded.

"How come you don't age?"

But she only smiled.

He stared at her, and found he was not really all that surprised. He had no idea how such a thing was possible, but it seemed to make sense anyway.

Nothing about her could surprise him anymore.

"It's good luck," she said, "but that's not why I'm giving it to you."

"Why?"

"Because it's the only thing I have left of my childhood." She studied him. "You understand, don't you? The only thing. I'm giving it to you. It means I am trusting you with this thing that is precious to me, and I hope you'll trust me too."

He took the statue and set it carefully in his lap. Very carefully. Twenty-seven thousand years old! He could not even imagine it. "What if I break it?"

Her voice grew stern. "Are you *going* to break it?"

"No! Of course not."

"Then don't worry about it."

"Of course. Thank you." Then he lowered his head and said quietly, "Chiyoko, why me? Why did you choose me to be your student? Did you know it would happen – all this with the Sagittarians?"

She shook her head. "Not when we first met. I can guess a lot of what might happen, and I knew you had potential, but that? No."

"Why, then?"

"I knew you had potential," she repeated. "You were brave the first time I saw you. Really brave. And it had been a while since my last student. I just liked you, that's

all. I still like you."

"Your last student?"

"I've had lots of students, Petras. You're probably...oh, coming up on number five hundred or so. But you're definitely the luckiest of them so far." She grinned. "Or the unluckiest."

"I still don't understand. Rikter wants me as Emperor so he can make Senris powerful again. Lamendo wants me as Emperor so he can keep Senris and Darmis from killing each other. But you...why do *you* want this?"

She chuckled. "You're my student, and I'm giving you lessons. If you think my job is to make your life easier, you'd better find another teacher."

"Lessons? We're still talking about *lessons*? Chiyoko, this isn't a homework assignment! What if I screw it up? What if I'm already screwing it up?"

"Then you're human. You worry too much, Petras."

A useless answer. He frowned. "Chiyoko...you got into the Emperor's private chambers on the *Manticore*. If you can do that, you can do anything. You're so worried about the Sags, the Plateau, the direction all this is going...why haven't you just crowned yourself already?"

She looked at him blankly. "Me? Empress?"

He nodded.

Chiyoko laughed longer than he'd ever seen her laugh before.

"You'll do fine," she said. "Look at it this way: you will never be bored again."

PART III: EMPEROR

Chapter 20

The crown was a silly thing, as crowns so often were – crafted for a fashion centuries out of style, preserved by tradition. An ornately engraved band of thick silver formed the base, and it was nearly as tall as it was wide, a labyrinthine construction of spirals and orbs and emerald leaves. And no piece of it was so miniscule it wasn't symbolic of *something*, as he and hundreds of others had learned over the course of half an hour, during the coronation ceremony in the Westmorrow Citadel on the planet Riaad, capital of Riaadika. Then Petras had knelt, and a man in a green silk stole had approached and placed two thousand years of history on his head.

And he had worn it for six hours after that, all through the interminable ceremony: endless speeches, endless rituals, and endless music, including a lengthy interlude featuring the Bergschrim Children's Second Interstellar Choir. His attention had wandered, taking in the vastness of the Citadel's interior, the faux-stone polycore walls, the absurdity of a fortress like this on a planet orbited by dreadnoughts. Gradually his left leg fell asleep, and he had a terrible time easing the feeling back without standing up or tipping off his crown.

But he vividly recalled one moment that had captured his full attention.

The gray-haired woman had approached, wearing a brilliant green tabard over white sleeves. If he hadn't already known she was the Head of the Order of the Gardenia, he could've guessed it from the enormous white flower embroidered over her breast. She had knelt on the carpet, and hundreds of heads had obligingly lowered. Then she had recited in a loud clear voice:

Praise to the Emperor. He is wise; his wisdom leads us through uncertainty. He is strong; his strength shepherds us to cool waters. He is loving; his love warms us among the icy stars. He is the one true Emperor. Praise him.

His lip curled at the memory. Reverences. He would have to do something about those.

Now it was almost sunset, and the official part of the ceremonies was finally over. Entering the car that would carry them to the evening festivities, he took a seat by Karmindy and doffed the thing on his head with a sigh. "I thought you said we were going to do the short version."

"That was the short version," she said. "You know how you can tell? If it ends the same day it started, it was the short version." She appraised him quietly and added, "You do look like an emperor."

Petras doubted it. He wore black boots, a paper-crisp pair of white pants, and a formal white jacket over a green shirt. A green silk sash and a gardenia brooch completed the costume. Getting ready this morning he'd felt like a child playing dress-up, and he still did.

No, he knew, he was no Emperor – but Karmindy was every bit the Empress, and it showed. Even sitting in the back of the car, hands folded in her lap, she was stunning – her dark brown hair pulled back in a chignon, her eyes and mouth and cheeks subtly transformed by makeup. Her dress was a slim white thing that left her arms and shoulders bare, and a green sash encircled her waist. And she was radiant, in every sense of the word. A net of small lights in her hair cast a new glow on the seats and ceiling whenever she moved her head.

He, Karminy, and Lamendo had agreed on this scheme together. Karminy's title as Empress gave her a reason to be by his side at all times, advising him, guiding him, speaking with him privately. Her full title was merely Empress-Consort, not Empress-Regnant; she had no official power. But the Empress-Consort title was bestowed, by definition, only on the wife of the Emperor.

And so they had married.

They had done it privately, in her quarters on the Sun Palace, witnessed only by Lamendo, Rikter, and (at Petras's request) Tamil. The ceremony had been a legal binding, nothing more; the vows, following a formula carefully established for such occasions, had not included the word 'love.' They hadn't even kissed. He had set the marriage gem on the back of her right hand, and she had done the same to him: the only part of their ersatz ritual that felt real. It stared up at him now, an irregular hexagon, a thick white jewel two centimeters across, bordered with green. It was affixed to his flesh by a technology he could not have explained, still perceptibly tight but not uncomfortable.

That was three days ago, and so far – true to her word – they had treated their marriage like the political fiction it was.

But she is my wife, he thought, and the word – however meaningless – had curled up in his mind and refused to leave. He could not decide what to think about that word. Rikter had said little about it, but seemed to think it a fine joke; apparently he believed Petras had wasted no time securing a beautiful, empty-headed woman for his bed. Tamil had congratulated him politely. Then they had left, and Karminy too, and only he and Lamendo had remained.

"I don't care that it's a formality," Lamendo had said. "I don't care that it was her idea. The two of you will be living together, so let me clarify something. My daughter is quicker than lightning and smarter than *me*, and in less than a month she'll have the Imperial Navy wrapped around her trigger finger. She's being very sweet right now, so maybe you've forgotten, but if you hurt her..." He swallowed visibly. "If you hurt her, she'll tie you up in your own puppet-strings so tight you can't sneeze, and then she will *hurt you back*."

Petras had no doubt of that, but it didn't matter. He didn't want to hurt anybody. Enough people had been hurt already.

In his mind he still saw Jienne, too, crawling through the rain, each time he looked at the white jewel. Had he really never loved her? But believing you were in love, how different of a thing was that? What was love, if not belief?

No matter; that was over now. True to her word, she had found someone new. He was glad about that; glad, too, about the Imperial heavy cruiser that now orbited her little world, quietly keeping her safe, watching for anything that might hurt her, waiting to *hurt them back*. Being Emperor, even as a puppet, had its privileges. She would hear about it, of course, and guess the reason, but that was all right. The stars were his province now, and he wouldn't bother her down on the ground.

Karmindy said her spies could report more details on Jienne's new life, but he had no need of that. Jienne was safe, and strong, and better off without him. New lives beckoned for them both.

Petras hoped hers was more peaceful than his own.

He had told Karmindy everything about Chiyoko putting him on the throne. Her

reaction had been surprisingly sedate. She'd said that Chiyoko was like a wild animal: unpredictable, occasionally destructive, but nothing for civilized people to stay up worrying about at night.

He wasn't so sure.

Karmindy's voice broke into his thoughts, startling him. "This is where it starts to matter," she said. "There's no script for what happens tonight. Are you ready?"

"I think so."

"There's no reason to be nervous. No one expects you to know anything tonight. Let them think you're Rikter's pawn until we're ready."

"Right."

That was the consensus among the galaxy's political elite, Lamendo had told him. They believed he was linked to some strange new power, a game-changer, but that he himself – the Empris Persona – was a curiosity, a nobody. It was the Empris Edificia that mattered, and that, said the conventional wisdom, was all Rikter. Meanwhile the Big Three powers all declined to say officially just what had happened at the so-called Battle of Sacadoor, but rumors abounded, each in its own way oddly skirting the truth. A superweapon, they said. A traitor. A survivor of long-dead Aberdale. The Star-Witch.

Petras stared through the car window, watching the city go by. The street lights carved bright arcs in the misty dusk, exposing flashes of silver and gray and black, the bottoms of enormous buildings – a forest of giants. He was, indeed, among giants now, and his instincts told him to run, before he was trampled.

Like his father.

"Who was that man who crowned me?" he said. "I didn't recognize him."

"No reason you would. He's the Imperial Crownkeeper. He's nobody."

"The Crownkeeper? What does he do?"

"Crowns the Emperor."

"Well, obviously. What else?"

"That's it."

"Karminy, it can be thirty years between coronations. He must do *something* else."

She gave him an indulgent look. "He travels, talks about what it's like to crown the Emperor. He writes books. He takes care of all your crowns – you have over forty, by the way. And he has to stay current on the very latest protocol, so he can always say the right thing at official functions. And he collects his salary. That's it."

"That's pathetic."

"Being Emperor means you're surrounded by the very best. Nothing is less than professional, nothing is left to chance. Those boots you're wearing – do you think they just ordered them off the Net? There are contests, Petras, where the top fashion leaders in the galaxy compete for the honor of designing the Emperor's boots. When they have a design, the top footwear companies in the galaxy scramble for the contract, and whoever gets it has thousands of different boot-makers create thousands of pairs of identical boots, by hand, separately, and then a team of boot connoisseurs – and yes, such people exist – a team examines each one, and finally, with supreme dignity, chooses the pair of boots that will touch the feet of the Emperor himself. If you were to say in public that you liked your boots, it would make someone's career. God help him if you found a loose thread."

He glanced down, ran a finger thoughtfully over his left boot. They *were* nice.

"How do you know so much about boots?"

"I had an uncle," she said vaguely. "We're here. Any last questions? You remember your line?"

"I'm honored to be here."

"Good. And smile. But not *too* much. Just, you know – try to seem natural. Oh, and don't forget to correct me when I misspeak. It'll make me seem stupid, keep their focus on Rikter. No! Don't open your door. Wait."

"What? Why?"

"That's someone else's job."

"You're serious."

"Petras," she said, "you're the Emperor. Repeat after me: 'I will never open another car door as long as I live.'"

"What about the crown?"

"Leave it. Someone will take that too."

Someone did indeed open the car, and he circled around to take Karmindy's arm. The walkway to the front gate was lined with people, all watching expectantly. He glanced at his wife, and was jarred once again by the sudden way she transformed for the public. Gone was the brilliant strategist, replaced by a silly, pretty face that smiled without understanding. Guilt tugged at him, irrationally, but there was no time for that.

He began their advance, stopping every few steps to shake someone's hand, smile, and say in a pleasantly neutral voice that he was honored to be here.

** **

The banquet hall was the largest room he had ever seen. Strands of lights hung

everywhere, as if the designer of Karmindy's luminous hair had gotten free rein over the decorations. Strains of some stringed instrument floated over the buzz of a thousand conversations and mixed with the clatter of silverware and plates; black-suited attendants weaved purposefully through the crowd offering hors d'oeuvres. A pleasant scent hung in the air – a mix of the massive flowery centerpieces that adorned each table and the mingling of ten thousand colognes and perfumes. Petras practiced his smile.

One after another, he chatted with nearly every government figure he had ever heard of: landgraves, Assembly representatives, Imperial secretaries, and the governors of planets. He remembered their names – mostly – and made appropriate comments; he laughed at their jokes, and corrected Karmindy's deliberate mistakes; he gave harmless answers to polite questions, and evaded the more pointed ones. And he tried as best he could to ignore the other looks that showed through behind the smiles – the flashes of real emotion, sometimes pity, sometimes anger, sometimes curiosity, which all said the same thing: you do not belong here, and as soon as we can manage it, you will be gone.

The woman who took his hand now had a long nose, olive skin, and broad dark eyes like windows into space. "It is a great honor to meet you, Sire," she said in an odd, halting accent. "I am Na Jamajna, the landgrave of Vorne. Please accept my humble congratulations on your ascension to the throne."

"Thank you, and may I say I am deeply honored to meet you at last. I've heard so much about Vorne and its many treasures, not the least of which is the woman who fights for it so tenaciously."

He thought that might earn him a smile, but she only nodded, full of that same pleasant neutrality he'd been projecting all day. "Your Majesty is kind to say so. Vorne

has indeed faced many threats. The aggression of stronger landgraviates. Poverty. The indifference of emperors." An edge entered her voice. "My people have suffered under the shadow of Darmis for a long time. I would hate to see one aggressor removed, to be replaced with another."

You have a better chance than you think of escaping Senris's grip, thought Petras. Still, he felt like a hypocrite, all dressed up and chatting about blood as if discussing the weather. If he felt that way about himself, what must *she* think of him? "It's my job, of course, to represent everyone. To work for peace."

"Yes, of course, and who does not like peace?" she said. "But 'peace' is a strange word that can mean many things. Neighbors living in harmony, that is called peace. A country burnt to ashes, that is called peace also, once the fire is out. What kind of peace will we have, I wonder?"

"Petras!" called a voice, and he turned, grateful for the interruption. Tamil Faze shook his hand, his smile bright and unfeigned. He was flanked by three others – his father Rikter, Lamendo, and another man Petras didn't recognize. All wore the Senrian red and gold. "Can I still call you Petras?" Tamil said, laughing. "Is that allowed anymore?"

"It is if I say it is," said Petras, returning his smile. "Have you met Ms. Jamajna, the Landgrave of Vorne? Ms. Jamajna, this is Tamil Faze, a good friend of mine. And here, I believe you already know his father, Rikter, Landgrave of – "

"Yes," said Na Jamajna, "we are acquainted. If Your Majesty will excuse me?"

Once she was gone Rikter quickly rolled his eyes and grinned, as if to say: those silly non-Senrians! "You look good in that uniform," he said. "It suits you."

Rikter, of course, knew nothing about Chiyoko's intervention to make him Emperor, or Lamendo's plotting. He still thought – with Monifice and Werner shoved aside – that he himself was at the crest of his victory, that Petras and his alien friends were just one more little detail to manage. Petras had to be careful; the lies were already getting difficult to manage. He didn't know how Karmindy did it, wearing deception around like a dress.

"Let me introduce you to someone," Rikter continued, "a colleague and an old friend who I hope you'll come to trust as much as I do. This is Sommil Naile. Mr. Naile, I present the newly-crowned Emperor Fairburn."

"An honor," said Naile, shaking his hand vigorously. He was a short, lean man with neat eyebrows and carefully sculpted blond hair.

"I have selected Mr. Naile as my liaison to you," said Rikter. "Of course you should consult me directly whenever necessary, but I do have my own duties to attend. I hope you will accept Mr. Naile as your advisor and treat him with the confidence and respect you have already shown me."

In other words, a babysitter.

"Naturally," said Karmindy, extending her arm with the easy grace of an Empress.

"I suppose you will be needing quarters in the Imperial Palace, then?"

"If it's not too much trouble, Your Majesty."

She giggled so stupidly, Petras had to restrain a grimace. "Not at all, Mr. Naile. Our home is yours."

Later that evening, Emperor and Empress were seated at the head of a long table with Rikter, Tamil, and Sommil Naile on their right, Lamendo on their left. Waiters were

serving the first course of dinner, a thin beef bouillon, when the conversation abruptly died. Nasir Asemeian had arrived, his expression neutral but far from pleasant, and he sat down beside Lamendo.

Rikter broke the silence first. "There was word that you might not come," he said. Asemeian took a spoonful of soup. "I'm glad you did."

"No doubt. Unfortunate that no invitation made its way to Secretary Werner in his prison cell, or to citizen Monifice on the little exile world you found for him. An oversight, I am sure. But just as well, perhaps; I hear you've put lifewords on them both."

"Ours is a dangerous rivalry, Nasir. We should be cautious. I would not want any unpleasantness between us to erupt into something that could harm our people."

"Magnanimous of you," murmured Asemeian. "But then, it's easy to be magnanimous when you hold the reins of an empire. Perhaps you think this a fair turnabout, Rikter, perhaps even overdue, but remember one thing: all the time Monifice ruled, I strove for balance. Balance! As to my people, I will look after them myself. I have never needed a Senrian's help for that."

"I don't think we've ever been properly introduced," Petras said quickly. "Not in person, anyway. I'm honored to meet you."

Asemeian took a long, slow drink, then examined the glass carefully as if scanning for defects. Ceiling lights reflected variously over its surface as he turned it, throwing rays on his thin cheeks, his coarse white-streaked brown hair. His silence had lengthened well past the point of rudeness when he finally spoke.

"When I was very young, I lived in the countryside on a backwater Darmian world, whose name, I am sure, you would not recognize. Every year on All-Fools'-Day

we would dress up in our costumes. My parents would dress like storybook heroes, my brother would be a clown, and I would be a soldier. And we would take one of our pet pigs, tie a plastic crown to its head, and call it king for the day. Childish games, you see. We would salute it and bow to it and pretend its grunts were orders. But for all the times we played such games, I cannot recall that we ever once got confused, or mistook our king for anything other than a pig, plastic crown or not."

"Now that is – " Rikter began angrily.

"I would like to believe," said Petras, cutting in with a clear strong voice, "that we are none of us children anymore, that we can speak to each other directly without veiled insults."

Asemeian nodded. "That was well said. Nothing would please me more than directness, even if others don't show me the same courtesy." His eyes met Petras's for the first time, furious and hard. "Your so-called ascension is illegal, Mr. Fairburn, your coronation is a farce, your reign is illegitimate, and the implication that we'll accept you is insulting." He turned to Rikter. "And you, who killed thousands of my soldiers in the name of Senrian honor while you cowered in the Sun Palace, you want to talk about our *rivalry*? Like we're scoring points in a *maka rhan* match? Well, call it what you like. But that gun you've so carefully pointed in my face, Rikter, take care it never wavers, or you'll remember what it means that I am Landgrave of Darmis. Good evening."

He walked out before anyone could stop him.

"Shit," muttered Rikter, and he and Sommil Naile stalked off in another direction, followed shortly after by Tamil, who flashed Petras a bemused look before disappearing.

Petras looked around, then leaned over to Lamendo and Karminy.

"What does it mean?" he whispered. "What happens now?"

"Not to worry," Lamendo said softly.

"Eat your soup," said Karminy. "And smile!"

** ** *

By the time the attendant led them to their suite on the top floor of the Jade Fountain Hotel, brought in their baggage, and closed the doors on the newlywed, newly-Imperial couple, it was after midnight. Petras sat on the edge of the enormous bed and surveyed the room, taking in briefly the gossamer-thin watersilk curtains, the vast viewscreen, the little dishes of Reithan chocolate, the crystal drinking glasses, the thick carpet like a green-gray ocean beneath his feet. He'd slept in the Sun Palace; such luxury was commonplace now. He took off his boots and socks and rubbed his toes thoughtfully.

"How bad is it?" he said at last.

"How bad is what?" Karminy had already synced her netlink with the hotel's computer and was checking her Net messages. "Oh – Asemeian? Not too bad. He'll lodge a formal complaint, file an appeal that will be overruled, make some angry speeches, and cool down eventually. He'll be replaced if he doesn't submit – Darmis can't stand against Senris and Riaadika combined, and he knows it. It's the way of galactic politics: until you go public with an announcement, you're just blowing smoke."

"So you're not worried, then?"

"I'm not worried."

"Rikter seemed pretty shaken by it."

"Rikter is a monarch. He's landgrave because eight generations ago one of his grandfathers pulled off a coup. He's rich, well-dressed, makes a strong impression, but

he's not actually all that...smart."

Probably the same opinion he has of you, thought Petras. "What if he gets scared and does something stupid?"

"He'd have to do it quick. We'll give him bigger things to worry about very soon."

He realized, just then, what was so wonderful about Karminy: her clarity. She took a muddled mess of conversations, headlines, half-remembered facts, and turned it into something clean and understandable. *This* faction was not a threat, *that* maneuver should be dealt with in thus-and-such a way. Like clean white lines framing the chaos of his thoughts. He had never known such precision before.

Miraculous.

He was not going to get in her way, he'd decided; he was not going to try and rule, even halfway. He was all right being a puppet.

It would have been different with Rikter, or even Lamendo. He would have fought them – in small ways, or in bigger ways – because he had to. Because the job was too important for anything else. He would have watched them for signs of corruption or bias, and fought them whenever he had to.

But Karminy was different. She knew what she was doing, and further, she was doing it for the right reasons. The crown, the gardenia, they were toys to him, but to her they were tools, and she was a master artisan. He would follow her guidance – her orders, even – for the same reason he would have fought Rikter, and in fact was going to fight him, very soon. Because the job was too important for anything else. Especially his ego.

He had decided this, but he didn't tell her. Not that he didn't trust her; but even so, a few secrets were best kept in reserve, at least in these early days.

She shut off the computer and sat down beside him. Kicking off her shoes, she began the meticulous process of removing the net of lights from her hair. "You did well tonight, Petras. You remembered names, said the right things, made a good impression – or as good as could be expected, under the circumstances – and all that without coming on too strong. It's a fine start."

"Good."

"I know this all seems crazy right now, the politics and the ceremonies and everything, but you'll get used to it. And I'll be right with you the whole time, guiding you through. My father will fly back to Senris tomorrow, to manage events there; we'll soon have need of that. But I'll be in touch with him constantly. We're both on your side a hundred percent."

He nodded. "What about Dr. Bernabie?"

"I wanted to keep him on as an advisor, to help us deal with the Sagittarians, but..." She set the web of lights on a dresser and turned it off with a short click. "He said he was tired of government work. Tired of being manipulated, he meant. He's going back to his old job, the one he held before Werner pulled him in for first contact. He's what they call a wandering professor, traveling between universities, teaching for a year or two at each and then moving on."

"I suppose we can still call him if any questions come up."

"That's right." She glanced out the window, looked around a moment, and stopped.

"Something wrong?"

"I am going to change out of this dress," she said formally, as if issuing a

proclamation. "If it makes you uncomfortable, I will go into the bathroom to change. However, since I expect we will be living together for a long time, it seems not unreasonable that we wouldn't bother about such things. I will leave it to you."

He swallowed a laugh as he realized what this stiff formality meant. The great Karmindy Quince – Karmindy Fairburn, now – the woman who had stared down Padrian Werner, who had taken a ripgun blast, who only this morning had been crowned Empress-Consort of the Galaxy...*now* she was nervous! "No, it's fine," he said. "I don't mind. Really."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. I mean, you're right, we're going to be living together, it's silly to be that careful around each other." Not that he needed much of a reason to agree. The prospect of seeing Karmindy sans dress was not something he had any desire to veto.

"All right," she said, a little more quietly; and then, after one last moment of hesitation, she slipped out of the dress and hung it carefully in the closet. The underwear came off next, and she knelt naked by her suitcase, searching through her clothes. He tried not to stare, but he couldn't help stealing one long glance at her. And she was lovely, dark hair falling like melted chocolate over bare shoulders, spine arcing gently toward the smooth curves of her backside. She saw him looking, and her modest smile was an expression he would never have thought possible on her face.

Suddenly she grimaced and reached an arm toward her left breast.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I get little aftershocks sometimes, from where the ripgun hit me. I'll be fine, it's already going away."

"It still hurts? I thought you were all recovered from that."

"Well, mostly. It was an intense operation. They had to graft on a lot of synthetic tissue...they said it would hurt occasionally. I'm fine."

Nothing about that part of her body looked synthetic to Petras, but he kept that thought to himself.

He said, "I guess as long as we're talking about this kind of thing, there are some other items we should discuss about our marriage. You know, just because the situation is so...unique."

She pulled on a beige nightgown and sat back on the bed. "Such as?"

"Well, first of all, I assume you're okay with me changing in front of you?"

"Of course."

"Thanks." He turned away and slid off his pants as she watched, trying to act like it was the most natural thing in the world. Which, come to think of it, it was. Sort of.

"Also. Sleeping arrangements? There's only one bed, so I assume we're sleeping together tonight. What about at the Palace? Are we going to sleep in separate beds there?"

"We can, if you want to. We don't have to."

"I'm all right with sleeping in the same bed," he said cautiously, "if you are."

"That's fine," she said, trying – and nearly succeeding – at averting her eyes. He was not wearing much at the moment.

"Okay." A rather long silence now as he got his pajamas on. "What about sex?"

She cleared her throat. "Like I said, I don't expect you to be faithful to me. This isn't a normal marriage, we both know that. You can sleep with anyone you want to – trust me, there'll be no shortage of willing women. Just be reasonably discreet about it,

that's all I ask."

"Yeah," he said, sitting down beside her, "I know what you said, but I don't like that. I mean, maybe it's silly, but...I just don't like the idea of cheating on my wife. Even if we're not, you know, a normal marriage. We're still married. I just don't like it."

Another awkward silence.

"I take it, then, you expect *me* to be faithful to *you*?"

"Well, I..." He looked down. "I mean, I didn't say that. I don't know how you want to do it."

"Monogamy is a two-way street."

"Of course. Yes."

One of her eyebrows rose. "So are you saying...you want *us* to have sex?"

"No! I mean...that's not what I was suggesting. Necessarily. But if you...I mean, I don't know. What do you think?" he finished lamely.

"I don't know. I...well, I don't know what I think." They were both thoughtful for a moment. "Not tonight," she said finally.

"No, not tonight."

"I mean, it's late, and tomorrow – "

"No, I know, it's a big day tomorrow – I didn't mean tonight. Or anytime. I just – thought we should talk about it."

She nodded. "Well. We've made some progress tonight. Let's get some sleep, and we'll...figure out the sex thing later. Okay?"

"Yeah," he said. "That sounds good."

They got under the covers and he tapped his netlink, switching off the lights.

Chapter 21

The knock on their door came at precisely nine o'clock the next morning. Zethius Trum was right on schedule.

He looked to be in his mid-forties, solid but not muscular, with a receding hairline and an expansive mustache. He wore a charcoal suit. In later years, it would be the suit that Petras remembered most about Zethius. To say that it fit him well was an understatement; it was not merely that the suit was exquisitely tailored, that it matched his black shoes, that it was neatly pressed. There was something more, which Petras could never quite explain. The closest he could come was to say, somewhat inadequately, that Zethius seemed...*comfortable* in his suit, as if it were part of his being, rather than a thing external.

"Your Majesty," he said, executing a tight bow, heels together. "I am honored. My name is Zethius Trum. I am the majordomo of Your Majesty's Imperial Palace, if it please you, Sire."

"Thank you, Mr. Trum. It's a pleasure."

"And for me, an honor. I was the chief steward for the offices of Her Majesty's father here on Riaad, but now that he is making Senris his primary residence, he has seen fit to leave all the Imperial Palace in my charge. Quite a promotion, if I may say so, Sire, but have no doubt I am possessed of the most impeccable qualifications. Your affairs will be ably managed."

"I have no doubt of that, Mr. Trum."

"His Majesty may call me more simply, by my first name, if he chooses."

Petras smiled. "Zethius, then."

Zethius bowed again, less deeply, and Petras knew this was no arbitrary motion – Karmindy said there were different types of bows, in fact *hierarchies* of bows, each one meaningful and separately appropriate for any of a thousand occasions, and that Zethius knew them all. He was reminded of something Chiyoko had told him once: there is no crevice so obscure, no dust-grain so minute, but someone has built his life around it.

For some reason, it was a comforting thought.

"Is His Majesty ready to tour his Palace?"

"I'm ready."

"Will Her Majesty be joining us?"

She glanced up from the computer, and Petras noticed she did not put on her usual show of acting stupid. "No, thank you, Zethius. I've seen the Palace before."

"Of course," said Zethius. He gestured toward the hallway. "Sire?"

** **

It was a fine clear day as they approached the Imperial Palace from the west, and the brilliant morning sun hovered straight ahead; the shuttle viewscreen dimmed so as not to blind them. Petras watched as the famous landmarks rose like storybook pictures off the horizon. First was the Observatory, the amber spike that climbed like an impossible needle to its three-kilometer-high pinnacle. Then, as they flew over the deep, straight-walled metallic canyon that marked their entrance to the Inner Palace, others emerged, a patchwork of architectures that spanned the styles of fifty centuries and a million worlds: the high and frowning Auditorium with its ridged roof, the long angular caterpillar shape of the Great Hall, and nearby, the Hall of the Fathers. On it went; each passing minute

revealed some new legend. The grassy bulge of Barrowfell, with the Star-Tower at its crest. The domed crystalline mass of the Sanctuary, which housed the Gardenia Throne. Further on, the Serpent. The Imperial Gardens. The Spires. Whiterock.

"They're real," said Petras.

Zethius seemed to understand. "That they are, Sire."

He took it all in a moment longer.

"Where do we start?"

"Your Majesty may of course see whatever he chooses. But traditionally, we start with the Observatory."

** **

The elevator took nearly two minutes to reach the top of the Observatory. At that point they paused briefly, then rose for another ten seconds before they finally halted.

"The elevator stops at the public viewing area first," Zethius explained. "Our destination is the private deck at the very peak. No one is allowed up here but the Emperor and Empress, their personal guests, and maintenance crews. For anyone else, even a landgrave, it is a very serious crime."

"How serious?"

"We throw them over the edge."

"You're kidding!"

"Yes," Zethius said gravely, "I am." He pressed a button, and the doors slid apart.

"Your Majesty, may I present to you your empire."

Petras ascended a short staircase and found himself on a circular platform a few meters across, inside a bubble of transparent polymer. All around him the circular

horizon enclosed a panoramic view of the Palace, three kilometers below. He fought down vertigo as he stepped tentatively toward the edge of the circle.

"I assume this is, uh, safe?"

"It has stood for over eight hundred years, Your Majesty, and no one has fallen off yet. That is to say, not by accident. Once a year on Heather Day, a few skydivers are given permission to make the leap. They put on quite a spectacle, lights and smoke trails and such. You can see it from your bed chamber."

"My bed chamber? Where is that, exactly?"

"Traditionally, Your Majesty's primary residence is in the Spires, which are almost directly below us – there."

Petras worked up his courage and stepped to the very edge, looking where Zethius pointed, at a collection of slender white towers that rose like sentinels from a patchwork of green roofs. His gaze wandered west, past Barrowfell and the Auditorium. "What's that dark ring that goes all around us?"

"I presume Your Majesty means the Drywater Channel. It is an artificial chasm, several hundred meters wide and nearly a kilometer deep, which marks the boundary of the Inner Palace. Your Majesty will notice the Bridge of Ashes to the west, which is the main point of crossing, and is just south of the spot where we flew over the Channel ourselves an hour ago. Seven other bridges also link the Inner Palace to the Outer. To the east, Sire, you can see Xon Bridge, which..."

Petras half-listened as Zethius explained the symbolic significance of the Drywater Channel, the history of the bridges, and the meanings of their various names, then pointed out the miniscule speck of Westmorrow Citadel, site of yesterday's

coronation, out beyond the Bridge of Ashes. Eventually Zethius fell silent, and they merely stood, looking together over the absurd vastness of Petras's new living space.

"How big is it?" he said finally.

"The Inner Palace?"

"No. The whole thing."

"It depends on your meaning, Sire. The Palace proper covers just over three hundred square kilometers, but including outlying lands, the total approaches fourteen thousand."

"I guess what I'm asking is, how much does the Crown actually own?"

"Why – the whole planet, Sire."

"No, that's not what I mean. I understand that Riaad is under Imperial jurisdiction. What I'm asking is – me, as Emperor – how much is actually personally *mine*?"

"Yes, Sire, if I may say so, I believe I understood your question correctly. The entirety of Riaad belongs to Your Majesty."

"You mean...I own the land? Development rights, eminent domain, that sort of thing?"

Zethius's lips parted under his wide mustache in the barest hint of surprise, but he moved on gracefully. "If Your Majesty will allow, there is perhaps a simpler way to explain. Imagine a sphere, centered on Riaad's core, and extending to one hundred kilometers above sea level. Everything within that sphere, excepting only the people themselves, is Your Majesty's personal property."

"But you can't mean everything. I mean – well, obviously not their houses, and I'm sure – "

"Their houses also," said Zethius.

"You mean, legally, I could – what – just walk into people's houses and take whatever I see?"

"Indeed. That is, if one could speak of *taking* what one already possesses."

Petras was silent a moment.

"That's quite a thing to spring on somebody all at once."

Zethius bowed. "The planet is yours, Sire. I am sorry. I thought you knew."

** ** *

They stood at the end of a long, dark corridor, where rows of dim overhead lights projected their shadows at odd angles. This was the Imperial Museum, where Petras's curiosity had led them to the Irth section. The object before him stood on a pedestal, enshrined by a spotlight, protected by thick glass. It was a small round stone, completely unremarkable but for three recessions on its surface that looked, with some imagination, like a mouth and two eyes: a human face. He glanced at the placard, which bore the thing's inscrutable name: 'The Makapansgat Pebble.' Three million years ago, some unthinkably ancient ancestor of his had discovered in this rock some semblance of himself, and brought it back to camp.

If you're lonely enough, it doesn't take much, does it?

The sound of footsteps made them both turn. It was Rikter's pet watchdog – Sommil Naile. Petras put on his most ingratiating smile.

"Mr. Naile!" he said. "So glad to see you! Zethius was just showing me some of the artifacts we preserve here. Zethius, this is my advisor – "

"You haven't been easy to find," said Naile, "gallivanting all over the Palace. In

the future, try to keep me better informed on where you'll be." Petras was gratified to see Naile was breathing hard and had apparently been running. "Rikter's prepared an Imperial Proclamation for you. Read it over, if you like. He – " here, a glance at Zethius, " – *suggests* that you issue it tonight."

"Thanks. I'll do that. I'm sorry about making you run all over – "

"Save it," said Naile. "When I need a real Imperial thank-you, I'll let you know."

He walked off as quickly as dignity would allow.

Zethius did not speak up until the man was quite gone. "If I may, Sire, Your Majesty is exceedingly tolerant of disrespect."

"I'll work on it," Petras said lightly. "Let's see the Gardens."

** ** *

It was just after seven o'clock when Petras took his leave of Zethius and began the long walk through the Spires, navigating its forest of alabaster turrets. Toward his bed. There were quicker ways, of course – the entire underbelly of the Palace was a mess of rails and elevators and moving sidewalks – but it was a warm evening and the sun was just closing on the horizon. He had expected the Palace to be bustling with workers and attendants, but all day he had hardly seen anyone. A great deal was automated, it seemed. His breathing, his boots on the pavement, and the song of a distant nightingale were the only sounds here in the deepening quiet.

He sighed. The Spires were beautiful – everything was beautiful, beyond his highest expectations. Towers, gardens, museums, statues...a whole planet...

He deserved none of it, had asked for none of it. Had he wanted to be chosen by the Sagittarian? To get tangled in Karminy's schemes? If only he hadn't gone for

groceries at the same time as Chiyoko that day, a dozen years ago...

Idiot, he thought. After all this time, still playing what-if. *Look at the richest man in the galaxy feeling sorry for himself. You promised Chiyoko duty. I don't remember a self-pity clause in that bargain.*

He took an elevator the rest of the way up.

His rooms were just as decadent as he'd expected: ten-meter ceilings, vast wall tapestries, each piece of furniture so elaborately engraved it was a separate masterpiece. Petras ignored it all, located the computer, and sat down to examine Rikter's handiwork. He read the title out loud: "An Imperial Proclamation to End the Establishment of State-Enforced Atheism."

"You're back," said Karminy, stretching arms over head as she came in from another room. Again his eye was drawn to the white marriage gem on the back of her hand. Such a peculiar symbiosis it stood for.

"I'm back. Why is Rikter so interested in letting people practice religion, anyway?"

"For the same reason Darmis pushed Monifce to outlaw it in the first place. Monarchies are rooted in tradition, so they draw power from traditional institutions, like churches: in this case the Senrian Orthodox. They're complementary. Dictatorships are different – they demand a direct connection between the people and the state. Any organizations that aren't part of the state draw power away from the dictator."

"You're calling Asemeian a dictator?"

"What else would he be? Kind of a nice guy by autocrat standards, but don't let the man fool you. His governmental machine is still very much intact."

He paged through the document. "But this doesn't *require* the landgraves to grant religious freedom. It just takes away the prohibition at the Imperial level. Why wouldn't he require everyone to grant the same freedoms? Wouldn't that weaken Darmis?"

"If they actually obeyed it, sure. Rikter's trying not to strain his newfound power too far just yet. In time, as the other landgraviates open up their churches, pressure will build on Darmis to do the same. For now it's an easy move for Rikter – a cheap popularity boost at home."

"So that's why Naile was pushing so hard to have me sign this thing right away." He paged to the end of the document. "You want me to go ahead and do this?"

"Yes." She winced, rubbing at the old ripgun wound by her left breast, but she waved away his concern.

"All right. Show me which buttons to press."

When it was done, they went over the plans for tomorrow's lifeword ceremony once more. Karmindy made him repeat the entire thing back to her, start to finish, all contingency plans included.

"Any last questions?"

"No. I'll be fine."

"Good." She gave him a reassuring smile. "This is going to work, Petras. Not just tomorrow, but the whole thing. You as Emperor. You don't have politics in your genes, but I can get you through that. What matters is that you seem..." She frowned. "It's just something about you. I think you can do it."

He sighed. "I'm not used to these kind of games, you're right about that. But I want to learn. What you told me just now, about monarchies and their churches – that

makes sense, that idea, but I never made that connection before now. I guess I had thought about it, but it was sort of...murky. I want to understand the speeches I'm giving. If you can keep teaching me, help me get all this straight, may be I can make your job a little easier too."

Her smile grew wider, a knowing grin that satirized itself. "As Your Majesty wishes, of course."

Chapter 22

The Auditorium had earned its reputation as one of the Palace's great wonders, not so much for its intimidating girth, but for the subterranean annex it guarded beneath its polycore foundation: the Life Chamber. Petras stood at the bottom of the Chamber, in its very center, in a circle ten meters across. All around him the seats were set in concentric circles, each higher than the last, rising to a flat ceiling so distant it seemed impossible he could be underground.

He examined his reflection on the polished metal surface of the dome that rose from the floor beside him. Immaculately parted black hair, clean-shaven jaw, and – though he tried to laugh the thought away – a sort of royalty in his ice-blue eyes. He wore the Emperor's most formal dress uniform, the same clothes he'd worn two days ago, at his coronation. It was all there: the silver gardenia, the contest-winning boots, the impossibly crisp pants and jacket. On his head sat a new crown – not the tall, gaudy Corona Lux of the coronation ceremony, but the Corona Regis, a slim band of silver that twined around a faceted emerald in front. A symbol, not of glory, but of power. Normally fine clothes annoyed him and parted hair felt silly, but today, appearances would be very

important.

Petras looked up. Over half of the four hundred invited landgraves had already arrived and begun picking out seats, arranging themselves by alliance and status – *like schoolchildren*, Petras thought. Four hundred landgraves per day meant the ceremony had to be spread out over five days to accommodate the full eighteen hundred. He'd been afraid he could never remember that many lifewords, but, as Karmindy had explained, there was a system to them.

With Karmindy, there was a system to everything.

Scanning the crowd, he located Rikter Faze, who favored him with an amused smile, probably because of his clothes. Formal dress was not traditional for the lifeword ceremony. Like the other landgraves, Rikter wore just an ordinary business suit and could have been anyone.

Na Jamajna appeared, a smile in her dark eyes as she thanked him excitedly for last night's proclamation. Now that the atheism policy had ended, she said, the Church of the Infinite God could return to its rightful place at the center of Vorne's spiritual life and resume its search for the Messiah. Petras tried to focus on what she was saying – two of Karmindy's mantras were 'Cultivate All Relationships' and 'Pay Attention To Everything' – but he was too distracted to really listen. Finally an attendant announced that all four hundred landgraves had arrived. Petras politely took leave of Jamajna and made his way back to the center of the Life Chamber.

"Good morning!" he shouted. The buzz of conversation gradually died.

"We have a long day ahead of us – I'm told this generally takes six hours, plus an hour-long break for lunch – so I'll be brief.

"We are gathered to perform the Lifeword Ceremony. This sacred ritual dates back to the dawn of the Riaadikan Empire and demonstrates the very deepest degree of loyalty, binding the landgraves to their emperor, the landgraviates to their empire, with absolute finality. Your presence today demonstrates the depth of your fidelity. I am profoundly honored."

He looked around the room, gauging his audience. Rikter was smiling; most everyone else looked bored. Both would change shortly.

"There is one other thing.

"You will note that the lifeword machine is enclosed by a small dome which is both soundproof and opaque. This is to facilitate the tradition of bestowing lifewords in private. That tradition goes back to the beginning of the current dynasty – a dynasty marked by weak Emperors and rampant corruption, from the infamous Emperor Quastra all the way to my predecessor, Emperor Monifice. Although I trust we are beyond all such childishness today, nevertheless the private ceremony sends a poor signal to my empire. Therefore...I will return to the old ways."

He raised his arm, activating his netlink with a finger. The dome retracted into the floor. Inside was a lifeword machine. Or rather, *the* lifeword machine – the only one in the galaxy.

Old Faithful, it was called: an ancient and cruel-looking device, all smooth curves of titanium alloy plating. It seemed almost to have grown over the course of centuries from the floor of the Life Chamber, a grotesque and mechanical protrusion in that serene sanctuary. On one side stood a low, metal-rimmed area that could only be entered by kneeling; on the other, a short pedestal on which the operator stood, and a control panel

that glowed faintly red. The machine defined by its form two distinct roles: a master, and a slave.

"Furthermore I have posted video cameras all around the room, broadcasting live to the Net even now. An entire galaxy will bear witness today!"

A storm of whispers arose, but no one objected. How could they, in front of an audience of trillions, without arousing suspicion? Rikter looked like his head might implode from fury, his great chest working with slow breaths as he restrained his rage; but he said nothing.

The dome was the trigger, that's what Lamendo said. Going inside the dome would have clicked something in Petras's brain, compelling him to kneel while Rikter put a lifeword on him, instead of the other way around. Removing the dome meant the compulsion wouldn't trigger, and broadcasting it all live – Karmindy's idea – meant Rikter couldn't say much about it. Not right now, at least.

"I give the honor of first lifeword to my mentor and strongest supporter, the venerable Rikter Faze!"

They did the thing in silence – Rikter, who could have been anyone, kneeling under the machine, submitting to the Empris Persona. After all, with a galaxy watching, appearances were important.

Only three hundred ninety-nine remained.

** **

Petras and Zethius were strolling through the Imperial Gardens when the storm hit. It was Sommil Naile.

"What the hell were you *thinking*, Petras? Did you really think – "

"Zethius," said Petras, "Mr. Naile has called me by my first name. Enlighten him on the protocol for addressing the Emperor."

"The Emperor shall be called 'Sire' or 'Your Majesty' or 'Your Imperial Highness.' The tone of address should be respectful, and is preferably humble."

"Thank you, Zethius. Try again, Mr. Naile."

"Skip the bullshit, Petras, I – "

"Try again, or I'll have you removed."

Sommil Naile ground his teeth. "Very well, then. *Your Majesty*, I must respectfully protest – "

"Much better. Zethius, don't you agree?"

"Inexpressibly, Sire."

"Mr. Naile, please remind the venerable Rikter Faze that he is my *subject*, and inform him that I expect prompt and gracious obedience. You might also mention that he is eminently replaceable. As for you, Mr. Naile, you are a terrible advisor and too boring for a jester. I hereby release you from all duties, real or imagined. Zethius, please have Mr. Naile escorted off-planet and see he does not return in my lifetime."

"Gladly, Sire."

Naile said some more things after that, but Petras didn't pay much attention. The man's tirade didn't last long, anyway. It turned out Petras had a truly colossal number of bodyguards.

The next day Petras accepted the unconditional allegiance of four hundred more landgraves. First in line was Nasir Asemeian.

** **

Lamendo retained his position as Secretary of Foreign Affairs. Officially it was a minor position, and he was not promoted to avoid the appearance of nepotism, but his role in government was quietly expanded. Meanwhile Karmindy chose a woman named Lifa to replace Padrian Warner as Secretary of Domestic Affairs, a position second in authority only to the Emperor himself. Lifa was also Senrian, a childhood friend of Karmindy's and one of her most capable and trusted allies. Petras had met her only once, at the coronation dinner, and she had made little impression on him then; but he supposed that if she was anything like Karmindy, her apparent meekness was by design.

Karmindy chose equally close and trusted allies for two other key positions: the Imperial Spokesperson to the News Media, and the Landgrave of Riaadika. Together, these four crucial positions constituted what Karmindy called the Circle: the group of people who knew that Karmindy, not Petras, was the locus of Imperial power. It was a carefully managed system. Lamendo and Lifa handled Imperial matters of state, the Landgrave handled Riaadika's internal affairs, the Spokesperson handled the public, and all four reported to Karmindy. Petras's only remaining roles were to give prepared speeches, attend scripted ceremonies, and meet with minor dignitaries on matters of little importance.

"They'll notice," said Petras. "They'll see I never do anything important myself."

"Of course they will," said Karmindy. "And they'll guess the truth. But they won't be sure, and even if they were, how would it help them? I'll make you strong, Petras. You watch me."

"But Rikter knows for sure."

"That's right," said Karmindy, "and he'll cause some trouble, no question. But I'm

a lot better at this than he is, and my father will be in Senris to manage him. Besides, you have his lifeword."

Karmindy met with her Circle frequently, behind closed doors. Petras was not invited and rarely saw them, but Karmindy filled him in on the highlights. He learned, and that was enough for him.

They told Zethius too, of course. He was one of the few men Lamendo trusted completely.

It was just as well. Zethius had suspected anyway.

** ** *

One of Petras's first duties as Emperor was to negotiate the status of Vorne. Na Jamajna's little landgraviate lay at the center of the galaxy, the very edge of the Empire. It contained the Maelstrom – the supermassive central black hole, graveyard of four million suns – and very little else. It was enough. Darmis, eager to exploit the Maelstrom as a power source, had held Vorne as a Darmian colony in all but name for the past two hundred years; never mind that in all that time their engineers had failed over and over to extract a single watt of usable power from the singularity. No new technology was required here, merely a conventional system that had to be scaled up to work with the largest black hole in the Milky Way. It was doable; Darmis just hadn't done it.

With Monifice out of the way, Senris was disputing the old treaties and demanding the right to take over the failed Darmian engineering projects. Most Senrians, ignorant of Rikter's catastrophic failure and with the clamor of Senrian Orthodox church bells ringing fresh in their ears, did not doubt Vorne would be theirs by month's end.

The diplomats assembled in the Great Hall to await his arrival, late into a dim

gray morning on the sixth day of his reign. They made a fine parade: the Senrian ambassador, with his aides and their assistants, chatting with the easy grace of victors; the Darmians, somber and aloof, determined to salvage dignity and maybe public opinion; Na Jamajna and her little group, who had been invited to lend an air of legitimacy. They surrounded a vast oval table, in the center of a vast windowless room – all hard angles, brooding gray. And they waited.

The Senrians discussed, in casual tones, why a small state like Vorne couldn't effectively leverage a resource like the Maelstrom, the regrettable need for a state like Senris to step in, the noble burden of looking like oppressors. As the minutes passed, they grew restless, glancing at netlink time displays, asking in hushed tones what was keeping the Emperor.

After twenty minutes, a man in green and white appeared and distributed copies of a document titled 'An Imperial Proclamation Regarding the Status of the Landgraviate of Vorne.' The document explained – carefully and technically, over the course of thirty pages – that Vorne was answerable to no one but the Emperor and that its resources were its own. An eight-page appendix noted that this worked out rather well, since Vorne's own engineers were – by any objective measure – the best in the Empire.

It didn't take long for those assembled to catch the general meaning, and uproar followed. The Senrian ambassador called the document "outrageous" (which it was) and "insulting" (which it also was). The Darmian ambassador wondered aloud whether this set a precedent for the rest of the minor landgraviates. Na Jamajna, euphoric, merely wept.

A few minutes later, one of the more perceptive Darmian aides mentioned

cautiously that an Assembly voting bloc consisting of Riaadika and a united Thousand would be more than the one-third required to keep the Emperor in office, overriding Senris and Darmis combined, should anyone try to oust him.

** ** *

The blitzkrieg continued: another Proclamation, affirming the equality under law of every landgraviate in the Empire, offering Imperial help in getting rid of unwanted influence. A week later, yet another Proclamation removed the old prohibition on ‘anti-Imperial’ content in speech and media. Torture by Imperial officers was outlawed; prison reforms were launched; all official policies of persecution were annulled. Darmis did not grant all these freedoms to its own people, but hundreds of other landgraviates did. In Karmindy's words, the government was "cleaned up properly." Genuine change always lagged behind legal fixes, she said, but it was a good start.

"The Reverences," Petras told Karmindy, one day while all this was going on. "I want to get rid of the Reverences too. And the Order of the Gardenia."

He had found her – as usual – in one of the spare bedrooms in their residence, which she had converted into an office. She sat cross-legged on a stool, glancing over some report, and she glanced up as he entered.

"People can do what they want," she said, going back to her papers. "Neither was ever legally required in the first place, so there's nothing to abolish. If people still want to say the words or join the Order of their own free will, I'm not going to stop them."

"It's not that easy." His voice had an edge now. "People are scared, and rightly so. Jienne's parents entered the cult because everyone who resisted, disappeared. I almost got arrested in college, and I even *said* the Reverences."

"So what do you want me to do?" she said absently. "As people see there's no more retribution, they'll gradually drift away from the Order and the Reverences. In the meantime, it's a kind of stability, a solid point in a shifting political ecosystem – "

"Karmindy."

She turned a page. "What?"

"It's me." He grasped at his heart. "*His strength shepherds us to cool waters. His love warms us among the icy stars.* Like the Emperor's some kind of god, like they're kneeling in his temple. They're talking about *me*."

Finally now she looked up, and after a moment, nodded. "All right," she said gently. "I'll have a speech drafted. You can read it over the Net tomorrow."

She did, and he did.

** ** *

Petras sent Rikter a message asking him to release the Sag ambassador to an Imperial escort. He got no answer. The next day he sent another, hinting at what might happen when the Sag lost patience and left on its own, recalling the *Rothgar* and the Battle of Sacadoor. Rikter released the Sag. Petras was there personally, soothing it as they transported it to the secluded Riaadikan world of Dover.

Soon, he projected. *Soon*.

Its gills flushed red with impatience.

The next day, as the galaxy was still fumbling over his other edicts, Petras revealed the Sags' existence to the public, and simultaneously unveiled his treaty. It was a cold, austere thing, preaching a doctrine of total non-interaction. There was to be no mingling of the two civilizations, no great sharing of technology, no grand uniting push

toward the common good. What Petras gave them was a wall, halting the vast lumbering expansion of humanity – in one direction, at least – for the first time in twenty-seven thousand years. Also the Emperor would purchase and grant to the Sags an uninhabited system in the Outer Provinces; they disputed its ownership, he said, and for the sake of peace it was cheaply bought. In this way he satisfied both of his hasty promises.

Across the Empire, rumors rumbled. Most everyone agreed that these strange new aliens were responsible for both the strange new Emperor and the drubbing of the Darmian fleet. But nobody could agree on much besides that, and Karmindy gave them few details to chew on. She released no photos; Bernabie had called her specially with that advice. An unseen alien could be abstracted away in discussion, but the tentacled thing in that tank would be a monster forever.

<I have done it,> Petras told the ambassador, surrounded by Dover's barren volcanic rock. Starlight hung dimly on the Sag's breathing tank, which separated him from the roiling methane gas by mere centimeters. *<The treaty is agreed upon. The system is yours.>*

The Sag's mind bubbled like laughter. *<It is good!>*

<It is good. Will you stay on this world?>

<I will stay. May we never meet again.>

** ** *

On the sixty-first day of Petras's reign, an Assembly rep from one of the Thousand called for a vote to remove him from the throne. It was a hasty, poorly-organized campaign. The Senrian members of the Assembly did not even have time to organize their voting bloc properly, and only two-thirds of them voted for it, most

wondering why they were trying to oust their own landgrave's choice for Emperor. Senrian influence in the Thousand bought them a few more votes, but nothing more. The motion failed overwhelmingly and lacked a single Darmian vote.

Karmindy had orchestrated the whole thing. The loyal plaintiff's political suicide was more than compensated by Imperial coffers.

The Impo were instructed to change their colors to green and white.

** ** *

That night, Petras and Karmindy celebrated with half a bottle of wine in the bedroom they shared. They decided unanimously that it was silly for a husband and wife not to have sex.

Chapter 23

They lay together a long time afterward, naked, silent. Both of them lay on their backs, close but not quite touching. *What are you thinking now, Empress?* he wondered, but he didn't ask. Petras felt that anything he said would somehow shatter this curious enchantment that followed in the wake of their bliss.

The effect of the wine still tingled at the edge of his senses, but he was mostly sober, had not been very drunk to begin with. He was glad about that. He would not have wanted any senses dimmed for the past hour, nor to reflect on it later with memory impaired.

"I've never done that before," she said softly.

Petras looked to his right, disbelieving, studying her. Still he said nothing.

She glanced at him, then returned her gaze to the ceiling. "Don't give me that

look. Of course I've had sex before. But it was always, you know, with that mask I wear, that other woman I pretend to be. I've never done it as *me*."

"Really?"

"Not like I never wanted to." The shape of her words, distinct and natural, signaled her own sobriety. "But it was the only way. I'm human, I wanted sex like anyone else, but I could never risk taking off the mask."

"You've pretended your *entire life*?"

"Don't say it like that," she whispered, and his breath caught as he realized, stunned, that he had hurt her.

He had not really believed that was possible.

"I'm sorry."

But she spoke again in a normal voice, and the enchantment had not yet broken. "I started pretending when I was fifteen. My own idea. Dad warned me against it. But I could tell from his voice that he knew it was a good strategy, knew I could pull it off. Once I realized that, the decision was easy."

"A good strategy for what?"

The chandelier, an armada of narrow crystals, shone rich light on them both. She had drawn her legs in, knees pointing upward. "Monifce took power when I was only ten years old, and the one before him was just as bad. Both my parents spent their lives looking for ways to topple the dynasty. When I was born, they knew I could be a target, so they showed me how to survive. Before I could even walk, Mom taught me to press a silent alarm on my netlink if I saw a Darmian or Riaadikan uniform. I knew every landgrave's name and face when most kids my age struggled with long division. Lying to

people was just another subject I studied, like art or chemistry. They turned me into a weapon."

"Did you know what they were doing to you?"

She winced. At first he thought it was because of his question, but instead she rubbed that spot just above her left breast. The old ripgun wound, where they'd grafted the synthetic tissue. The pain had never quite gone away.

"Of course I knew. They told me. I just didn't know it was unusual. They taught me everything themselves; I rarely saw other children. I thought everyone who mattered was playing this game."

Abruptly she turned on her side, facing him, her breasts pushed together over her left arm. Her nipples were a lighter shade of her coffee-colored hair. "Do I seem very strange to you? Am I anything like a normal person? Anything like Jienne?"

He frowned at Jienne's name, which ripped open an uncomfortable world he had tried to put behind him. Jienne was happy with somebody else now, and she had no more part in his life. But Karmindy's question tugged at him, and reluctantly he considered it.

He did not think he had ever loved Jienne, not in the deep, give-everything way that real love was supposed to be. But he had felt, sometimes, that she *needed* him – to listen to her, hold her, comfort her. He missed being needed. He wished – unfair though it surely was – for Karmindy to need him too.

It felt like a long time since anyone had needed him.

"Nobody's normal," he said.

That seemed to be a good answer. She smiled and rested her fingers on his forearm. "It doesn't feel so strange anymore. The mask, I mean. I do it without even

thinking. I don't want you imagining it's some awful burden, when it's not." Her fingers curled and uncurled over his skin. "And it's not like I'm some kind of machine. I make mistakes. That speech you gave about the Reverences, the Order of the Gardenia, you were right about that. The Empire needed to hear it. They resented Monifice for those things, and now they won't resent you. I don't know why I didn't see that myself."

"I'm glad you think it was the right choice." The silence lengthened. He wanted to keep her talking, to peel back more of the shroud that concealed her inner life. "You never talk about your mother. What happened to her?"

The smile faded from her eyes first, then gradually from her lips. "She died."

"I don't know why I asked that. I shouldn't – "

"No, listen. She was...brittle. She wanted the same things Dad wanted, just as bad as he did. But her hardness was all on the outside. She was weak at the core. In our line of work, bad things happen, and eventually she just couldn't fake it anymore. One day while we were gone, she stuck a nirvana badge to her arm.

"The nirvana badge isn't physically addictive the way some drugs are. You don't need it biologically. You could take it off. But it's so much pleasure you can't imagine actually removing it, you can barely even think. I've read it's stronger than an orgasm, waves of it, constantly, for your whole body.

"I don't know how long she lay on the floor like that. But she shot herself with a ripgun before my dad got home. He didn't want me to see her body, but I looked. I thought I was strong enough. I was nineteen."

Again the memories tore open, forcing him down pathways he had just recently sealed off. There was his father, strength ebbing day by day as he traded his old

conviction for trivial pleasures. What was that, if not a kind of nirvana badge? And what difference if the hand that held the final gun was not his own?

Karmindy was right. The Imperial Palace was no place for weakness like that. He couldn't allow it in himself.

She rolled over on top of him, laid her head on his chest. Her hair tickled his chin; he had forgotten how much taller than her he was. He stretched out his hand on her back.

When she spoke, he felt her cheekbones moving. "I won't do that to my children, when I have them," she said. "I won't turn them into weapons. There are other ways to be strong."

He drew breath and did not exhale. The enchantment of this moment had drawn tight. "Children?"

"I really am human. Having children – isn't that what normal people do? Get married, start a family? What do you want, Petras?"

Get married, start a family. I really am human.

He knew then that he loved her. But he had spoken those words in error once before, and he was more careful now. That revelation could wait.

"Nobody's normal," he said again. "No reason our children should be either."

** ** *

The breeze ruffled Tamil Faze's carefully combed golden hair as he and Petras stepped through the low gate. They made their way over the lawn to stand at last a respectful distance from the gleaming white monument before them.

He looks nervous, thought Petras. He ought to.

"This is it," he said aloud. "Whiterock. You say you've never seen it before?"

Tamil shook his head. "Monifce didn't invite us to Riaad very often. I got a tour once, but it was just so they could say they'd given us a tour. They left out a lot of things, and it was a long time ago anyway. I'm not that familiar with the Palace."

"I know the feeling," Petras said dryly. "Zethius told me all about this one, though. I had to show you. Isn't it something?"

The monolith stood fifty meters tall and was half that wide, vaguely ovoid, but tapering from a broad base to a rounded tip. It was white marble – not marble-textured polycore but honest-to-goodness *stone*, cut raw from Riaad's crust two thousand years ago and set up here, with only a paper-thin layer of hyalinium to protect it from the elements. Hundreds of sculptors had worked it over the centuries, carving relief figures into a sort of frieze that spiraled upward and ended three-quarters of the way to the top: stern profiles and thundering parades and fleets assembled for battle. The rest was smooth rock, winking in the afternoon sun.

"Why didn't they finish it?" Tamil asked.

"They carve it a little at a time, one more piece for each Emperor's reign. It's a history book. That's why the carvings are bigger at the bottom. As time goes on, they're running out of space, so they get smaller and smaller as you go up. That last one – can you see it? – that gardenia with the soldiers standing guard all around, that's for Monifce. I wonder what they'll put up for me, when I'm done."

They circled the thing slowly, Tamil glancing up now and again. "My father doesn't know I'm here."

"I know."

"Lamendo asked me to come. He wouldn't say what for, but I...I think I can

guess."

"You've heard Rikter's speeches, I assume? Since the lifeword ceremony?"

"Yeah."

"He's riling up his citizens, trying to turn them against me. He's calling me 'Monifce the Second,' Tamil."

"I've heard the speeches."

"He couldn't even say that if I hadn't repealed the Monifce laws and given him free speech."

Tamil nodded unhappily. "I get it. I know people think I'm...naive, or something, and maybe I am, but I do understand what happened. My father tried to trap you, and you escaped, and now he's angry. Well, he's my father, but even I can tell that you're right and he's wrong. I get it, Petras."

You're right and he's wrong. Petras had not expected it to be quite that easy. After months of scheming, trying to outthink everyone from Chiyoko to Padrian Werner, he'd forgotten how straightforward Tamil could be. "If he keeps on like this, tensions could escalate. Nobody likes to talk about a Darmi-Senrian war, but that's where this path leads if we follow it too far. I don't have to tell you how many millions of lives would be lost. And that's not even the nightmare scenario. If I'm forced to get the Sagittarians involved, if things turn ugly..."

Dimmerok. The un-gathering. The xenocidal war.

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Tell me how to deal with Rikter. How do I make him see reason?"

The wind picked up. Tamil pulled his red-and-gold jacket tighter. Had Petras ever

seen him in anything besides red and gold? "My father's a very proud man, especially when it comes to Senrian matters. You'll have to frame it as a question of honor." Tamil's ready response indicated he'd thought about this already. Good. "Make him see that it would be beneath Senrian dignity to keep harping on grievances this way. Don't antagonize him, don't make it sound like he was wrong to be angry. But it would have to be very delicate, very careful. You'd have to know just what to say."

"Maybe if I..."

"No. No, forget what I just told you. There's nothing you can say. He hates you too much. He's convinced you betrayed him."

"What about Lamendo? Could Lamendo talk to him?"

Tamil was already shaking his head. "He doesn't trust Lamendo anymore. Lamendo swears he didn't tell you about their plan, but my father is very suspicious. It wouldn't work."

Petras let the silence settle in before he said what he'd been waiting to say. "Is there anyone who could talk him out of this, Tamil?"

They had nearly completed their circuit of Whiterock. Tamil glanced up at the Observatory, the massive three-kilometer-tall amber tower that dominated all of the Inner Palace, then back to the smaller monument. "You're asking me to do it."

"Will you?"

"He won't forgive me for this, you know. Yes, I do believe I can talk him away from his saber-rattling. But he'll never forget that I took your side."

"He's your father."

"And I'm his son. All the more reason he'll see it as betrayal. You're asking me to

give him up."

"Tamil..."

The thin line of Tamil's mouth, the careful inhalation, were the only signs of his pain. "I'll do it. Didn't I lecture you about duty back in the Sun Palace? Of course I'll do it. You only had to ask. I'm going to be landgrave someday, I know about these things. But you have to understand something." They stopped walking. "I can only do this once. After this, you'll have no more leverage on him, not through me. That's not a condition I invented. That's just the way things are."

"I understand."

Tamil pointed. "You say that's where your carving is going to go?"

"Yeah."

"Make it something good, Sire."

Tamil left him. In less than a week, the speeches stopped.

Chapter 24

Three years later, Karminy gave birth to a son.

The night Dreslin Fairburn was born a swarm of meteors rained silver and green over the Palace. It was not an omen. Ships in high orbit dropped them specially, artificial bodies with cores of magnesium and barium chloride, which tore like rivers through the sky. Clouds were redirected for a clear viewing. The son of the Emperor had arrived.

Petras turned from the hospital suite's balcony. Inside he saw that the doctors had gone, and there was only Karminy, seated on a couch, whispering to her child. He sat down beside her.

"Sleep," she murmured. "Your world waits for you beyond these walls. Let it wait. Hush, Dreslin. Sleep, Dreslin."

He sat beside her, stroked her hair. Love was a manifold creature. The love he bore for the mother of his son was reclusive, cautious, still unexpressed after three years of waiting and watching. His love for Dreslin was something else entirely: soft, but also hard as a dreadnought's hull, wild and deep as the Maelstrom that ravaged stars in the center of his galaxy. Petras looked down at his son and felt that something inside him was changed, that a balance had shifted, that anyone who wanted to hurt this little boy would have to get through twenty legions of warships and his own bare fists. And he looked at Karminy and smiled, because he could see she felt it too.

Dreslin grew to have black hair and blue eyes, just like his father. He learned to talk later than other children, but Petras understood silence and didn't mind. He spoke to Dreslin from the beginning.

"There are the Gardens," he would say, holding Dreslin on his shoulders. "Do you see? There are the green Gardens, and up above is the sky. You see the sky? On the night you were born, they dropped meteors in the sky for you."

And each night he would tell his son that he loved him, as his own father sometimes had.

Dreslin did eventually learn to talk, of course, and as he grew Petras loved him even more, if such a thing were possible. The Palace was a vast playground for the boy, and Zethius, who took to him at once, was his guide. Zethius taught Dreslin the name of every kind of tree in the Palace, and dozens of stories, and long words like 'sesquipedalian.' He quizzed him on all of it, too, and if Dreslin answered wrong, Zethius

would raise his chin to impossible heights and say, with mock severity: "Very disappointing, Master Fairburn, *very* disappointing." Dreslin would collapse into giggles.

Of course, Zethius alone couldn't provide for Dreslin's education. Petras and Karmindy hired tutors to instruct him in math, language, art, the sciences, history, and analytics. His tutors worked on a flexible schedule, and Dreslin might spend anywhere from one to six hours a day with them. Petras reviewed his progress every day and helped him with any area where he struggled. Dreslin was good at all his subjects except formal speaking, and Petras had done enough of that – albeit mostly in front of a netlink camera – to help. Petras wanted to augment his son's history classes with the lessons he'd learned from Chiyoko, but he didn't think Dreslin was quite old enough yet to keep those secrets secret.

Soon. Soon he could reveal to his son the full breadth and color of his world. Soon he would have the privilege of watching Dreslin select a life for himself.

Lamendo visited the Palace often to see his grandson, and Petras had never known such warmth was possible from the old man. Over seventy now, Lamendo still lifted six-year-old Dreslin up on his bony shoulders easy as anything, and sang old Senrian songs about faithless lovers and ships that never returned to port. Lamendo was civil to Petras, and no more, but that was nothing new.

One thing Petras noticed in particular. He had always had a hard time connecting to others, whether making friends, building relationships, or just talking; he felt that he lacked something. But that limitation, whatever it was, didn't stop him from bonding with Dreslin. The boy followed him around, watching in silence mostly, giggling when Petras picked him up or asked what he was doing. He was an easy child, rarely cried or

complained, listened more than he talked.

Meanwhile Karmindy, true to her word, carefully avoided the kind of conditioning her own parents had given her. She did, however, make sure that Dreslin understood the state of the Empire – and his own place in it – from a very early age. Petras remembered one night specially.

Dreslin lay in bed, warm under copious blankets, Karmindy and Petras sitting on his bedside to wish him good night. Karmindy smiled. "Did you hear what happened today?"

Dreslin shook his head silently – never speaking if he could help it.

"Monifice died today. Do you know who Monifice was?"

He nodded.

"Who was he?"

"He was the old Emperor. Before Daddy."

"That's right," Karmindy said. "But he was very bad, and we put him away on a planet where he couldn't cause any trouble. Then today he did try to cause some trouble, gathered a lot of his friends, tried to start a rebellion. But it didn't work."

Young as he was, Dreslin knew the word 'rebellion.' His eyes widened. "Why didn't it work?" he asked.

"Mommy stopped him. Mommy killed him." She kissed his cheek. "Mommy keeps you safe, right?"

"It was Hierodula that helped him escape," said Petras. "Isn't that a strange name?" Hierodula was the so-called Veiled Blade of Darmis – an underground criminal organization, radically anti-Senris, with ties in the Darmian government that ran very

high – though supposedly not as high as Asemeian. Hierodula's assassins had caused many Senrian leaders to die suddenly of odd ailments.

Karmindy shot him a look, brows furrowed in annoyance. "There's no evidence of that."

"I read it in the *Journal Review*."

"Then that's what you get for listening to the *Review*," she said primly, and leaned away to give Dreslin a hug.

For all the time he spent reading and researching, Petras still didn't really understand half of what Karmindy did, the analysis that fueled her decisions. That failure was hard – harder than he'd expected.

But he had learned how to be a father, and that was even better.

** ** *

One day when Dreslin was seven years old, he and Petras were walking through the Gardens. They turned a corner, and there was Chiyoko: young as ever, sitting on a low stone bench, grinning at them. "This must be the little one!" she cried, and somehow pulled a gardenia from one of her sleeves. "Dreslin? You like magic?"

Dreslin nodded.

"Well, there's a lot more magic where that came from. Do you know who I am? I'm the Star-Witch."

Dreslin nodded again. "Alias."

She blinked. "What?"

"Star-Witch is an alias. Isn't that the right word?" Petras nodded encouragingly.

"Your real name is..." Dreslin screwed up his face. "Chee-oh-ko. You're a free agent. Not

aligned with any of the major landgrave-yits."

Chiyoko's eyebrows went up, and she looked at Petras with genuine open-mouthed surprise. "You teach him that?"

"Some of it. He's a quicker study than his old man." He knelt for a second.

"Dreslin, why don't you go play in the Puzzle Terrace for a while."

The boy trotted away.

Chiyoko tossed aside the gardenia. "Have to watch out for that one."

"And I do," said Petras, watching Dreslin round the corner. "Tamil Faze has a son now too, you know. We're all getting old and respectable."

At the word 'old,' Chiyoko laughed. "Tell me, Petras, do *you* like magic?"

"Bit late to say no, isn't it?"

"A bit," she said. "You look so much older every time we meet. How do you feel these days? Is this emperor stuff as bad as you thought it would be? Can't be too terrible if you haven't sent me a message with your magic pen yet."

"No, not too terrible."

"I suppose it's easier, with Karminy doing the real work." She saw his expression and laughed. "Relax. I won't tell anyone. Our little secret. But you and her, you've really shaken things up, huh? Free speech, no more torturing political prisoners. At least not officially – there might be a few more stragglers than you expect, yet. But thank God you got rid of those Reverences. 'Praise to the Emperor. He is wise...' That was hardwired to my gag reflex."

"So you can imagine how I felt."

She nodded. "I hear you've been having some more trouble with Hierodula."

"Some. They've taken to raiding targets in the Thousand where the local government is resisting Darmian influence. But Asemeian says he's doing his best to stop it, and Karminy believes him. We're in talks with him now."

"Anyone killed?"

"Not yet."

"Hope it stays that way. Vorne's almost finished building a generator that actually pulls power from the Maelstrom. I bet that'll piss off the Darmians."

Petras said nothing.

"Well," she continued, "I'll get to the point. I need a favor."

"From me?" He chuckled. Somewhere a robin chirped in agreement. "I'm just the Emperor. What can I possibly do for you that you can't do for yourself?"

"There's a sleeper in Sagittarian space."

"A sleeper!" Sleepers were people who set off into space at near light speed, often cryogenically preserved, riding the relativistic effects far into the future. Essentially, they time-traveled into the future by moving very fast, but it was a one-way trip. There was no way to time-travel backward again. "How far into Sag space is it?"

"Twenty light-years."

"A sleeper, beyond our borders. But that's impossible, unless..." He frowned. "Just how old are we talking here?"

"Old. Very. Based on its velocity and location, I think we're looking at a vessel launched before the destruction of Irth."

"You really think so? Nobody's ever found one that old before."

"I know. Took off in a straight line and never looked back. Must have – it's the

only way anything could be that far out."

"How did you find it?"

"There are ways."

Chiyoko and her *ways*. "And now you want me to make the Sagittarians hand it over to you."

She smiled impishly. "Yes please."

"Listen, I don't know what kind of power you think I have with them, but they don't follow my orders. I don't even think they like me – if they like anyone. If I do decide to help you, it won't be easy."

"Nobody said it would be, but you can do it. They've given us favors in exchange for territory before. They could be persuaded to do it again."

"I see." Far beyond her, the Observatory reached like a great arm over the horizon, glinting brilliantly in the rising sun. He shielded his eyes. "And what do I get in return?"

"For helping me?"

"Yes."

"You get to talk to someone who remembers Irth like it was yesterday. How's that?"

"This question with Irth is your fascination, not mine. I'm curious, yes. That's part of the payment. But it's not enough."

"Isn't it."

"Don't say it like that. Everything you've ever given me has had a price."

"What do you want, Petras?"

"What do I want?" He saw her as if for the first time, her small frowning mouth, girlish black eyes. "What do you think I want, Chiyoko? I want to know who you are. Where you came from. How you can do these...miracles. Why you never age. All the questions I asked you back on Winnoka, that you never answered, while I was waiting for *something good*."

Chiyoko returned his stare. He did not feel as confident as he was trying to sound, and maybe she knew it. But it didn't matter. For the very first time, she needed him, and he deserved an answer.

"You're different now, all right," she said. "But if you insist. We'll do this whenever you're ready."

** ** *

He talked it over with Karmindy, who cared little for sleepers but was curious to learn more about Chiyoko. She praised him for demanding that condition. He loved hearing praise from her, and hated himself a little for wanting it so much.

He flew to Dover the next morning.

<Contact is undesirable,> the ambassador projected. <Silence is preferable. Solitude is preferable. There is no use in territory if outsiders are forever intruding. Already I have had to destroy three ships that flew too close with passengers who are not you. This is undesirable. Solitude is preferable.>

<Of course,> Petras replied, and his insides twisted with fear. The Sagittarians had destroyed more human vessels? Bernabie's warnings echoed again in his head, and he felt the Empire slipping closer to Dimmerok. <I will strengthen the guard around your planet to keep away the others. But Ambassador, I have another deal that can grant you

more territory.>

The ambassador was not pleased, but in the end the plan worked, and the Sagittarians sold him the sleeper in exchange for five uninhabited solar systems on the border, near an area of space called the Thistledown region. The extra systems were announced to the public as having been part of the original deal all along, which due to miscommunication with the Sags was only now coming to light. The public was skeptical, but the story never developed, and their attention wandered soon enough. Petras got what he was after.

The Sags gave up the sleeper that very evening, and that very evening he prepared to jump directly from Dover – alone – to the sleeper drop-off point. The spot lay deep in a barren, uninhabited region of a large but sparsely populated minor landgraviate.

"There's no Gate there," he told Chiyoko over his netlink.

"Actually," she said, "there is."

He made the jump.

** **

What filled his viewscreen now was something he would see only once in his life.

Afterward he was never able to describe it, though he kept trying. Some days he would say it looked like a crystalline tree, uprooted, floating in space; other times it was a sphere, glass perhaps, infinitely cracked; still other times he called it a fractal, or a frozen supernova. A pale glow emanated from its center, tingeing the outer regions white, or maybe rainbow-colored; it seemed to shift. Looking at it, he said, one had somehow the sensation of music, though there was no such sound. But he would never call the thing beautiful, because that did not fit either. "More than anything else," he would say later, "it

looked like an angel."

There was one other thing, too – a feeling, as if sensing some sort of presence, localized somewhere behind his left shoulder. He looked, but saw nothing.

Chiyoko's voice came over his speakers. "This is a one-time only chance, Petras. If you come back to these coordinates again later, you'll find nothing here. Understand?"

"I understand," he said, oddly hurt by this restriction.

"Permission to dock?"

A minute later she appeared beside him, and they gazed silently at the spectacle together. "This is odd," she said finally. "As many times as I've looked at it, I've never had anyone else with me before. It's...unpleasant." She leaned forward on the railing and turned her eyes down. "Well. You wanted to know who I am, didn't you? There, that's your answer."

Petras waited. After a while she continued.

"I was born on Irth, in a city called Tokyo. You remember it, right? I told you about Tokyo."

"Sure. The cherry blossoms."

"The cherry blossoms. That's right. I grew up with an uncle, never knew my parents. Didn't really know the uncle. On the weekends he would give me a little money and disappear, then come back again next Monday or Tuesday like nothing had happened. He didn't care about anything. I didn't care about anything. By the time I was twenty, I hated myself. I would wake up late and spend all day hating myself, and go to bed late, and not fall asleep for hours. It sounds silly to say, but it's true. There were months like that. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

Slowly, Petras nodded. "I have an idea."

"One day I saw an advertisement for a new technology that would freeze you, launch you into space at near-light speed. You wake up a thousand years later, and there's a whole new universe out there, everyone you know is dead, you're still alive. Sleeper technology, though it wasn't called that yet. I didn't even find out why they were doing it – history, science, something like that. It sounded good to me. I wanted to kill myself, you see, but I didn't want to die.

"There weren't a lot of applicants, and I was selected. My uncle was glad to be rid of me. They launched me that very year. Eight years later, while I slept, Irth was destroyed."

"Were you the first sleeper?"

"Yeah. I was the first." She returned her gaze to the viewscreen. "I drifted for five hundred years, and then *this* found me, woke me up. We were in deep space, light-years from the nearest planet. It doesn't have the sort of name you can say, so I called it Rin. It was the name I gave my imaginary friend, growing up."

"It's a good name," he said, and again looked back behind his left shoulder for the presence that wasn't there.

"You're the only one who knows it.

"So I was the first human being Rin had ever known, and it liked me. After all, I had no parents and no friends and no homeworld, and nobody I knew was still alive, and no other human lived within a trillion kilometers of me. So I was very lonely, and it was also very lonely, and we were very happy to find each other. It could talk to me, you see, and I found I could talk back, and I discovered just how powerful Rin was. I did not

know then whether the creature itself possessed the powers, or if it was using some kind of technology. I no longer feel there is a meaningful difference. What matters is the agreement we made.

"The agreement was this. Rin would grant me as much of its power as it could give. In return, I would talk to it, listen to it, keep it company, and – if necessary – protect it as best I could. I accepted the terms gratefully.

"Since then Rin has been a father to me, a mother, a friend – everything, that is, but human." She tilted her head as she stared at it. "It sleeps most of the time these days. It is sleeping now. For something so powerful, it is almost..." She reached her hand toward it, then stopped and sighed.

Again Petras glanced behind his left shoulder, nagged by an unidentifiable presence. "Is it the only one of its kind?"

"There are millions, but none here. Its home, its family, are in the Andromeda Galaxy, two million light-years away. I am sure I don't have to tell you what direction that is."

Once more he looked behind his shoulder in astonishment. "That's what that feeling is? I'm picking that up from Rin? But how did it leave, how did it get here?"

"An accident. Long, long ago – testing an experimental jump technology. It ended up here instead, with no way back."

"So what's going to happen? Will it ever get home?"

"Eventually."

"How?"

"The Andromeda Galaxy," she explained, "is approaching our own at a rate of

120 kilometers per second."

For a moment, he was silent. He had no good answer for this, could not really process what she was saying. "How long?"

"Two and a half billion years," she said, without much emotion. "It is over a billion years old already. It will wait."

"Can't it start flying home? It would be slow, but still a lot quicker than waiting."

"The Wide Dark is not empty, Petras. There are...things, between the galaxies." Her cheeks wrinkled in revulsion. "I've told you quite a bit. Now tell me something. What else have you learned about the Sagittarians?"

"Not a lot. I don't have much contact with them. The ambassador likes to be alone."

"Not a lot?" She stared at him. "That's it? Really? You're their sole point of contact for the human race, and what you've found out is: not a lot?"

"Every time I communicate, it's a risk," he said, hearing anger enter his voice. "You had me read about Dimmerok, remember? You know what we're dealing with."

"Do I?" she snapped. "You never told me about the ghost."

Silence.

He did not bother to ask how she'd found out.

"What does it do?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"You can't really expect me to believe that."

"Yet I'm supposed to trust *you*?"

"I came to you," she whispered, "when you were quivering in your bed, and I

plucked you out of Padrian Werner's claws. I answered your call on Winnoka, when they would have hunted you down like an animal, and I set you free." She was shouting now. "I came to you when you were twelve years old, and an Imperial officer had you by the *throat* – "

"For a price. Everything had its price, didn't it? Everything had its rules, its conditions, its condescending morals. Do you care about me, Chiyoko? I'm asking. I want to know. Do you consider yourself my friend?"

She looked away, scowled.

"For free, then," she said. "No rules. No conditions. I'll take you onto the sleeper ship and show you what I found."

"The Sags sent it already? You've been aboard?"

She nodded. "Sleeper's dead. For a few thousand years, at least. Freeze tank malfunction. But there's something else. And maybe after you see it, you'll rethink your idea of *risk* as it applies to the Sagittarians."

** ** *

He first noticed the air, dry and thick as a tomb, air which had not felt the wind of motion in two hundred years (or twenty-seven thousand, depending on your point of view). The corridors were smooth, polished metal, slightly dulled; the doorways, tall narrow hexagons, hissed as he passed through. All surreal, all taken from a past so remote as to be meaningless – just like that pebble from the Imperial Museum with the human face. And yet, like the pebble, here it was.

The man in the freeze tank was Petras's own age, face serene as stardust, immaculately preserved. Blank eyelids, round nose, soft pleasant cheeks – the innocence

of myth. He had a name: Howard S. Rochester. According to a brass placard over the tank's head, the 'S' stood for 'Samuel.' The name of a grandfather, perhaps, or an uncle. Or a prophet.

At Chiyoko's touch the screen came to life, the sensor log, a dusty drifting field of stars. Seconds later a ship rushed in, identical to the Sag ambassador's ship. Now the camera panned over Irth's pale curved horizon, which he knew from countless photos. Closer. Closer. And then –

Here the screen flashed brilliant white, faded back to the image of a darkened ball, gray and brown and black, cracked by endless jagged lines of fire. Gradually, the planet began to break apart; and as the Sagittarian watched, glowing chunks of rock the size of continents drifted away from the vast sphere of rubble.

The mystery of Irth's destruction was solved.

Chapter 25

As Petras's shuttle descended through the wispy, late-afternoon sky of Riaad, he did not even double-check the autopilot when it homed in on his personal landing pad, nestled deep in the Imperial Spires – scarcely noticed the polite *ding* which meant the landing was complete. He could think of nothing but the sleeper ship, and what he had seen there.

The whole sensor log had lasted no more than thirty seconds, and it looped endlessly in his mind even now as he boarded the empty elevator. So many questions. Why had they done it? How had they come to Irth so early, undetected? Why had the ambassador given no sign he knew about this? Did he? And – above all – what now?

He had to tell Karminy. She would know what to do.

Zethius stopped him with a short bow as he approached the door to his quarters.

"Sire."

"Zethius. Where's Karminy?"

"The Empress is in your son's quarters, Sire."

"Thanks." He opened the door.

"Sire..." Zethius ran fingers over his receding hair. *He's nervous*, Petras realized.

I've never seen him nervous. "There has been an accident."

"An accident?"

"You must be careful. Don't disturb him, don't turn it off – if it is turned off too suddenly, it will be such a shock that – "

"Zethius, what are you talking about?"

"Your son – "

Petras went around him, dashed up the stairs to Dreslin's room, even as Zethius called out more warnings from behind. Inside Karminy was sobbing, shuddering, her face a mask of agony, making sounds that were not speech. In the far corner, surrounded by doctors, was his son.

He pushed past them. The seven-year-old boy lay face up, arms twitching, legs and toes stretched out, as if compelled by invisible strings. His eyes were closed, brows drawing tight and releasing; he moaned softly, orgasmically, through unsteady lips. A line of spittle ran down his cheek.

Attached to his bare forearm like a bronze leech was the nirvana badge.

"Stay back," one of the doctors warned. "Don't get too near the object or it will

affect you too. Don't touch the controls. We're letting him down slow."

"Dreslin," said Petras. "Dreslin!" He seemed not to hear. "What's going to happen? Will he be all right?"

"Once the field is gone we'll give him something to calm him down, and take him to the Cliffwood Center, where they specialize in cases like this. He'll get the treatment he needs."

"Will he be all right?" he said again.

"It will take time, Sire. They'll do the best they can."

"What does that – "

"Daddy," said Dreslin.

"I'm here," Petras said at once. "It's okay, son..."

"It's going away." The boy had stopped twitching and was curled up now, knees at his chin; his fingers shook. His voice turned petulant as the waves of pleasure from the nirvana badge subsided. "It's going away. Bring it back!"

Petras let out a ragged breath.

"Bring it back!" Dreslin shouted. "Bring it back! Bring it back! Bring it back! Bring it back!"

"*Dreslin!*" his mother screamed wildly, rushing forward, and for minutes afterward she would say nothing but his name.

** **

Dreslin slept still under a white linen blanket, which rose and fell over his steady breaths. Petras watched him through the glass and held tight to Karindy. The screaming was done; they had gone quiet, all three of them. Somewhere, an air vent hummed dully.

"Zethius," he said.

"Yes, Sire."

"How did this happen?"

** ** *

But no one knew.

The facts were few and simple. Early that afternoon, Karminy had left Dreslin in the care of his math tutor. When that lesson ended, another man arrived, claiming to be the substitute history tutor, as Dreslin's usual tutor was sick. The guards hadn't recognized him, but that in itself was not suspicious, and his security clearance had checked out. They'd let him in. The man had then killed the math tutor, placed the nirvana badge on Dreslin, and killed himself. There were no bodies, but air sample analysis showed that he'd used a highly sophisticated weapon called a trace wiper that vaporized his body, leaving no remains even of DNA. Soon after, the real history tutor was found to have been killed with the same weapon. Hierodula used trace wipers, but other groups did too.

All the guards involved and all their commanders offered Petras their resignations. Karminy wanted him to accept in her first early moments of rage, but retracted an hour later. They had done nothing wrong, she said. The question was how someone had hacked into the most secure database in existence and obtained one of the highest-level access codes in the Palace, a code that had to be authorized by Petras himself. No analysis had yet revealed an answer. The man who had posed as a tutor had surely been working for someone else. But who?

The first days afterward were bad. Dreslin would not leave his bed, would not eat,

cried most of the time, begged them to bring back the nirvana badge. After a week, the doctors let him be moved to a room in the Imperial residence, though he was still surrounded by machinery, a doctor with him at all times. From the beginning, Petras and Karmindy never left his side. Petras read to him, asked him questions that got no answers, hugged him often. Karmindy was ferocious; she launched a personal war on his affliction, researched it voraciously, harassed Dreslin's physicians at all hours. She seized his hand and urged him in harsh whispers to be strong, to *fight*. Once, when he began to cry, she yelled at him. She was quiet for hours afterward.

They took out the feeding tubes at the end of the second week.

One night only, Karmindy came to Petras and asked him to hold her, to comfort her. As he stroked her hair, he bitterly recalled his earlier fantasy about being needed. And there was a part of him that liked it anyway, and he hated himself for that.

Zethius joined their vigil as often as his duties allowed, stroking his immense mustache as he told Dreslin grandiose lies about the events of his day – the thousands of barbarian invaders he had personally fought off, taking care to dispatch them all in the foyer lest their boots leave scuff marks on the kitchen floor. Then he would ask Dreslin about his own day, and when Dreslin was silent, Zethius would pat his shoulder and whisper something kind.

Lamendo, too, visited often. He didn't seem to know quite what to say, but he sat with them for hours, and smiled with grandfatherly warmth whenever Dreslin looked his way.

After a month, the doctors and the machines left, and Dreslin began to walk around their rooms some during the day. Petras and Karmindy celebrated, but it was for

his sake, not theirs. They knew he was different now. His attention span was shorter; he had no more patience for their questions; he cried often, and slept into the afternoon. Petras felt helpless. He could no longer make his son smile. He could no longer talk merely to talk. Whenever he saw Dreslin now, there was always the nirvana badge. He said "I love you" often, but Dreslin never answered.

There was a hole in Dreslin now. The drugs helped; his doctor said that without them, he might still be refusing solid food.

From now on there would always be drugs.

Yet there were signs of hope. Petras discovered a pen-and-paper game called eightsquare that held his son's attention for ten minutes at a time, then twenty, then half an hour. They began to walk outside again. And one day, as they made a circuit of Barrowfell, holding up their thumbs to see if they were bigger than the Star-Tower, Dreslin spoke up unprompted.

"I'm doing what Mom said," he told Petras.

"What's that?"

"I'm fighting it. Like she told me. I really am, I promise."

That night, Petras made his wife cry by repeating the story.

There were distractions, of course, though not the sort Petras would have liked. He told Karminy of his recent revelation, that the Sagittarians had destroyed Irth. She took it in quietly.

"You're sure this is legitimate?" she said when he finished. "Chiyoko or the Sags didn't manufacture the video somehow?"

"It's possible, but I don't think so. Doesn't seem like the Sags' style, and

Chiyoko...well, I can't say for sure. But I don't think so."

"Hm."

"We can't tell anyone," he said. "People distrust the Sags already. If they knew..."

"I agree."

Her silence irritated him. "So what do we do?" he pressed.

She didn't answer, and gradually Petras realized that she simply didn't know. In the end, they decided there was nothing they could do yet. Confronting the Sags over it could have no good outcome. And they dared tell no one else. Not their Secretary of Domestic Affairs, Lifa. Not even Lamendo. The barest hint of something like this, if it spread, would lead to war, and Petras knew that the name of that war was Dimmerok.

But when Karmindy asked what he'd learned about Chiyoko, he refused to tell. "It was a secret," he said, "given privately. She trusted me. It wouldn't be right."

Karmindy didn't force the issue, but she seemed upset. Or perhaps that was just the strain. It was hard to tell anymore.

Talks with the Darmians continued; the Imperial presence in the Thousand increased. But as raids from the Darmian terrorist group, Hierodula, began to turn violent, Senris demanded stronger measures against the Darmian government, and Karmindy's political skill was pushed to its limits. Tensions were high. Each morning Petras woke up expecting to read headlines of open defiance from Rikter.

Two months after the nirvana badge, database record analysis finally revealed how the code had been granted. Years ago – during Monifice's reign – someone with an Imperial Mandate had used that power to set up a back door in the security system, apparently without Monifice's knowledge. But the back door had a password, meaning

that even if someone else found it, they wouldn't be able to get in. Only the creator of the exploit knew how to use it.

At the time it was set up, only one person had held an Imperial Mandate.

Padrian Werner.

** ** *

The next day Petras flew, alone, to the nearby Riaadikan planet where they held Werner prisoner. A nervous-looking guard led him fourteen levels down and across the hall, where a door opened on a little gray room. Padrian Werner sat on a low chair, wrists clasped by manacles that attached to the table, which in turn was bonded to the floor.

"Petras Fairburn," said Werner, grinning his hateful grin. His short black hair, once so neatly trimmed, had turned ragged. Stubble lined his hard jaw. But nothing had changed in the terrible intensity of those green, predatory eyes.

"Padrian. I'm cutting you off. No more visitors, no more contact with the outside world."

"So much for your prison reforms. Civil liberties, they're damned inconvenient, aren't they? Easy to love when you're a rebel, ah, but power changes everything."

"You lost that right when you used it to attack my son."

Werner chuckled. "Just now figured that out? Slower than I expected. So, what's it going to be? Here you are, big bad Emperor, descended from heaven in your righteous anger. You going to have your guards come in here and beat me up? No – you'll do it yourself, of course, to show what a man you are. And then execution, I expect. Well, you're a busy man, let's waste no time."

Tempting. Petras held the man's lifeword, could destroy him right now with a

breath. But he and Karmindy had decided against it.

Execution and torture were both counterproductive; Karmindy had calmed down enough that she could see that. Werner had become a sort of folk hero within Hierodula for his brutal tactics and hard-line pro-Darmian stance. Another Hierodulan martyr was the last thing the Empire needed. Especially when they didn't have a crime to execute him for. They'd kept the nirvana badge incident a secret, for Dreslin's sake.

Even so, Petras had thought Karmindy would fly to see Werner the moment she learned the truth, to put her own personal brand of terror into him. But Karmindy had called Werner a worm, not worth yelling or looking at, an unhuman whose risk she preferred to manage from her palace.

Petras was less philosophical. He needed this. Not so he could scream, or hurt, or exact a price. But he needed it all the same.

"I only have one question, Padrian. I want to know why you did it."

"He was so sweet, your son. Like a picture. If I could only have seen his face! It must have been *rapturous* – "

"Was it revenge?"

"Revenge? Don't be silly. Revenge is a child's game."

Softly: "Was there no reason at all?"

"Ah, you'd like that! You would like that! How convenient that would be for you. Senseless violence. No reason, nothing to understand, just a sad old lunatic with no connections to your conscience. Yes, you'd like that very much. It's a simple answer, and oh, you're so very hungry for simplicity."

"What, then?"

Werner's smile tore deeper across his face.

"Guess."

Petras scowled. "I'm not going to guess."

"Of course you are. Just one guess." His eyes widened with pleasure. "You're considering it, aren't you? You're thinking about making a guess. Because I ordered you to. Because I possess something you need, something you will never be allowed to have: certainty. Isn't it remarkable that after all this time, after all we've been through together, I still have power over you?"

Petras stared down at him a while, then shook his head. Karmindy was right; Padrian Werner was a worm, and not worth his time.

He left the little room and shut the door behind him.

Chapter 26

Petras had once read a story about a king whose kingdom's prosperity depended on his mood. Peace on the days he was happy, ruin and starvation when he fell into a temper. Petras was gratified to learn that his own empire followed no such law.

For despite his pessimism, which turned darker with each new crisis – Werner, the nirvana badge, tensions with Darmis, tensions with Chiyoko, the Sags as Irth-killers – despite all this, as years passed, things in the Empire slowly got better.

Petras came to a sort of agreement with Asemeian: Hierodula was kept on a short leash, the raids died down, and Darmis was free to manage its own affairs without interference from the Impo. The minor landgraviates were grateful, and even the Senrians found less to complain about. It was a surprising and wary peace, which no one expected

to last; but it was pleasant while it did.

Karmindy's new freedoms, too, had their effect. An end to Monifice's brutal crackdowns meant less reason for people to rebel in the first place, and less money from Imperial coffers to fund the Impo. Practical considerations aside, it was gratifying just to watch the old ice of repression gradually thaw. People went to church. They talked. They *debated*. Gradually, as faith in their liberties grew, they became less afraid. If humanity had any chance of breaking the Plateau, this was surely a good start.

A slow process, to be sure. After more than a decade, Karmindy was still rooting out pockets of corruption in the Impo and the Navy alike, still putting down insurrections from those groups that read openness as weakness, still asking Petras to publicly defend the steps toward liberty she had not yet taken. Darmis, meanwhile, had done nothing to thaw the oppression of its own regime, which Nasir Asemeian called a matter of security. Especially important, he said, with Hierodula such a concern. Karmindy knew better, but forcing the issue now would be disastrous.

A slow process. But things *were* getting better – even in Darmis. Asemeian had launched a vast new project to renovate Darmian infrastructure, repairing old Gates, patching up ailing mechanospheres. The project seemed plagued by inefficiency and mismanagement, but Karmindy said any civil development was progress. Rikter tried to portray this Gate repair as Darmian aggression, but even he seemed to realize the absurdity of his claim, and his propaganda in that area was halfhearted.

In the seventeenth year of Petras's reign, when he was forty-three and Dreslin was fourteen, galactic population reached the sextillion mark according to Census statistics – a one followed by twenty-one zeroes. Billion, trillion, quadrillion, quintillion, sextillion.

This seemed like a fine excuse to celebrate, and the festivities captured the cautious optimism that so many felt those days, Petras not least. One journalist dubbed this optimism the *Zeitgeist* – the Spirit of the Age. Petras himself traveled to the planet Niune, birthplace of the symbolically chosen Sextillionth Child, born just forty-eight hours earlier. He delivered a speech, written by one of Karmindy's assistants, to an audience of precisely one million – each person in the stadium representing a quadrillion in the Empire. It was not a very profound speech; he talked vaguely of history, of a promising future, of humanity's potential.

But when he finished, Dreslin got up and shouted, with voice amplified to carry over the ocean of faces: "Happy Sextillion to all the peoples of the Empire!" It was the first time he had spoken to a crowd. He had asked for the chance specifically – "It's something I should learn how to do," he'd said – and Petras was proud of him. A million pairs of hands clapped for their Emperor, his son, and his wife. Petras felt good.

That night, after Dreslin went to sleep, Karmindy sat with him in their rooms on Niune. She had congratulated him on his speech, then withdrawn to her computer screen, drafting some position statement by the look of it. In spite of her kind words, she seemed distant tonight, and that ought to have warned him away from his plan; but his spirits were too high to change course now, and he had planned this too long. He had to go forward.

"Karmindy."

"Mm."

He got up, pulled a chair over, and sat right beside her. She looked away from her screen cautiously, but did not speak.

"Karmindy, there's something I need to tell you."

He took her hands, and he saw they were not quite a young woman's hands anymore – a just-visible slackness to the skin, a roughness around the knuckles. He saw these, not as defects, but as signs he had already waited too long. She tensed, silent, anticipating something unforeseen. His own heart butterflied nervously.

"We've lived together almost two decades. We've raised a son together. I don't know how we went this long without saying it, but I want to say it now." No response. He swallowed. "I love you, Karmindy."

Her eyes were down. She pulled her hands away. Silence. She took a small breath. "It seems likely you do believe that," she said, just audibly, "but you are in error. Here is what will happen now. You and I will end this conversation, and we will not return to it. If you continue the conversation, I am going to become angry."

A cold, physical wave of despair washed him, settling in his stomach, even as he started getting angry himself. He, too, was quiet, and the stillness surrounded them, waiting. "You don't have to feel the same," he said, "but I deserve a better answer than that."

"You love me?" Her fingers opened like careful tulips. "You. Love. Me. What does that mean to you, Petras? What is it you think we're doing, here? Imperial husband and wife, running the galaxy together, raising a son on the side? Partners. Equals. That's the kind of love you mean, right? The kind where we treat each other like equals, tell each other our stories, get through the day together? Is that what you think we are? Equals?"

He got louder. "You're being insulting. Of course I don't have your political skill –

"

"Don't have my – " She broke down to laughter. "No, Petras, no, you don't have my *political skill*. This thing I accepted in place of my childhood, this thing I built up fourteen hours a day since I was old enough to know that if I ever wavered, if I ever didn't push just as hard as I possibly could, someone else's blood would pay for it – this thing, Petras, no, you do not also have it, it did not also fall to your waiting hands.

"I orchestrated the most perfect coup in history, I kept the Empire out of a war that should have shredded it fifteen years ago, and what?" Her voice grew steadily louder; her eyes turned wide and white with restrained fury. "What do I get for it, Emperor? Tell me." The words sounded rehearsed. Where was this anger coming from?

"That was *your* choice. You knew there wouldn't be – "

"I never expected a medal. I never expected a reward – not honor, not a place in history, none of that. Ten to the twenty-first people think I'm your cute, airheaded housewife, and not one even cares enough to hate me. And I can live with that. It is so much – *so much* less than I deserve, but I planned it that way, and I can live with it. That's not it. There's only one thing I ever needed, and that's respect – just the tiniest bit of respect – "

"But you just said yourself, no one even knows – "

"From you, from *you*, Petras, goddammit, from *you*!"

He stumbled.

"Of course I respect you – "

"Bullshit!"

"Yes – "

"I can't even make myself watch you anymore. You *swagger*. Reading that idiot speech – you were *preening*! I mean, goddammit, Petras, did you really think you were the fucking *Emperor*? Do you think you're *anybody*?"

"I've been trying to learn! You've been teaching me."

"Yes, I know, your *lessons*. They're a joke, Petras. I hate them. I hate explaining each tiny thing to you a thousand times, watching your stupid expression as somewhere inside your skull two neurons *struggle* to connect. Hell, Dreslin's fourteen years old and he gets it quicker than you! I hate that you think you're making progress, I hate that I have to pretend I agree, and more than anything – more than *anything* – I hate seeing you wear that crown as if you'd done the least microscopic thing to deserve it, as if you had even a *shred* of legitimacy. I gave up my father's *name* for you. *My* name, Petras! Seventeen years of that, and not once a word of respect, of honor, for the kind of sacrifice – "

"You want to be Empress-Regnant? Then do it! Take the fucking crown if you're so much better than me! Yes, I act like an emperor now, because after endless deliberation I've decided I don't want to spend every waking moment feeling like *shit*. But as you may recall, this whole scheme wasn't exactly my idea! So take the damn crown, Karmindy!"

"I can't!" she spat. "Do you know how many hours I've spent trying to figure out a way to do just that? But because of me you have a reputation as a *wise ruler*" – she laughed cruelly – "and the Assembly of Worlds would never approve an idiot like me to replace you. And people are afraid of your connection to the Sags. It would never work. Believe me, if I could get rid of you, I would!"

"If you're so much better than me, if you're such a fucking magician, then *how the hell did they get to Dreslin?*"

The argument snapped and lay still, broken. He had said what he'd promised himself he would never say.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

She left the room.

After a tense day apart, they met up again at the palace. In quiet, courteous tones, they agreed it was best if they separated for a time.

** ** *

There was no question, of course, that Karminy had to stay at the Palace. So Petras toured his empire.

He traveled mainly among the Thousand, visiting celebrated but politically neutral sites like the Obelisk of Souls at Aberdale, and Grayglimmer Wall in Omid Nikulu's capital. A goodwill tour of his domain. Zethius had planned his itinerary: a week or more at each stop. He was in no rush.

The days were given over to a parade of wonders, but the nights were all the same: the argument cycled in his mind, demanding and resisting analysis. Events were hard to process. She had been his source for clarity, for making sense of the world, and now she was gone.

She had been cruel and unfair, he knew that much. And he *did* respect her. But had he also been cruel and unfair? Had he taken her monumental efforts for granted? And if so, did that even matter, since this whole thing had been her idea?

It mattered now. Now that he'd said I Love You.

And he still loved her, of course – had in fact never stopped loving her since that moment seventeen years ago when she revealed that she wanted a family, that she was human after all. But what now? His three words to Karminy, like his single word to the Sagittarian, could not be unsaid. They were etched on his history.

What would happen when he returned? What kind of life waited for him, now?

Dreslin split his time between them: first two weeks at the Palace, then two weeks with his father, alternating after that. His first day with Dreslin, Petras explained what had happened in a calm, reasonable tone, reassuring him that they both still loved him. Dreslin – with an authority Petras envied – said he understood. He did not say much else. He asked only one question.

"How long do you think it will be like this?"

Petras could not even remember what smiling, inadequate answer he'd given.

It was months later, during his tour of old Bergschrim, his home landgraviate, that he heard the news of Dr. Yindel Bernabie's death. Natural causes. Eight-eight years old. Private funeral. For some reason he felt ashamed on hearing the news. *Look at you*, a part of him said. *A good man is buried, and there you sit, not even speaking to your wife. These days won't last forever.*

But with an odd symmetry, someone new entered his life even as Bernabie left. It was a week afterward that he first met Talya Nevadt, though he took no special notice of her right away.

She was merely a new face among his personal attendants, dark-haired, smiling, only seventeen years old. Talya was not like the other servants, who bore their gardenia uniforms sternly, as noble burdens; she laughed, and spoke to Petras and Dreslin alike

with an almost improper familiarity. She took to Dreslin especially, sitting with him at meals, singing him songs or balancing silverware on her nose. As they traveled, Dreslin began searching the local shops for exotic trinkets to give her. Petras worried a little, seeing his son get interested in a serving girl three years his senior, but the transformation that overtook Dreslin was so remarkable he did not dare interfere.

Before long Dreslin and Talya were going out on excursions of their own, and the pretext of a master-and-servant relationship grew thinner every day. Consequently Petras saw less of his son; but he was so cautious to preserve this fragile new growth, he hardly even mentioned it. When he did, the questions – and answers – were short and neutral. Yes, the two of them were friends. Yes, they'd gone to see the Saddleback Caves last night, accompanied by guards. Sure, he'd had a good time. As for Talya herself, Petras barely spoke with her at all; but he was careful to be polite.

As the weeks became months, however, their relationship seemed increasingly odd to him. The expected romance failed to blossom; the careless signs of intimacy, the small ways new couples find to touch each other's fingers, or hair, in public – these did not appear. But he couldn't believe his son's claim that it was all platonic. They seemed too close for that, in their conversations, in the long evenings they spent together. He began to imagine that Talya, older and more practiced, was toying with his son, leading him on either for amusement, or some hope of reward, or merely from malice. This thought grew in his head, and grew, till finally it superseded the joy he saw in Dreslin, and he decided to get to the bottom of it.

He sent for her, and she appeared in the doorframe of his private study, frowning. She looked so young and hesitant, blue eyes wide as she drew a finger through her dark

hair, that he wondered if he'd made a mistake.

"Something is going on that I don't understand," he said, "and you are at the center of it. I think you'd better explain yourself."

"I'm your daughter," she said.

Yet he was hardly even surprised, though he had not suspected before. And looking at her now, he saw a resemblance to Jienne, in the fragile cheekbones, the determined eyes; and in the set of her lips he saw himself. He did not ask her for proof; that could come later, a formality. He knew.

"Yes, you are," he said. He rose from his desk and approached her hesitantly, then – abandoning caution – reached out and hugged her. Bernabie was dead. He would hug his daughter.

She clutched him in return, and when he let her go, she exhaled her relief with eyes shut tight.

"Tell me everything," he said, and she did.

She was Jienne's girl, of course, conceived on that final night together in the rain. Jienne had outgrown her compulsion to stay in the house by the time of Talya's youngest memories. Jienne's husband was a kind man who Talya was never taught to call Father. And from the very beginning, Jienne told her the truth.

But as Talya grew, her mother's story became ever harder to accept. So when she was sixteen, she began to investigate.

Months of supplication finally won her an audience with Zethius, who tested her against a copy of the Imperial DNA and confirmed her mother's story. She begged Zethius not to reveal her at once, and after much pleading, convinced him. Zethius got

her a job as a personal attendant, and soon after, she began talking to Dreslin.

"I suppose he knew as well," said Petras.

"Yeah."

"Talya, the Palace has a well-established procedure for testing kinship with the Emperor. You do a quick test, fill out the right papers – if you're a match, they'll contact me. A billion tourists do it every month. Why didn't you come see me?"

"Why do you think? I was scared."

"Of me?"

"Of everything! What did I know about the Empris Persona? Who knew what you really thought about my mother? Who knew I wouldn't be an embarrassment, and quietly disposed of? Don't look so shocked, I thought of that too. Or maybe the opposite, maybe you'd try to buy me with titles, or money. But I wanted to know. I had to see what kind of person you were...before I let you see me."

"And what kind of person am I?"

She gave half a shrug and half a smile. "You're my father."

It was a beautiful answer, a surprising light on someplace inside him he hadn't realized was dim. He smiled back.

"How is she?"

"She's good. Really good. She's happy."

"What did she tell you about me?"

"She said you didn't want to leave her – that all the bad things that happened were never your fault."

"Did she ever say anything about wanting to see me again?"

"No." Talya looked away. "But not because...I mean, I don't think..."

"You don't have to explain. I understand."

And he did; he really did. But the words were still difficult to hear.

Three days later he ended his vacation and they all returned to the Palace.

Karminy was civil to them both, but nothing more. When he went to bed that night, he found she had moved her things to another suite months ago.

Chapter 27

Karminy received him coolly in her new office, in another suite of rooms Zethius had found for her in the Spires. He did not bring up their argument. He merely said that he was done traveling, and that if she could make further use of him as a figurehead, she was welcome to do so. She said there was something he could do.

A few months ago, the Church of the Infinite God – headquartered in Vorne – had declared that its long-prophesied messiah had arrived at last, and his name was Anton Scheller. Anton had come to Riaad to see the center of secular authority, and was in the Palace at this very moment. Karminy supposed that if Petras merely went and talked to him as a goodwill gesture, without saying anything of substance, there would be little harm in that.

Petras thanked her and left her to work.

** **

The setting sun laid long, angular shadows by the bases of pillars at the entrance to the Second Galactic Pantheon. The radiant white of the entry steps had dimmed to gray, and the structure's colossal dome now seemed like a sagging giant, settling down

for the night. Off to the west, somber Whiterock crouched beside the soaring, needle-thin blackness of the Observatory.

Inside the Pantheon's dome, knots of stragglers – the devoted and the curious – drifted back toward open air. Petras nodded to them, gave small greetings. It was good to talk to people, to be conscious of the moment. It was good to be back.

In the center of the great circle knelt a man who could only be Anton Scheller. He was an imposing sight: over two meters tall, arms like sledgehammers, spine and shoulders held straight even in prayer. Petras had been Emperor too long to fear physical strength anymore, but just then he was glad of his guards.

"Mr. Scheller?"

"A moment of patience, Your Majesty." It was a strong voice, used to being obeyed.

Half a minute passed. Scheller rose and surveyed the heights of the architecture. The last of the sun fell between pillars and landed gently on his short chestnut hair, already silvered. Silvered, but not with age – he could not have been more than thirty.

"I am done, Your Majesty."

"I hope I wasn't intruding."

"No harm." Scheller looked down at Petras for the first time and gave one of those pleasantly neutral smiles Petras knew so well. But something was different. This was not the long-suffering smile of a man resigned to a life of politeness.

This was the smile of a man who knew he wouldn't have to fake his smiles much longer.

"I'm surprised to find you in the Pantheon," said Petras. He gestured, indicating

the dozens of wide rings that circled the ceiling, each host to countless images of gods upon gods and demons upon demons, no two alike. "This is one of the old temples. I had thought the Church of the Infinite God was monotheistic. Though I admit the results of my research were not always...clear."

"God is one," Scheller murmured, "God is all. There is no place we can walk that is not holy ground, no sound we can utter that is not a name of God. There is only one Infinity..." He reached a hand forward, grasping, and dropped it. "I am rambling. I am a poor teacher, Majesty, and lack the patience for acolytes."

"I was never much of a student anyway."

"Not a student?" He began to walk away. "In all my life I have had only students and enemies."

"Stop."

"I have other duties, Majesty."

"Mr. Scheller, I command you to stop."

No answer.

"Guards."

It was a plain word, spoken without force. It was enough. From all directions came the hard clicks of boots over stone and the softer clicks of ripguns preparing to fire. Over a dozen men appeared in Scheller's path, some uniformed officers, others who till now had looked like disinterested civilians. More guards took positions at the exits and around Petras himself; and Petras knew there were yet others, hidden and watching. The whole process took perhaps five seconds from start to finish.

Anton stopped.

"I have tried to be polite," said Petras. "I hope that didn't somehow suggest my commands are optional."

Scheller lowered his head but did not turn. "What is your will, Majesty?"

"Tell me why you're here."

"I am here because God has called me here."

"Don't avoid the question."

"Your Majesty, I avoid nothing. What would you have from me? It is the only answer I know."

"What did God call you here to do?"

"I don't know."

"That's not good enough, Mr. Scheller."

"It must be, Majesty. It is all I have."

"Do you understand that your comment about students and enemies sounded like a threat?"

Anton turned, a ponderous motion.

"Majesty, I did not mean it so. I am the Messiah of the Infinite God. I meant the word 'enemies' merely in a spiritual sense; I think of them that way only because they distract from my purpose."

"Which is?"

"To save them."

Petras frowned. After a moment's hesitation he waved his guards away.

** **

With her mother's blessing, Talya had moved into her own rooms in the Spires,

and Petras happily gave her a tour of the Palace. Dreslin came along.

Petras was an excellent guide; and as he explained the history and trivia each monument had accumulated, making her laugh from time to time with jokes mostly stolen from Zethius, he realized to his own surprise that he was trying to impress her. He was trying to forge a bond he'd never known was absent.

He watched her, capturing each detail, transforming her bit by bit from an abstraction – *I have a daughter now* – to a breathing, human girl. She gave a little bounce on her heels when she was excited about something. She bit her lips (lower and then upper) as she mulled over new information. Where had she gotten those habits, which belonged to neither him nor Jienne? Everything was new. Everything was sacred. He had to make up for a lifetime apart.

Even more striking was her effect on Dreslin. He talked and laughed with her as he rarely had with his father. Dreslin loved her, and she loved him, that much was clear.

But I love him too. Why doesn't he do that for me?

He tried to push the thought away but could not quite banish it.

Talya and Dreslin spent hours together each day. Petras often joined them, though he could not be as talkative, as fun, as they were. But they suffered him with good grace. Mostly he just listened to what they said.

One day, Talya said this: "You should go talk to Karminy."

They were riding in the back of an unmarked car, crossing the Xon Bridge as the autopilot took them east, toward a city in the Outer Palace where Talya wanted to shop for a Reithan chime bracelet. Petras glanced at her, then back out the window.

"About what?" Cautiously.

"You know what. Look, I mean, I don't know everything about this. But I think she's being unfair. Just because she runs the show doesn't mean – "

His eyes snapped back to her. "What did you say?"

Dreslin's mouth opened. He looked from Talya to Petras nervously. "I'm sorry, Dad. I told her about Mom. I know it's a secret, but she's my sister, I thought it would be okay..."

Talya's hand cut the air like a knife. "I won't tell anybody. Promise."

Petras frowned. "That's right. You can't tell anybody. Not even your mother, understand? If anybody knew, she could become a target. There are people who would like very much..."

"I promise," she said again. "Really. Not even Mom. But listen, you have to talk to Karmindy. That's what I was trying to say before. She's being unfair, but..." Talya leaned forward and laid a hand on his knee. "She needs you. If you think this is hard for you, try to imagine what she's going through. I don't even think I can. It's too much for one person to suffer alone."

Petras was shaking his head. "She doesn't need me."

"She *does*," Dreslin burst in. Petras stared at him in astonishment. "She told me, while you were traveling! Dad, she said she doesn't feel human when you're not around. You know what I mean? She always has to pretend. She always has to act like she's stupid. That's why she needs you. And Zethius is worried. He said that if the Emperor and Empress don't talk to each other, what chance does anybody else have? He told me not to say anything, but I just thought..." Dreslin trailed off, seemingly awed at his own boldness.

Talya was nodding. "Dreslin's smart."

Dreslin nodded too. "Mom's waiting for *you*, Dad."

"Karminy's not shy, son. If she wanted to talk, she would just..."

But Dreslin shook his head emphatically. "No, Dad. She's waiting for *you*."

** ** *

By the end of their day together, Petras had decided his children were right. And, once decided, he acted immediately. He could not bear to wait.

At ten o'clock that night, he found Karminy in the office of her new suite, studying the latest forecasts on the Darmian infrastructure project. The computer threw hard light on her features, highlighting her annoyance at the interruption.

He pressed on anyway. He told her everything, laying out his case as he had organized it in his head.

He said he understood why she had yelled at him, why she was frustrated; but it was untrue that he didn't appreciate her. Only, he probably hadn't demonstrated that very well, and he would do better. He said he would probably never understand just how difficult her position was, but he would try anyway. She ought to understand, though, that the situation had never been easy for him either, and that unlike her, he had neither planned nor trained for it. And both of them had to think about Dreslin, and how the unpleasantness must be hurting him, though he never spoke of it.

What he wanted, he said, was to make things right again. He wanted her to move back in.

She had listened quietly through all his explanation. She no longer looked annoyed, or pleased, or anything at all. When he finished, her voice was as soft as it had

been during their fight. "I'll move back in."

He nodded, relieved. "I'm really glad, Karmindy." And then, because that seemed to be the end of it, he began to walk out.

"Petras."

He turned. She had cradled her face in her hands.

She was quiet a long, long time. He didn't rush her.

"What about..." she began at last. "What about the first thing you said? Back when all this started. The first thing."

He swallowed. She shouldn't be making him say this. Not anymore. But he would say it anyway.

"I think I'll always love you," he answered. "I can't switch it off, and I wouldn't if I could. But I won't bring it up again. It doesn't have to be any concern of yours."

She was quiet a long, long time.

She stood up and walked to him.

She knelt, actually knelt, on the carpet before his feet. She set his hands on her face, covered her eyes with them, and he felt her silent tears.

"It wouldn't be fair," she whispered. "I wouldn't be the woman you want. I wouldn't say the right things or take care of you or be *nice* to you. It's just going to be me, and I'll be grouchy and condescending and manipulative, and you'll keep waiting for me to change, and it'll never happen. So there's nothing in it for you. You understand?"

When he understood what she was saying, he laughed as his own tears spilled over his chin. He wiped them with his shoulder because she still had his hands. He got down on his knees with her.

"I've loved you," he said, "ever since we decided to have Dreslin."

"Oh," she sobbed. "I'm sorry, Petras, I'm so sorry. I've loved you ever since the *Malta*, when you waited for me. Nobody's ever waited for me, Petras!"

** ** *

The last nightingales were singing their farewell songs and the Palace lay shaded in green as Petras descended the staircase. He noticed none of it.

"Talya!" he called, opening the door to her rooms. His voice carried the fragile hope of an untested revelation. Her advice had worked – he had to tell her how she'd made things right. And then Dreslin, of course. But where, where was Talya?

He found the note on his second pass through the foyer, deposited limply on the floor.

Father,

I am leaving. I won't say where, because I don't wish to be followed. I wanted to say this in person, but if I'd tried, I would be here still.

You've been so kind to me, and I wish I could be as kind in return. My reasons are difficult. I'm not angry or upset. I feel calmer and clearer than I have in years. All I can say is that I can't stay here any longer. Mom's house wasn't the right place for me, and I realize now the Palace isn't either.

I go in search of a place that is right for me.

Mom doesn't know any of this. Please tell her. Write her a message if you don't want to see her in person.

Most of all, I worry about Dreslin. I wrote a note for him, too, and hopefully he'll

understand. I wish I could stay with him. I wish there was a way to make everyone happy.

Goodbye, Father. I hope and expect I will see you again.

Love,

Your daughter,

Talya Nevadt

But she had crossed out Nevadt, and next to it written Fairburn.

Petras lowered himself and sat cross-legged on the floor, like a child. He read the note again.

PART IV: HORIZON

Chapter 28

Raindrops fell like quiet emissaries from heaven over the crowd that had gathered in the Imperial Gardens: the wide-brimmed hats perching on ladies' heads, the fine aristocratic suits, the mock-solemn children who did not quite understand. The suits, the hats, all were black – like the mood. Before them stood the great black casket, raised up on thin legs like a monstrous beetle. It was half open; inside lay Lamendo, skin smooth gray, expression pleasantly neutral. The mammoth spike of the Observatory rose to the sky behind the casket, seeming to impale him.

Petras glanced to his right. Karminy stood perfectly erect in her plain black dress, chin raised. No tears. She had shed them all last night as he had tried to comfort her, his assurances sounding banal to his own ears. Petras thought how old she looked

just then, hair stark white though she was only fifty-one.

But then, neither of them were young anymore. That felt unfair; it was wrong somehow, to be young, and subsequently not to be young. How had it happened? What crime had they committed, to be punished this way? But it was impossible to explain such thoughts to others. He had tried. People smiled, even, and said it was good to die – it was better this way. Better!

They were dark thoughts, and he knew it, but they didn't spring from the funeral alone. It was two years now since Talya had left, no word from her at all. He thought of her daily, and daily saw the folded-up note she had left, which he seldom made himself read anymore. Gone now were the unhelpful questions: *why did she leave* and *could I have made her stay*. In their place was a void.

Dreslin stood to his left – seventeen, cool-eyed, graceful and quiet, his hair like wavy shadow. All hints of the nirvana badge were gone; against all hope, he took no more drugs. He was studying to design starships, already pondering designs for a new class of frigate that could take less time between jumps. His engineering tutors spoke highly of him.

He was a man now, building his own place in the galaxy.

And the galaxy was changing.

Nasir Asemeian had finally retired as Landgrave of Darmis a year ago. His successor, Nasir Croulin, had been chosen as a compromise between the elder landgrave's conciliatory policies and the hard-line anti-Senris factions. He was young, a passionate orator who preached Darmian unity and Darmian honor. *We stand fearless*, he said, and his people had begun to talk with interest about what, precisely, they were not afraid of.

Hierodula raids in the past ten months had tripled.

Tamil Faze had spoken to Petras about these developments earlier today, before the music started, keeping his voice low as if talk of death could disturb the dead. He said Rikter was angry, of course, but holding steady for now. Rikter was not seriously considering military options. Not yet.

Tamil had looked older, too, with his red-and-gold marriage gem, his son Loril now sixteen and watching Petras with steady eyes.

Something else had changed, too. The Sag's "ghost," the little black disc he'd received so long ago on Sacadoor, no longer made his ears thump when he touched it. He could not imagine what this omen meant, but he felt instinctively that some bond with the ambassador had been broken. Such a tiny thing, which he had noticed only by chance. But he did not understand it, and it troubled him more than a dozen Hierodulas.

He wished he could talk to Chiyoko, if only for a few minutes. Surely she could answer some of these questions. But she hadn't contacted him since that day with Rin and the sleeper ship, a decade past. He did not yet dare use the magic pen she'd given him. It only worked once, she'd said, and she was very particular about her bargains.

Petras shivered in the rain.

Lamendo had died suddenly. The disease was an odd one, which Petras had not heard of till now – an infection of some kind that killed in a few days. Lamendo had been unconscious for most of it and suffered little. Father and daughter had exchanged no final words; she had rushed to him and found him asleep, and he never woke up. A callous, unsatisfying end, but merciful in its way.

There were the usual suspicions, centering as they often did on the possibility of a

lifeword. Sudden deaths always attracted talk of a lifeword, said Karminy, but it made her angry anyway. At least the speculation was muted this time, there being no obvious advantage to such a murder – for the Emperor, anyway.

"I wish they'd cover him up," she whispered.

He didn't answer.

"How much longer do we have to stand here? This is voyeurism. This crowd...I hate this crowd."

"Almost done," he murmured back. "A few more minutes."

"Petras."

"What?"

"It hurts." Pain stretched the words tight, made them quiver.

"The ripgun wound again?"

She nodded. "The rain does it."

"Dreslin, ask Zethius to get your mother's medicine." Dreslin turned and whispered to Zethius, who stood nearby.

"It won't help," Karminy said. Her whispers had grown louder, and people were glancing at them curiously. "Nothing helps. It's getting worse."

Getting worse. It seemed like everything was.

My daughter, my precious daughter, where, where is my daughter Talya?

** **

Talya had a seat in the front row, as always.

She would rather have sat in the back. The view from the back was best, and the cathedrals of the Church of the Infinite God were so beautiful. Last week the service had

been in the sprawling and monumental Ex Centris Lux, the Church's mother basilica. They'd given her a tour beforehand, pointed out the ancient, pre-Riaadikan North Wing – the three Stone Towers, built with rock from every inhabited world in Vorne – the monumental Chamber of One, where the flapping of a pigeon-wing in the center could be heard even at the outer rim, half a kilometer distant. All features lined up admirably with the tour guide and the pamphlet, and she had experienced awe.

Today's service was light-years away, in the much smaller – and much older – Empty Bowl Cathedral. No more than five hundred people were packed into the wide amber pews, enclosed by frowning walls and crowned by a circular skylight of real, sand-melted glass that cast church and churchgoers alike in a cloudy gray.

Anton sat to her left, his fingers idly stroking the small leather pouch that hung from the cord around his neck. His followers had speculated rabidly about the contents of that tiny pouch, but they would have been disappointed to learn the answer. It was no relic or medallion – only a little black disc that made your ears thump when you touched it. She had no idea what it was or why he kept it.

In the front of the church, as always, was an elevated stage; on the stage, as always, stood a well-dressed man who spoke to the assembly in passionate tones.

"Sometimes," said the man, "we forget who we are, don't we?"

He paused. In the space between his words, Talya heard the collected silences of five hundred people – the small sighs, the rustling of fabric, the throats surreptitiously cleared. "We are the Church of the Infinite God. Yes. But what does that mean? You say, well, there's this God, you see, and he's infinite, and we are his church." Muted laughter. "But they aren't just words, are they? When we say that God is infinite, we mean that he

is everywhere, that he is everyone, that he is everything. That there is no place we can go that is not his holy ground. That there is no word we can speak which is not among his names. That every blade of grass, every stone, the face of every person we meet, is an avatar of his perfection. That every crying child and creaking hinge sings out, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Word of our God.'

"Hard to imagine, isn't it?"

The skylight grew dim with the spattering of raindrops, and the rustling of the church quieted under their accumulated sound.

"Yes," he said, "we've forgotten a lot. But perhaps now, at last, we are starting to remember.

"Because we know what happened, don't we?"

"God sent his only son, his prime avatar, to the cradle of our Motherworld. To teach us. To guide us. To unite us under his love. After a thousand generations of selfish violence, God gave us this chance, this image of himself. This peaceful emissary.

"But we lost that chance."

She glanced at Scheller; he was hunched over, staring at some fixed point in space, grappling in thought with unseen foes. She could never tell, at such times, whether he was ignoring the speaker, or the only one really listening.

"We murdered his emissary – without provocation, without reason, out of sheer humanity. We murdered him. And in just punishment – more than just – God loosed Armageddon, shattering the Motherworld.

"That was a lesson, wasn't it?" Silent nods through the congregation. "Before that day, God's children were pleased that his avatar had died. Grateful for that murder. A

point in their favor, they believed. A few churches out there still believe it. But not us.

"Armageddon was a lesson."

More heads nodded. They knew this story, had worn it soft with repetition. Talya could recite it from memory now.

"After Motherworld's death, you see, we expected the Kingdom of Heaven. But here we are, twenty-seven thousand after the End of Days. No Paradise. Not yet. So we know something is missing, something remains to be done. Now perhaps you don't think so. Perhaps you say, God's given up, He doesn't care about us anymore.

"But I ask you this: when we murdered God's avatar, why did He wait three millennia to destroy the Motherworld? Why did he wait until ten years after we built our first Gate, took our first steps out into the universe? I'll tell you why. He waited to give us a chance. He waited so we might yet achieve salvation.

"*Achieve* salvation. That's the key, isn't it? We can't accept salvation as a gift. We've proven that once already. Somehow, we must earn it. Somehow, we must find our way back into God's arms on our own.

"I don't know how to do that. Neither do you. For thirty thousand years, no one has known the answer to that riddle. For thirty thousand years, we've been trying to figure it out.

"Today, my children, there is someone who knows."

The assembly grew still with anticipation. The thick, insistent rain was the only sound.

"My children, I present to you now...the Awaited."

As always, a flood of applause. The people rose to their feet, cheering

rapturously, straining for a glimpse of their messiah. Talya rose and clapped also, so as not to seem rude. This was the part that disturbed her. The scriptures, the theology, the hoary rituals – all those she could follow, even if she didn't believe. But this fanatical devotion, this crowd-hysteria that turned individuals to atoms, was something else completely. Emergent behavior, Anton called it – the monster behind the mind. She smiled, and shuddered.

But something was different this time. Anton did not rise, did not break from his private thought, assume his stage persona, begin his oration. He merely sat, staring as before at something invisible, eyes narrowed in concentration or pain, lips drawn, muscles locked, intent with all his being on what he alone could see. Shouts of joy and awe washed over him unheeded. "Anton," said Talya. "Anton – it's time – "

A colossal roar split the air; chunks of plaster and glass fell from the ceiling, smoke filled her vision, the adoring shouts turned to screams of terror and agony. The floor shook. People surged toward the exits, some bleeding or clutching their eyes. "Anton!" she screamed, and knelt beside him where he had fallen unconscious to the floor, his chestnut hair stained white with dust. "*Anton!*"

Something splashed on the back of her neck, and she looked up in surprise. Through the shattered frame of the skylight, rain was pouring in.

Chapter 29

It was Na Jamajna's olive-skinned face on the viewscreen now, her delicate features tight with fury. Petras had not expected the Landgrave of Vorne to be happy. He was correct.

"Twenty-four dead," she said. "Nearly two hundred injured. Sacred artifacts destroyed. One of our oldest churches wrecked. Anton Scheller is in a coma, he is not expected to live. *He is not expected to live.* You admit that Darmis is responsible. And you sit in the luxury of your apartments, commander of endless armies, holder of Nasir Croulin's lifeword, master of the galaxy, and tell me *nothing can be done?*"

Karmindy scowled but said nothing. Petras, seated beside her in their little conference room in the Spires, went ahead with the lines they'd prepared. He kept his expression pleasantly neutral. "Ms. Jamajna, please understand you have my deepest sympathy, and I am taking all appropriate measures to apprehend those responsible and ensure the safety of Vorne's citizens. As you know, the attacks were carried out, not by the Darmian military, but by the Darmian terrorist group Hierodula. As such, no direct punishment of the Darmian government is appropriate."

Somehow, her lips drew even tighter. "I suppose, if a man kills with his right hand, you would say also, 'We cannot punish this man, because it is only his right hand that has killed, and not him.'"

"Again: as you know, Ms. Jamajna, there is no conclusive evidence that Nasir Croulin directs Hierodula's actions, however – "

"That is a lie. The evidence – "

" – *however*, as an incentive to keep Hierodula under better control in the future, I will shortly announce strict new tariffs on Darmis which will remain in place until these attacks diminish. And of course I will continue to aid Darmian forces in their own efforts to bring these terrorists to justice. Beyond that, there is little I can do presently."

"How can you say such things," she demanded, "and claim to care for your

people? Is Darmis not a part of your empire, that you cannot send ships to root out these attackers? Is Vorne not a part of your empire, that you cannot defend it? You call yourself Emperor, yet you do nothing. You are no different than Monifice."

"And you," growled Karmindy, "have been spending too much time near that Maelstrom of yours. It's sucked out your neurons. Do you think you're the only one with a church, or a hero? Twenty-four deaths! What are twenty-four deaths in an empire of a billion trillion people? Your *messiah* would not even dare show his face without – my husband."

Petras released his breath slowly. She had almost said, 'without me.'

"Why your *serving girl* was invited to this meeting, I cannot understand," Na Jamajna bristled. "I see that we are done with discussion. You will not help me. Perhaps I will find someone who can."

The viewscreen went black.

"Karmindy..." he began, and stopped.

"Karmindy what? 'Karmindy, Karmindy,' it's all you say. That woman is blind to everything but her messiah. She is a waste of my time. We need to be preparing for – "

"Listen to me," he said gently. "How many times have you warned me never to lose control? Take a break, if you need it. After what you've been through, anyone would have trouble. Don't push too hard. Please."

Her eyebrows lifted in surprise, and lowered in petulant anger. "My father is dead," she said. "People die, and it's sad. It happens. But it's going to happen a lot more if I start taking *breaks*. Do you understand me?"

"Now pay attention. Two things.

"First, I'm going to upgrade a large segment of the Navy to instant alert status. They'll be ready to jump anywhere at a moment's notice. Not cheap to maintain, but I think that's prudent for now. Probably for the foreseeable future.

"Second. If Scheller survives, this whole thing will blow over for the present. If not, Vorne may turn to Senris for help. I don't have to tell you what will happen if Vorne becomes a battleground for Darmis and Senris. We should encourage Senris to keep investing in Vorne, keep building up its relationships there, but they *cannot* send in forces or weapons. If they try, we'll teach them otherwise.

"The key is convincing Rikter that Darmis isn't an immediate threat. We'll tell him the truth – Senris is bigger, it has a stronger military, and, for the past twenty years, its influence among the Thousand has only increased. Senris has nothing to fear, no need to be aggressive. Besides, the Thousand are sticking together more and more these days, and Darmis only hurts itself by failing to stop these attacks. That's what we'll say. Have you got it all? Do we need to go over it again?"

"I've got it."

"Okay. We only have an hour. Why don't we practice your lines a little more? You did well with Jamajna, let's not mess it up now."

Petras frowned. "We only have an hour till what?"

Again that incredulous, furious stare, those big white eyes like unlaidd eggs, that preceded her outbursts. "What's *wrong* with you, Petras? Are you stupid, or do you just not care? Rikter Faze, we're meeting with Rikter Faze in an hour! The most powerful landgrave in the galaxy? What do you think we've been *talking* about?"

"All right – all right. I knew we were meeting him, I just forgot what time. It's

been a long day." He was forgetting more, lately. Ideas not written down were soon gone; appointments had to be carefully recorded, schedules diligently checked. And he could feel it, even, this forgetfulness – like a physical object in the back of his skull, a slime attached to his brain – deadening his thoughts. He could not be rid of it – he could not –

"The problem," Karmindy was saying, "is you don't pay attention, you don't *think*. You want to run an empire, but you can't even check your own calendar. It's hard enough handling Darmis on my own, but on top of that I have to be a babysitter for – "

"Hey!" he snapped. This was not like her; she had not shown this kind of bile since before Talya left. "I'm doing my best – you know that. And I understand how hard this is for you..."

"Your best – your *best* – "

Abruptly she screamed and convulsed in her chair, clutching the left side of her chest. The old ripgun wound again. He ran for her medicine, and she took it with quivering fingers. For a long moment there was no sound but her ragged, whistling breath.

She relaxed.

"Those are getting worse," he said softly. "I'll get Zethius to call a doctor. You need to be looked at."

"I've already been looked at." She sighed. "I suppose you should know."

He frowned, waited. She said nothing. "Know what?"

"Years ago, when I had that operation at the Sun Palace, they fused synthetic tissue with my flesh. The tissue is failing."

He leaned forward slowly, trying to make sense of what she was saying. "Failing

how?"

"It was defective. It's disintegrating, it's poisoning me. I'm dying, Petras."

He stared in shock. "Well – can't they replace it?"

"Back then, they could have. Not anymore. Not after it's spent twenty years merging with the surrounding tissue. It's right next to my heart."

"But can't they – "

"No, Petras, they can't. They can't."

Dying.

He sat beside her, covered her shoulders with one arm, as she shut her eyes and drew heavy, careful breaths.

Chapter 30

How did I get here? thought Talya. *How did I reach this moment in my life?*

Not the first time she'd wondered that. But here, seated by Anton Scheller's hospital bed, the question seemed to take on a deadly importance. She had chosen this new direction – had left the Palace for Vorne – had been safe, and now was afraid.

Why?

Scattered rays passed through the thin white curtains behind her, warming her hands where they lay folded on her lap. She knew why she was here, of course. She was here because of this man, who now lay dying under a linen sheet.

Talya had first heard of him from Petras (she could not think of him as her father yet, despite what she'd written in her note). She'd been intrigued by his description of a slow but purposeful man, a man who believed he'd taken all mankind on his shoulders.

Though Talya would never have said so, that was exactly how she'd imagined Petras would be: strong, resolute, the answer to a lifetime of questions she couldn't even put into words. Instead, Petras was...

Petras was like Talya's mother. Kind. Loving. Strong, in a way. But still not capable of giving her what she most needed: a purpose.

Looking at Anton, the stark creases in his marble face, the powerful lungs that even now moved his chest like an engine, she understood. He had a purpose.

She'd overheard the whispers, of course: that Anton had kidnapped her, or was sleeping with her, or countless other improper things. None of it was true. She'd contacted him first, in fact, on that day two years ago – talked to him by viewscreen, so as not to draw the Imperial Guards' attention. Hardly even knowing why, she'd contacted him unannounced, apologizing, laughing nervously, asking a dozen questions about him and his faith that all amounted to the same thing: *You seem to know this road you're on. What are you chasing, messiah?*

He answered in that odd manner of his, polite but formal, almost cold. Though she thrilled to talk with him, she felt somehow chastened by the end of it, and resolved not to bother him again. She was so surprised when he called her back later to ask if she had more questions. A month of conversation followed, and when he finally said he was leaving Riaad, it took her only a day to decide she was going with him.

And so, for reasons she still didn't quite understand, Anton had dragged her around like a knapsack, from sermon to sermon, over the past two years. He showed little affection to her, or anyone else. They seldom spoke, and when they did, it was about schedules and hotel reservations.

Yet for all his reticence, she caught rare glimpses of another side to him. He would tell her after a sermon sometimes, "Today, I got it right – I said what I meant to say," or, "That time, I came close." On these days he would pull off his jacket and toss it over his shoulder, a single motion, and hum discreetly. It was always the same tune, but it didn't sound like a hymn, and once she asked what it was. He said it was a silly children's song called "The Butterfly's Eyes."

"Sing it for me," she asked, and he did.

The butterfly's eyes, well the butterfly's eyes

They give him the power to see, you see

And the butterfly's wings, well the butterfly's wings

They give him the power to fly, his sky

If the butterfly lost his butterfly wings,

Oh, the terrible things they'd say, that day –

But as long as he has those butterfly eyes

Then a butterfly he will be, will be!

And once – just once – he had taken her hand, looked down at it, and said, "Talya, you have been very good to me. I will not forget it."

Was that all – was that her price? For a song and a whisper, she was his?

Yet she had gotten less from others.

His bishops didn't trust her, bone-dry frowning men that they were. Why should they? But they checked on him twice a day, mouthing white-lipped prayers over his vast

body, and whispering beyond the door. These were the businessmen of the Church, its strategists and accountants, men of religion who had little time for God.

What would they do with her if Anton died?

So many things to worry about. She worried about Dreslin, too: what he was doing, whether he was all right. Leaving him had been worst of all. Sometimes she tried to imagine what kind of man he would be if not for the nirvana badge. But whenever she thought about that, hatred filled her like a stormcloud – hatred for Padrian Werner, for that terrible, terrible man who Petras still kept alive in a prison somewhere, for reasons she could not fathom. And then she had to stop and think about something else, to keep her teeth from grinding.

Talya sighed.

She laid her fingers across the tree-knotted thickness of Anton's arm, tracing out the blue rivers of his veins. He was waiting for something, this man – poised, even under his coma, in a way Petras had never been. She could see the electricity in him, stored up over decades of little motions, nearly ready now, for discharge, into – into what?

His breaths –

His breaths were accelerating.

She jolted up, leaned close to him – no, there was no doubt. The slow, almost imperceptible rise and fall of his chest was growing clearer, higher – now as if restless in sleep – now as if waking –

Just like that, his lips parted and drew three long breaths, and he said, "How long?"

Startled, she released his arm. "You're awake."

"How long has it been?"

"It's been almost two weeks. Anton, how do you feel? Be careful..."

His eyes opened, then fluttered closed, and stayed that way as he spoke. "I feel fine. Don't call the doctors."

Talya sat down. "Can I get you something? Are you thirsty? Hungry? Hold on, I'll get you something."

"Was it Hierodula?"

"That's what everyone says."

"Are we alone?"

"Yes. Though the door isn't locked."

"Lock it."

She rose and set the latch, then found her seat again.

"I have been dreaming," he said. His voice suggested she ought to listen, so she did.

"I dreamed of a planet, a circle of writhing yellow gas, swimming in stars. The Sagittarian Motherworld.

"Millions lived there. Each had its own mind, could think its own thoughts, but all minds were linked and all thoughts were shared. Differing ideas were smoothed out. Averaged. On all questions, a consensus was reached. Agreement spread like a disease. Minority opinions were shouted down by the Consensus. Rarely, new fashions of thought emerged, and then they would spread and consume the planet, each creature now agreeing on the new idea."

It was eerie, how he spoke without opening his eyes, without moving. As if the

coma still had him.

"Critical thinking died, and all knowledge was subject to the whims of Consensus. Matters of philosophy and conscience were eradicated; science was uninteresting. Thinking grew lazy. History became wish fulfillment. They were a glorious empire; they had always been glorious; they were a jewel unmatched in the universe.

"Happy. Self-satisfied. Stagnant.

"And then something happened.

"Somehow, by a mystery I cannot yet explain, eight of them escaped to eight new worlds. Each had a new chance, alone, free of the web.

"Four of the eight were lazy, squandering their new freedoms in their private kingdoms. Three more worked to better themselves, building tools from the metals they secreted, teaching themselves technologies one agonizing millennium at a time. But all eight had a time limit, because the Sagittarians spawn children – inexorably, involuntarily, without the need of a mate. Slowly, each found its private kingdom growing more crowded. And slowly, each of the eight planets collapsed back into a web again.

"All but one.

"The one who they now call the Founder, the father of all free Sagittarians, built a metal shell for itself and drifted among the stars. It found and destroyed the other seven webs, but it left the Motherworld. A warning, a chance at redemption, or plain softness, none of them know why.

"But the Founder had its children.

"Slowly, with the passage of eons, they began to think their own thoughts again;

they began again the process of dialogue, which they had long forgotten. And they were careful. Brief moments of contact, that was all; anything more and they risked collapsing to the way the Motherworld had been; they risked the group mind, the Consensus. Five on a single Sagittarian world was risky; fifty were doomed. They lost many individuals that way.

"And many remained.

"Gradually, within this sheltered caste, real thinking emerged. They began to question their history – and speculate about the truth."

They lost their Motherworld, she thought. Just like us.

At last his eyes flickered open. He held up the leather pouch that hung from his neck. "I know what this is now."

"Yes?"

"It is a ghost," he said. "The ghost of the Sagittarian ambassador. The Sagittarians are terrified of being too long together, which is why they love territory so much. But if a Sagittarian wishes to share his mind with another, yet remain apart, it can make a copy of its knowledge, a sort of weak imprint of the mind, into something called a ghost."

"A ghost." She flexed her fingers unconsciously. "And you were able to access all that knowledge from this one – ghost?"

"It was...difficult," said Anton. "The coma was fortuitous. It is..." He fumbled for words, and strung them together awkwardly. "It is necessary to partially decouple the qualitative experience of consciousness from the neurochemical processes that ordinarily drive it. The lack of consciousness...helps," he finished.

Talya suppressed a shudder. Fortuitous! "I see," she lied.

"So do I. For the first time, I see exactly where the path ahead of me leads. I see this device, and all of its potential. This isn't just a memory bank, Talya. This is the tool I've been waiting for."

Even as part of her turned sick with fear, her breath quickened with anticipation. This was his purpose. This was what she needed. This was the revelation that had drawn her away from her brother and Petras. "What were you waiting for, Anton?"

"I've strayed too far, gotten too used to this comfort. It's time to finish what I've begun. No more sermons, no more theory. I am ready to break down the wall between Man and God."

"Anton," said Talya, "I don't know what that means."

Anton smiled grimly.

"We are going to the Maelstrom."

Chapter 31

Karmindy had not expected even one more year of life, but two had passed, and she was still Empress in fact as well as name. She stood perhaps even straighter now when she walked; her temper was shorter, her bouts of pain more intense and more frequent. But still she ruled, and those in the Palace who noticed her pale, shrunken cheeks – or the careful way she walked, as if always expecting a fall – were wise enough not to comment.

Her temper was especially short today. She had practically chased him and Dreslin out of the Spires this morning, claiming they were 'crowding' her – that was her word, apparently, for Petras asking twice in four hours whether she needed anything. She

rarely apologized for these outbursts, and part of him resented that.

The rest of him knew better.

Early afternoon, now, and a crisp north wind meant autumn was coming. He and Dreslin had wandered to the *maka rhan* courts and started a match. It was Dreslin who'd first gotten him into the game, shortly after Talya left. A sport that required some exercise, but not too much. A rich man's sport. The expense had kept him away when he was younger, but he supposed that excuse was a little outdated now. Besides, it was fun, once you got the hang of it.

"Any luck with those propulsion extenders?" Petras asked, launching the ball with a snap of his racket. Dreslin's studies in starship engineering had made enormous progress, and his tutors spoke highly of him. Petras was so proud of his son that he felt it just then, physically, like a surge in his heart.

Dreslin returned the ball through the middle gate, and they volleyed a while in silence. He was a very deliberate young man. Petras waited for him to sort out his thoughts.

"Some," Dreslin answered, when the round ended. "I've been reading a lot. Jervanski says frigates are too small to use propulsion extenders efficiently, but then, his other papers seem to contradict that." Another thoughtful silence. He lobbed a serve through the high gate. "It's frustrating sometimes. Even if I spend another five years on this track and actually make a breakthrough, we're still only talking about a two percent efficiency boost. Everyone seems thrilled about that, but I think: so what? While we're wasting our time on this, the Sags are hopping around the galaxy with *linear energy jumps*. But something like that...I wouldn't even know where to begin. I mean, it's not like

I haven't thought about it."

The Plateau, Petras thought. *There's a way out. The Sags have it, Chiyoko wants it. What's wrong with the human species, that we can't see it too?*

He was about to answer when Dreslin called out: "There was another attack, I heard."

Petras winced. As if he needed a reminder.

"Yeah. At Chissomrock. Only two killed this time, though."

"How many is that this month? Five?"

"Five. Yeah." His wrist was beginning to ache already. He was only forty-eight and already getting too old for this lazy, rich man's game.

"Mom's afraid the attacks are getting worse because of her health. She's afraid they'll think you're too preoccupied with her, and won't pay attention to them."

"If that's what they think, your mom and I will teach them different. She's a very tough woman still."

Pause.

"Mom's afraid that – "

"I get it, Dreslin."

From his peripheral vision, Petras saw his son look away. "Sorry."

Petras drew a long breath, and sighed. "No, I'm sorry. My fault. I only...wanted a little time to not think about things."

Dreslin bounced the ball a few times and gave up. "I just can't believe that she's actually...I mean, that this is really going to happen to her." He avoided the word *dying*.

"You know? It's hard to explain."

"Yeah. I know." Petras inhaled shakily. "I know." They returned to the game, not really competing, just hitting the ball back and forth. "Dreslin, your mom's been...sort of, a little unpleasant, lately. I hope when you're older, you don't remember her like that. That isn't her. What she's doing right now, the burden she's carrying, I can't even imagine. But she loves you, so, so much. I'm not sure you realize just how proud she is of you, for getting over the nirvana badge."

They both went quiet. They rarely discussed the nirvana badge anymore.

"I'm not *over* it," Dreslin said at last.

"I just meant – "

"I know, but I'm not *over* it. I still fight it. Every single day, I still want it." He laughed nervously. "Mornings are the worst. Once I get past breakfast, it's easier."

Petras frowned. He had known this, of course. But with Karmindy's illness and everything else, and Dreslin so good at hiding his struggles, it was easy to...

Go ahead and say it, Petras thought furiously. To forget.

We can't just not talk about that any longer.

"Your Majesty," said a voice. Petras turned to see Lifa approaching him. "I have news."

Lifa was almost sixty now, five years older than Karmindy. Despite serving over two decades as Secretary of Domestic Affairs – Karmindy's right-hand woman – Lifa still retained an air of...what? Youth? Pleasantness?

Serenity, he decided, was the word. Her long gray hair shifted in the wind like afternoon clouds, a match for her sky-blue eyes. Karmindy had chosen Lifa to replace her as the force behind the throne, and Petras couldn't imagine a better choice.

Only –

Lifa was good, very good, but she could never be as good as Karmindy. Nobody could. He would have to watch her decisions carefully. He wouldn't be able to trust her like he could trust –

A hard lump formed in his throat, and he forced the thought away. "What news?"

She glanced at Dreslin. "Private news."

"No problem, Dad," said Dreslin, picking up his racket and ball and jogging for the exit. "I'll practice on my own."

When he was gone, Lifa's serenity faltered, lines tightening in her face. "He's a tough young man," she said. "He seems to be holding up well."

"What is it, Lifa?"

"Your Majesty, the Empress sent me to tell you that we've captured a Darmian spy in Sama's offices." Sama was the Landgrave of Riaadika, another member of Karmindy's inner circle. "Not Hierodulan. Sent by the Darmian government itself."

"How much did he learn?"

"Nothing. Our intelligence expected his placement ahead of time, but due to various complications, feeding him false information would have been difficult. We captured him instead, and his interrogation has been immensely fruitful. That's the good news."

"But?"

"We're still preparing a complete summary, but essentially, this is what we know."

She took a deep breath.

"Ever since you took the throne, the Darmians have seen the balance of power gradually slipping to Senris. Senris has a larger population, a larger military, its influence among the Thousand is greater. Asemeian was a moderate, and your promises of neutrality reassured him, but he never trusted Imperial authority to keep Darmis safe from Senris's growing power. Nasir Croulin is much more suspicious of both us and Senris, and has actively encouraged Hierodulan attacks in Vorne and elsewhere.

"All this we knew or suspected, and it is confirmed."

Petras folded his arms, but said nothing.

"What we did not know," said Lifa, "is that Croulin and his predecessor both believe Senris acquired Sagittarian technology, either through some secret dealing with the Sags, or via an agreement with you. Consequently, they have devoted tremendous resources toward closing what they see as an enormous technological gap. Their suspicions are not confirmed by our own intelligence, and we believe them to be unfounded. The facts, however, remain.

"The vast infrastructure project undertaken five years ago by Nasir Asemeian, and recently ramped up by Nasir Croulin, has seen slow progress. We believed this was due to bureaucratic mismanagement. We now understand that progress was slow because almost half of its funds were diverted elsewhere."

"Lifa," said Petras, "whatever you need to say, say it."

She answered quickly and quietly, as if that might render the news less potent. "It now appears that the Darmian government has in its possession one or more working prototypes of a Class IV weapon."

Petras stared. "A starkiller."

"Yes, Sire."

"Certain?"

"He was."

"What are their plans for it?"

"Unknown."

"A starkiller. They always said it was impossible. They said...well." A cool wind made him shiver. *Maybe someone's found a road past the Plateau after all.*

Unfortunately, that 'someone' was the Landgrave of Darmis. "What will you do?"

"We're talking it over now. In fact, Sire, time is short, and if you'll excuse me – "

"How did you get this information from him?"

Surely she must have expected the question, but she looked surprised. "Our people are well-trained in interrogation, Sire."

"So well-trained that they *persuaded* a Darmian agent to give away his motherland's greatest secret? How did you do it?"

"Of course I did not *personally* – "

"Lifa."

No answer. Briefly she caught his gaze, but could not sustain it. She said nothing.

"I see."

She cleared her throat. "Will that be all, Sire?"

Gathering clouds darkened the *maka rhan* court. Lifa's eyes had fallen half-closed; her mouth pulled miserably tight.

He had never seen her ashamed before.

"Yes, that'll be all," he said abruptly, and pushed past her to the door.

** ** *

When Petras stepped into the foyer of his apartments, it was like entering a crypt. No lights were on; dots of sweat hung uncomfortably on his face. The door clicked shut behind him, a tiny sound.

Karmindy lay sleeping on the couch, her head askew over a pillow, one leg dropped off the side. Her skin was stark white. He picked a chair by her feet and watched her. She was beautiful when she slept. Neither age nor sickness had dimmed the curious wonder of that transformation, the engineer of an empire ceding control of her own consciousness, softly as any child.

Eventually she stirred. "Is that you, Lifa?"

"It's me."

"Petras."

He looked at her. He felt he should be angry, but he was not.

"You promised me you would never have anyone tortured," he said.

Silence. She opened her eyes but did not turn to look at him.

"I'll pay for it," she said.

Silence.

"Besides," she said, "I didn't *have* him tortured."

"You did it yourself?"

She sighed, very sadly, like the end of summer. "I did it myself."

"I don't understand," he said, shaking his head. "I thought we agreed we would never do this. I thought...you said torture was ineffective. That it makes the subject say

anything, true or not, just to have it over. How do you know – how can you even be sure? Maybe there isn't really a Class IV weapon after all. Maybe – "

"Petras," she said. "Think." She coughed a few times, groaned softly. "That logic is antiquated. With Monifice...the Truth Scanners...everything changed. Don't you see? Everything we get from them...every confession...we can verify in real-time. The Truth Scanners changed everything. Torture is viable again; it's been viable for decades, now. From the beginning. Don't you see it, Petras?"

He felt a deep sickness inside him, low and horrible. It was worse than anger, though he was furious too – at Monifice, at Karminy, most of all at himself. Yes, of course he should have seen it. Padrian Werner had *done* it to him. How could he not have seen it?

This was wrong – this was all wrong.

And what could he do? What was anyone supposed to do, hearing something like this?

"I assume there's a video of it."

"No."

"You're lying to me again."

No answer.

"I want to see it."

"To see what a monster I am?"

"That's not why."

"So you can watch how horrible it was for him? Understand his pain? He works for Croulin, Petras. He would've done the same with any of our agents, and gotten a lot less choked up afterward. He doesn't need your pity."

"I want to see it."

"Too bad." She coughed again, a cruel sound from deep in her lungs. "Just leave it be. He suffered. I suffered. No need for you to suffer too."

Silence.

"Karminy."

A small motion of the hand, dismissive. "You can see the video."

"Thank you."

"Please. Don't be *nice* to me, not now. Just answer this: if you could undo what I did to him, make it so it never happened, would you?"

"I wouldn't have done it at all."

"Of course you wouldn't," she said. "But that's not what I asked."

He didn't answer. For a long time they remained together thus, in the still darkness, surrounded by offensive luxury.

Finally he spoke.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm dying, Petras." She turned away from him. "I thought you knew that."

** **

The video was one hour, twelve minutes, and forty-eight seconds long. Petras watched it from start to finish without pausing. Breaking the man's will took only the first seven minutes; it was clean and efficient. There were devices, now, to cause pain at a

distance, without blood, without damage, at the intensity you preferred. The screaming was bad, yes, but Petras had heard screaming before, and it was soon over. The remainder of the video was just question and answer. Dull, really.

No, thought Petras, *no*, *I would not undo it*; and that was worst of all.

Chapter 32

Three days later, Karmindy called her physician complaining of strong pain in her chest and abdomen. Her heart was beginning to fail.

Petras came to the hospital as soon as he heard. They had her in a tall, narrow room on the tenth floor. The ceiling was scarcely visible through the labyrinth of machinery overhead, scanners and regulators and alarms: all dark, silver, like a tentacle from one of those giant squid Chiyoko had told him about, so long ago. A wide window on the north wall opened on the Gardens, where the first tinges of orange and purple crept into the trees. Late morning light drifted in, brightening her bed and a low swath of the sea-green walls.

Karmindy opened her eyes as he entered. "Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"Are they treating you okay?"

"Well enough. They tell me I'm stable for now, whatever that means."

She looked terribly old. All color was gone from her hair, matted in bone-colored clumps. Her skin, just as white, lay over her skeleton like a shroud. A sheet covered her from the shoulders down. Her lips had disappeared, leaving a thin-line mouth creased by a permanent frown. And the smell – faint, but stale, unpleasantly sweet. The smell of

death.

Yet the strength in her voice surprised him.

"You sound better," he said.

She laughed softly. "Do I?"

"Yeah."

"I ought to." The smile faded. "There's no room left for weakness, never again.

From here on out, it's fighting the rest of the way. It's only me and Death now, Petras, and I won't give him anything without a fight."

He stayed with her. Dreslin joined them soon, and the three of them sat in the room till evening, when she insisted they go home.

Next morning he came to her again, alone. Her eyes were shut tight, and she talked soft and swiftly, like a long-repeated prayer:

"A moment the wild swallows like a flight of withered gust-caught leaves, serenely high, toss in the windrack up the muttering sky..."

She trailed off at last, swallowed, opened her eyes.

"Archibald Lampman," she whispered.

"I'm sorry?"

"That's the poet's name. He lived on old Irth, died thirty thousand years before I was born, but here he is still doing some good in the world." She shook her head, a tiny motion. "The pain comes and goes. When it comes, I repeat the poem until it goes. Seems to help. I've been repeating it a little too often lately."

"Can't they give you anything for the pain?"

"They have. Still hurts. They'd give me more if I let them, but I'd like to retain

what's left of my faculties. Let's not talk about it."

He sat on her bedside. He knew he was no good at conversation, so he'd prepared things to say ahead of time, and he used one now. "The lilies are starting to bloom in the Gardens."

"Did you bring me one?"

"I could have one brought."

"That would be nice."

He said a few words into his netlink, then lowered his hand to hers. Her fingers felt bony and cold. "Karmindy, do you remember that pen I told you about, the one Chiyoko gave me? I was thinking I might use it to send her a message. She has strange abilities, powers I don't understand. Maybe she knows something the doctors don't. Maybe she could help you."

"No."

"I'm serious."

"Don't, Petras, don't tempt me. You can only send one message. Save it for the crisis, for when things get really bad. It's coming. Who knows if she can help me anyway? Save it. Darmis has starkillers now. You'll need every weapon you can get."

"But if she *can* help you, then maybe *you* – "

"Petras," she whispered. "Please. I can't take any extra strain. I'm fighting everything, everything else. I can't fight you too. Please."

He nodded. With his free hand he wiped away tears. "All right. All right."

One of Zethius's men brought the lilies, and they were lovely as only Garden lilies could be: delicate as spun spider-silk and innocent as rain. She took them into pale

fingers and lifted her head to see, then set them down.

"Beautiful," she said.

They sat together a long while, and Petras thought she had fallen asleep. She surprised him by speaking up again.

"You never understand something till it breaks," she said. "As long as a ripgun works like it's meant to, you'll only see it as a trigger and an energy bolt. It's not till it leaks or overheats that you have to figure out what's inside the barrel. Well, I'm breaking, but maybe now I understand myself a little better."

She smiled at him, and he wondered if it was the last time.

"I love you, Petras," she said. "I really do."

** ** *

One morning he came to see her, and Dreslin was already there. Dreslin cut off in mid-sentence and looked up with haggard eyes. "Dad."

"Morning." Petras no longer said *good* morning. He took a seat by his son and his eyes rested on his wife.

"Feeling better," she said, in reply to his unspoken question.

And she did look better. It was not that her skin was less pale, or her eyes less sunken, but she seemed...easier, somehow. As if the phenomenal weight that pressed her down had let up just a fraction.

She looked at Dreslin, whose gaze flickered to Petras for only an instant.

What had they been talking about?

"I met with Lifa a few hours ago," said Karminy. "Dreslin's been keeping me company since then."

Meetings with Lifa. He never knew precisely what was said in these private conferences – discussions of strategy, he guessed, plans for dealing with the starkiller. Karminy was sharing her most deeply guarded thoughts with Lifa, drawing her from the Circle to the innermost circle of all, which only one person could fill. The secret coronation of a new empress with neither title nor crown.

"When are you meeting again?"

"We're not."

"No?"

"I've told her everything. It's on her now. I'm done."

"Done," he repeated.

Was it true? To finally, truly let go – was such a thing possible for Karminy, even in death? It seemed too generous – too much to ask.

Done.

"Tell him the rest of it, Dreslin."

"Well." Dreslin cleared his throat. "Mom and I were just talking, and she thought – I mean, we thought – that someday, when you're ready, when you decide you want to be done too – well, I just wanted you to know that I'd be willing to take over. If you want."

Emperor Dreslin. So that was the talk he'd interrupted.

Petrus had considered it before, certainly, but had never spoken of it, not wanting to force his burden on anyone else. He studied his son again. Dreslin's posture, the way he moved his hands, held a kind of precision despite his nervousness; his eyes, clear blue, were already old. The invisible marks of the nirvana badge were still there, but they were

only scars, such as soldiers also had.

"What about your ship designs?"

"I could still work on them. If I have time. But the Empire would come first, of course."

Yes, Dreslin was ready – or if not yet, soon. And a father-son succession had not happened in centuries. The idea had a storybook quality. The Assembly would love it. It would be a stable transition, and they desperately needed stability.

"You could do it," Petras said. "I believe you could absolutely do it."

Dreslin's smile seemed forced.

"Dreslin," said Karmindy, "will you excuse us a moment?"

He left quickly, eager to be gone.

Karmindy sighed.

"I hate lying to him," she said. "I told him I'd keep this secret even from you. But you have to know. Petras, it's the nirvana badge. He's been struggling terribly."

Petras took a seat, leaned forward intently. "He mentioned it the other day. Said he still had to fight it. I've tried to bring it up again a few times since, but he wouldn't say anything. Why is he hiding this from me?"

She rubbed a thumb over her palm unconsciously. "He wants so much for you to be proud of him."

"I *am* proud of him. I've told him so."

"Of course you are," she said softly. "We both are. I'm not sure why he came to me instead of you. Maybe because I've dealt with this before, with my mother. Maybe because he seems to have this idea that I'm...stronger than you, in some ways." *That's not*

just an idea, he thought, but it was kind of her to say. "That I could help him root out what he feels is this weakness inside him. But listen. He's not just fighting it. He's losing."

He felt like a hand had closed on his chest. "What do you mean, he's losing?"

"He feels like he's slipping closer and closer to the edge of a canyon. That's how he described it to me. He's meeting with his counselor again." She traced wandering patterns on her palm. "He's on the drugs again."

"What?" That invisible hand on his chest was closing tighter. "I'll talk to him. I'll talk to him right now."

"He's stronger than he knows, Petras. He can beat this. But you have to help him."

"I'll take care of him. I promise I'll take care of him."

"I know you will," she whispered. "That's why I love you."

He stayed with her until she slept.

** ** *

Petras found Dreslin walking around Barrowfell, holding up his thumb to the Star-Tower, like he had when he was seven. Petras told him what Karmindy had said. Dreslin only nodded, as if he'd expected this. He did not seem upset.

They talked a long time. Petras said all the things he felt he must say, and for a while after that, they just let the conversation wander.

At the end, Dreslin faced his father, blue eyes bright in the noonday sun. "Dad, I know you're worried. I would be too if I were you. But you have to understand: I didn't spend my whole life fighting this thing just so I could give up now. I won't let it get me. I promise."

Petras nodded. "Those frigate propulsion extenders aren't going to design themselves."

Dreslin's back straightened with absolute solemnity. "You're going to need an heir."

** **

The end came five days later, when Petras's netlink beeped at him. It was Karminy herself.

"Petras," she said breathlessly, "I need you now. Right now – you understand me? Run!"

He ran. The elevator, the blur of faces and doors and questions unanswered – all flew past like a dream as he called to Dreslin on his netlink, run, this is the end. He rushed through the corridors, the long stone pathways, the white halls of the hospital. He knew this was the end, and he knew, too, that something had gone wrong.

He found her surrounded by doctors, arguing with each other, looking stern and useless in their sleek brown coats. "Get out...get out..." Karminy whispered, shaking her head in a wide rocking motion. The doctors weren't even looking at her.

"Leave," said Petras.

And older doctor stepped forward. "Sire," he said, "Her Majesty's condition is critical. I regret we cannot allow – "

"Leave."

"But you don't – "

"Get out!"

They did. He shut the door and sat on the bed beside her.

"Petras," gasped Karmindy. "They killed Lifa."

"What? Who killed her?"

"Nasir Croulin – Hierodula – they're all one. You'll never prove it, though, don't waste your time trying to prove it, that's what they want you to do."

"Why did this happen *now*?"

"They never suspected me, they never guessed my real power. But Lifa must have slipped, must have breathed a word too much about her new secrets. I always told her she needed more bodyguards, but she thought it would attract attention. She's dead. It doesn't matter. She's dead."

Petras felt the cold rush through him, replacing his muscles with empty air. He was floating. Nothing was real. Everything was real.

"What do we do? Karmindy, what do we do now?"

Her voice shot out high and terrible. "The hurrying centers of the storm unite and spreading with huge trunk and rolling fringe each wheeled upon its own tremendous hinge tower darkening on and now from heaven's height with the long roar of elm-trees swept and swayed and pelted waters on the vanished plain plunges the blast – *ah!*" She sucked in breath, the lines around her eyes pressed tight like pale worms. "Lifa was the one. My other advisors are selfish – they have insight, but can't be trusted – "

"What do I do?"

"Behind the wild white flash that splits abroad the pealing thunder-crash over bleared fields and gardens disarrayed column on column comes the drenching – rain!"

"Karmindy! What do I do?"

Some distant part of him saw Dreslin dashing in, halting, kneeling at his mother's

bed, staring up at her with wide-eyed apocalyptic horror.

"Petras, listen to me! It's all on you now, you and Dreslin! Fight them! Fight them, do you understand? You have to – "

"Fight who?"

" – have to fight them, have to hang on, have to fight them with your laws, with your ships, with your treaties, with your guns – your advisors are greedy, your people are hungry, your enemies are closing in on you and your soldiers want blood – ahhh! – everyone wants, *wants*, you have something beautiful and everyone, everyone wants to break it, but Petras, you fight them, you hold them off, Petras, hold off the dark, and if they have to have it then you make – them – pay!" She sounded half-insane but he could see her there still, still thinking, just behind the eyes. "Meter by meter, Petras, you make them pay for it, you make them bleed for it, you make them die for it, and you give them nothing, nothing, nothing in return! Fight for it, fight for it, fight for – "

She screamed, a howling that went on and on in waves and wouldn't end. Her skeleton fingers clutched at her blankets, her pallid face rocked side to side, and still she screamed. Then she laid back her head and bellowed:

"IS THAT ALL YOU'VE GOT, YOU SON OF A BITCH? DO I LOOK SCARED? DO I LOOK SCARED TO YOU?"

For a long moment she stared up at the medical machinery overhead, eyes wide ovals, lips quivering, transfixed by some final revelation.

Then the moment passed, and the eyes shut, and Karminy Fairburn was dead.

** ** *

The funeral was private and brief. A dozen people attended: Dreslin's tutors,

Zethius, a scattering of Imperial officials whom she'd had some fondness for. Dreslin didn't come. He said it would be too hard.

She lay in an open casket in the Hall of the Fathers. Petras stood staring at her. The yellow lights in the colossal ceiling cast shadows on her face that made her seem old. Her death was not a thing but an *un*-thing, a staggering omission, a cold and nauseous obscenity.

Petras sent everyone away after half an hour, all but Zethius. Together they stood by her corpse in silence, and he stared at this artifact that was not her, wondering by what path he had slipped to this dim new universe where his love did not exist.

Chapter 33

After a few more rings and no response, he keyed the override code and walked inside. "Dreslin?" he called. "Dreslin! Where are you?"

He saw it as he peered into the drawing room. He rushed inside.

His son lay utterly still on the carpet, a nirvana badge stuck on his arm, his wrists muddied with the twisting red and black of congealed blood. On his chest was a clean white sheet of paper, with a few words roughly penned:

If she can break her promise so can I. Mom and Dad I love you forever.

Petras moved his lips, but no sound came out. He took three steps backward and fell.

Chapter 34

Zethius Trum straightened his collar as the elevator carried him upward. Steady,

unhurried. It was important to look professional. A good suit, if worn correctly, exuded calmness and dignity, to others and to oneself.

Calmness and dignity. What he was about to do would require both.

The doors opened, yielding to the cool vastness of the summer-dark sky. Tree branches silhouetted by stars rose up to the left and right of him, rustling in the wind. No other sounds but the low chirp of crickets, the staccato of his heels on the flagstone path.

A green-and-white guard stood on either side of the doors to the Imperial rooms. The senior guard, on the left, nodded easily. "Mr. Trum."

"Commander Wasmeth," said Zethius. He spared a glance at the doors, twin white polycore panels three meters high. "How long has he been in there?" He knew the answer, of course, but he wanted the guard to say it.

"Almost fifty hours now. His Majesty entered after that awful business with his son, and hasn't left since."

"His Majesty must be quite upset."

"No doubt of that. Terrible."

"Commander. I wonder if I might speak to you privately?"

The man glanced at his companion. "I'm on duty, Mr. Trum."

"As am I, Commander."

The guard hesitated, then nodded at his younger companion and followed Zethius out of earshot. Zethius knew better than to think they were alone – the Imperial Guard had numberless eyes, forever watchful of their charge – but it would do.

"What is it, Mr. Trum?"

"I am concerned about His Majesty."

"Certainly."

"The Emperor is a strong man, but what he has endured...it would test the very strongest. And he's spoken to no one."

"Correct."

Zethius did not know Commander Wasmeth very well, but he studied the man now: his careful frown, the stern set of his shoulders, the precisely combed lines of his gray-streaked hair. *A man of duty*, thought Zethius. *A man like me. Perhaps.*

It was worth a try.

"Commander, let me inside. I have to speak with him."

Wasmeth lowered his voice. "You know that isn't permitted. His Majesty gave specific orders not to let anyone in. No disrespect, but that includes you, too."

"I understand that. But two whole days alone – you must consider what it's doing to him. And when the Emperor suffers, the galaxy suffers. I'm sure you've heard the latest news from Vorne."

The commander nodded grimly. "Another bombing. Nearly a hundred dead this time."

"As long as he's shut himself in like this, it will get worse. People are starting to talk. There are rumors that he's died."

"Lies," the commander growled. "We're watching the biosensors. His stress levels are high, certainly, but in terms of his vital signs he's perfectly –"

"Doubtless," said Zethius, "but the more time that passes, the more people will talk. If the son was a suicide, why not the father? Perhaps it's already happened, they'll say, and the guards are just covering it up to keep the peace. You know how that

nonsense goes."

"Nonsense, all right. But I have my orders. Besides – " The hard edge of his voice softened. "Each man deals with grief in his own way. Give him his time."

"He's had his time," Zethius said gently. "This isn't about time anymore. This is about a man who needs a friend, and doesn't know that he has one."

Wasmeth pressed his lips together a moment. "You place me in a difficult situation, Mr. Trum."

"We are not young men, Commander. We both remember the bad old days under Monifice. We both know that orders and duty are not always the same."

A long, thoughtful pause, and a reluctant sigh.

"Very well," Wasmeth said finally. "You may enter. But have mercy on me. If this goes wrong it will fall on my shoulders."

Zethius nodded solemnly. "I will not forget it."

The latch clicked as it released. The doors swung open into darkness, then closed again behind him. He flicked on a light. There was no one.

"Your Majesty?"

He toured the lower floor in search of his master. No dishes lay out on the tables or in the kitchen. No sign that the rooms had been lived in lately. One chair in the dining room was overturned; he righted it quietly.

"Your Majesty?"

At the foot of the staircase he stopped. A long metal pole – the bedroom curtain rod, he realized – lay halfway up the stairs at an angle, the curtains still attached, torn from the wall.

He called out once more and began the ascent. The curtains, exquisitely embroidered burgundy a century old, were ripped to tatters and sat in bunches like the war banner of some defeated nation. He nudged the rod aside with one foot and continued. Broken glass crunched under his boots.

Zethius came to the master bedroom.

He blinked in surprise.

The room was dark, but moonlight pouring through the eastern window cast a ghostly glow on the scene. It was enough to see. The desk lay overturned, its surface marred by long scratches. Nearby, a viewscreen sat cracked and broken on the floor. Lamps and tables were smashed. Rough gouges and dents marked the walls like graffiti. The bureau was a mess of porcelain and glass, while spidery shadows hinted at cracks in the windowpane.

At the far end of the room, the Empris Persona rose from the bed where he'd been sitting, a shadow among shadows.

"Your Majesty?"

"Zethius." He sounded nervous, embarrassed. He laughed a little. "I'm sorry. This, this terrible mess, is my fault. And you and everyone else are out there waiting on me. I'm sorry. I'll come out. Just give me a minute. I need..." He stepped forward, retracted, sat down again. "I need a minute to..."

Zethius advanced slowly, picking his way through the wreck of furniture and debris. His fingers brushed the surface of a cushioned seat, its upholstery torn open, and he felt something sticky.

Blood.

"You did this, Sire?"

"I really am sorry." His voice was soft, raw, as if he'd been screaming. Again that anxious laugh. "I was angry. I was really – " Another laugh. "Really, very angry. Should've gone outside, I guess, where there aren't so many breakable things. I'm better now. I'm calm."

Zethius reached the bed and sat down beside him. The Emperor turned away, toward the window and the moonlight. A long gash ran down the side of his face. Dark stains marred his hands.

"Sire, your face – "

"It's nothing."

His Majesty looked down, turning an object over slowly in his fingers.

"What's that you're holding, Sire?"

The Emperor held it up to the light. "Piece of something I broke. A shard of...porcelain, it's called. Very old. Made from dirt, if you can believe that. They used to make things out of dirt a long, long time ago."

"I do know of porcelain, Your Majesty."

The Emperor turned back, eyebrows raised, only a moment. "But of course you would. So many old things here in the Palace. Well, this was a statue of a cat, a present somebody gave me." He tossed it aside. "Gone."

The moon was rising, taking most of its light along with it. Zethius's eyes had adjusted to the dark, though. He could make out the whole span of the room, the wide catastrophic vista and the high ceiling, to its farthest corners. It really had been beautiful, before all this.

The Emperor lowered his head and sighed.

"When Karmindy...well, I can say it, can't I? When Karmindy *died*, I felt like..."

He shook his head, lips pursed. "Empty. It was stupid, ridiculous. Some prosthetic tissue fails, and I have to watch my wife flicker out like a candle, and there was no reason for it, *no reason* – "

He unclenched his fingers, took a steadying breath.

"My heart broke so many times in the last few months that when it finally happened, I was almost, almost, glad to be done. Nothing left to break. And then that business with Lifa, poor woman, and suddenly it's all another kind of crisis, and it still is. I know, I need to go out there, I need to sort all that out. I will. I will."

Zethius waited. He was right to have come; that, at least, he was glad about.

"But all that," the Emperor continued, "it was, you know. Well. It was what it was. But then I walked in to see Dreslin, I walked in to see my son, and he...he was..."

He looked around the room. "What a mess I've made – "

His mouth opened wide, a slow and silent scream, as if he were drowning on air. Tears raged down his face. Gradually he doubled over, racked with sobs that accumulated, quiet breaths, till they burst out of him all at once. He held his own head and moaned and wept.

Zethius watched patiently.

At last His Majesty grew quiet again. When he spoke, his voice was soft and careful, his fingers still wet with tears.

"She told me, Zethius – you understand? She *told* me to watch for this. She told me to protect him. But when I talked to him, he sounded so confident, and we were both

so focused on his mother, and I thought..."

The tiniest motion of his head. Very carefully he leaned down and set the porcelain shard on the floor.

"Everything breaks, Zethius. I've believed that for a long time, but I used to think it was just pessimism. It's not. Everything breaks. It's not just part of our genes. It's part of our *universe*.

"And do you know – " He looked forward at something in the dark, eyes narrowed, hands precisely raised. "I can *see it*, even. Lines of instability in everything, in every – thing. Flaws in the system. Only they're not flaws. We're the flaws, our existence is the flaw, and the system, the system, is chaos and gray. Every time I close my eyes, I see the abyss. All roads lead to Dimmerok.

"I don't know what the point is, Zethius. I don't know why I'm doing this anymore. I'll go outside with you, I'll be Emperor, I'll do what I'm supposed to do. Of course I will. But – can – you – tell – me – *why*?"

The Emperor looked to Zethius, and Zethius was pleased to see that even now, there was hope in the Emperor's eyes as he waited for an answer.

Zethius thought a while. He didn't know if this answer was good, but he knew he had to say something.

"I married when I was seventeen," he said. "Two years later, she left me. It is of course nothing like the death of a son, or a wife; but I was young, you see, and I loved her. A kind of miniature Dimmerok. I lived near high cliffs by the ocean, and for weeks I walked along the edge, wondering every day if I would step over."

The Emperor was looking out the window again. "How did you beat it?"

"I never decided," he said. "But I discovered that if you survive one day, another will come. And if you survive that day, there is another; and if that sort of thing keeps up long enough, very soon you will find you are living again."

The Emperor looked at him sadly, and Zethius gave in return the barest hint of a smile.

"It never goes away," said Zethius. "It never becomes right again. I am sure you know. But appearances to the contrary, we still have a few good years before the entropic heat death of the universe. Come with me and we'll get you cleaned up."

They left the room together.

Chapter 35

When Petras emerged, his first task was to meet with Karmindy's most trusted allies, her "Circle." But the Circle was broken. Lifa, the Secretary of Domestic Affairs, Karmindy's chief advisor and chosen successor, was dead – killed by Darmian hands, lamented publicly and theatrically by Nasir Croulin.

Lifa was dead; and the cold feeling in his heart told him that this was the end, that his last link to Karmindy was severed and he must surely drown in waters too deep for him. But he shut out his heart, as he so often did these days, and he sent out messages and called together what remained of the Circle.

They arrived in his personal conference room in the Spires that evening, these faces he had glimpsed so often before – faces that had offered him polite nods as they passed to and from their secret counsels with his wife. Well, they would have to deal with him now. The air was cool and brittle with anticipation as they drifted in, one after the

other, a few minutes apart. He didn't even try to make conversation. No one did. He only watched.

First to arrive was Heryld, Secretary of Foreign Affairs. Like Lamendo before him, he was a white-haired Senrian; but whereas Lamendo had carried himself like a duke, Heryld's slumped shoulders made seem even shorter than he was. Heryld might be every bit as shrewd as Lamendo had been, but without Karmindy's commanding presence, could he be trusted? His small eyes moved guardedly under thin white brows, searching for an enemy.

After Heryld came Relina, the Imperial Press Secretary. Just as old and white as Heryld, she moved with an aloof and careless grace, like an angel who dispensed her tidings to lesser beings. The way she moved her hands, though, belied her inner peace: taking her fingers gently, first in one hand and then the other, as if trying to comfort herself. Like Heryld, she did not speak.

Third to arrive was Sama, a red-haired woman in her thirties – the Landgrave of Riaadika. She was lovely in her way, young and earnest. Karmindy had told him, too, of this woman's curious loyalty to him – not to the Empire but to the Empris Persona himself. He could not imagine why; he knew he was not charismatic. Was the Emperor mythos really that powerful? They exchanged a few respectful words, but he showed little warmth. He didn't want to seem weak by leaning too much on his only supporter.

They waited long minutes together, the four of them, in a heavy silence that drowned small talk and forced each of them inward, to their own thoughts. Petras wanted it over, this silence. In the silence he imagined Karmindy walking into this room as she had before, cool and wise and supernova-bright, sifting through the murky threads of

their quandaries and weaving them a solution. His right hand tingled with the absence of the marriage jewel. He imagined Dreslin, blue-eyed and brave, still poring over engine diagrams in his room not far away. These visions twisted and tore at him, leaving only a sick blankness behind, till he felt like he would remain here waiting in this room forever.

But the door opened, and in walked Eddard Boll: square-jawed, clear-eyed, no older than Sama but grim with purpose. Eddard was a former Darmian bureaucrat, high enough on the ladder to have had a little power but not famous enough to be known outside the Circle. Handsome, too, and absurdly rich. He was a newer addition to the Circle, but his inside knowledge of Darmian politics – though somewhat outdated – was nevertheless convenient. Karmindy had spoken very highly of him.

He sat down with a finality that made his seat more like a throne than anything Petras had touched. Petras felt a tinge of jealousy, but pushed it away in annoyance.

Eddard nodded respectfully at Petras. "We're all here, Sire." There was no attempt at a bow, but he was deferring to the Emperor the chance to speak first.

It was a generous gesture, and Petras took it gladly. He stood up and cleared his throat.

"In times like this," he said, "I think it helps to lay out the facts. I'll start with two facts that I think are pretty obvious. One: we need strong leadership. And two: I will never be what Karmindy was."

In quick glances he gauged their response. Nothing yet. They, too, were cautious.

"I will never be Karmindy," he said again, "and I recognize that all of you have served the Empire more directly than myself. I thank you for that. At the same time, I must remind you that I am still the Emperor, and you cannot do this without me. It is my

power you wield today, and you will not exercise my power without my consent.

"You *will* include me on all regular meetings; you *will* obtain my approval on all major decisions. And if you do not...I will find other advisors.

"Am I clear?"

Heryld scowled, but said nothing. Nobody looked very surprised. Petras wondered if he'd sounded more confident than he felt.

"Then I will gladly relinquish the floor."

Again everyone looked to Eddard. Though he had only been in the Circle for a few years, he seemed to be the unspoken leader of the group. He did not stand but merely leaned forward as he spoke, his voice careful but urgent. "All right. We're in a lot of trouble. Beyond any doubt, Darmis has a Class IV weapon, and Nasir Croulin has given every indication that he won't hesitate to use it. He is certainly not preventing, and almost certainly encouraging, attacks on all manner of targets – both military and civilian – by the rogue Darmian group Hierodula. They are focusing their aggression on Vorne, where the galaxy's supermassive central black hole offers the potential for vast amounts of energy, and possibly an advantage over Senris.

"All this you know, of course, but as the Emperor said, sometimes it is useful to lay out the facts.

"We know also that Karmindy had secret plans for dealing with the Darmian threat, and I have no doubt they were brilliant and capable strategies. Unfortunately, the only person she graced with this knowledge was Lifa. We all wish Karmindy had been a little less stingy with her insight, but we might as well wish for indestructible ships while we're at it, for all the good it will do. The fact is, we don't know what Karmindy intended

for this crisis. We have to form our own strategy."

Sama picked up for him. "One thing we do know is that she had ruled out a military response. The Imperial forces just aren't strong enough right now, and we don't want to risk a shooting war. That's just the excuse Nasir Croulin would need to send his war-hungry crazies off the deep end, and maybe even use his starkiller too."

Heryld scowled. "Do you hear yourselves? 'Karmindy intended.' 'Karmindy planned.' Are we like those cult followers from Vorne, divining the will of our prophet? Karmindy is dead." The word struck Petras like icewater, but he kept silent and listened. "We will do what we must. A military option should never be taken off the table. A quick strike to destroy their starkiller prototype would eliminate the threat and demoralize their fanatical wing at a single stroke."

"Hush," said Relina. "What if they have more than one prototype? How fast can they make more? And don't forget the Darmian public, who knows nothing about the starkiller. How do we justify the attack? It's going to look like unprovoked aggression, and that's exactly what Nasir Croulin dreams of."

"And Sama's right," added Eddard. "There's no such thing as a quick strike, not against Darmis. And the Imperial Navy just isn't ready for the response it would bring."

"Senris would back us up," said Heryld.

"Oh, good idea, let's start the Great War tonight," said Relina.

"Hold on a minute," said Sama. "Before we shy away from attacking, shouldn't we consider all the options?" She looked at Petras. "Your Majesty, we know you obtained from the Sagittarians some sort of...device. Is there any possible advantage this technology could give us?"

"Well," said Petras, "calling it a 'device' might be optimistic. We had scientists studying it for years, and as far as they could discover, it doesn't actually *do* anything. Physically it's made of a compound we'd never seen before, but if it has a purpose, I don't know what it is. I'd call it a curiosity." *And last time I checked, it wasn't even working.*

"And what about the Sagittarians themselves, Your Majesty? Karminy always said we could count on no help from them, despite what the rest of the galaxy may think. But with all respect to her, she was not their Speaker. Is it true? Is there no hope from them at all?"

Hope, from the Sags?

He thought again of the Irth-secret, the Dimmerok-secret, which he dared not utter even in this most secluded of chambers; he thought of the video in the sleeper ship, the black and purple vessel with its crescent-shaped hull, the jagged lines of fire as his Motherworld shuddered and broke.

"No. There is no hope from the Sagittarians."

"The Sagittarians..." Relina grimaced, as if swallowing something distasteful.

"Your Majesty...what *are* they?"

They were all looking at him now. None of them knew. It was the one question Karminy hadn't been able to answer. But Dr. Bernabe had told him the answer, all those years ago, and he believed it now more than ever.

"They are alien," he said. "Untouchable and incomprehensible. They're a little like insects and a little like gods. They are impossible as allies and unthinkable as enemies. Each time I talk to them, I feel I'm walking blindfolded toward a cliff, wondering with

each step if *that* will be the one that sends us over the edge. They are..." He sighed.

"They are what they are, and we are what we are, and we must keep apart forever or be annihilated. There is no hope from the Sagittarians."

It was a disheartening speech – or had seemed so to him – but Eddard only nodded. "It's just us, then," said Eddard. "Lifa is dead, and we've had to mourn her quickly. This is a kind of war, and grief is a luxury. In the meantime, we'll need a new Secretary of Domestic Affairs. Suggestions?"

"Please," muttered Relina. "You know it's you."

"I didn't – "

"It's you," agreed Sama.

"You," said Heryld.

Eddard looked at Petras. He seemed honestly surprised.

"If they say so," said Petras, "who am I to disagree? I'll write up the announcement and give it tomorrow."

Eddard nodded again, slowly, processing this new data. It was, indeed, a kind of war, and he had become a kind of general. He did not look nervous, or pleased. He only looked thoughtful.

"Well, Mr. Secretary," said Petras, "advise me. What do we do?"

Eddard was gathering his thoughts for some response when Sama's netlink suddenly chirped. Heryld glared at her for the interruption; but it was worry, not embarrassment, that now lined her normally affable face. "I set it to ring only for Priority One messages," she said.

They all stared as she quickly scrolled through the few lines of bright blue text

that hovered over her hand. She looked up.

“Your Majesty,” she said, “I’m so sorry. I take personal responsibility for this failure.” She swallowed. “Forty-five minutes ago, Hierodula struck Padrian Werner's prison. He’s escaped.”

** ** *

Details were still coming in, but it seemed Hierodula had attacked with staggering force: over a hundred destroyers and four heavy cruisers, most of which had simply guarded from orbit while the strike team did its work. According to Imperial intelligence, the force comprised nearly all of Hierodula’s existing military assets. That intelligence was now being questioned.

Despite Karminy’s still-standing order that much of the Imperial fleet be kept on instant alert status – so they could respond to exactly this kind of situation – the call for Navy backup came too late to do any good. By the time they arrived, it was all over. Somewhere in the bureaucratic chain lay a case of gross incompetence, or perhaps a traitor. Either way, someone was losing their job soon; Padrian Werner was alive and free somewhere in the galaxy.

No one in the room questioned what had to happen next. Werner would be expecting it, and perhaps it would accomplish nothing, but it had to be done.

Petras knew exactly what to do. He had practiced the commands many times, and he tapped them into his netlink now. His next words would be broadcast on all channels, on all authorized Net-linked devices in the galaxy.

He raised his hand to his mouth and spoke: “Darmis Gamma Twelve.”

Padrian Werner’s lifeword.

Chapter 36

After that, things turned bad quickly.

Petras appointed Eddard Boll the new Secretary of Domestic Affairs the very next day. It was a simple announcement; there was not even a ceremony. In Eddard's first speech as Secretary, he issued an ultimatum to Nasir Croulin: rein in Hierodula and turn over Padrian Werner, or face crippling trade restrictions. Croulin responded with a lengthy tirade, absolving himself of all responsibility for Hierodula, warning of an Emperor who was overextending his power, an Emperor whose bloodlust for this Darmian national hero was entirely unprovoked. Croulin claimed, smirking, that he had no idea where Werner might be, but that he "probably" had already had himself surgically rendered deaf as a safeguard against lifewords.

It was a typical response; Hierodula launched no new attacks right away, however, and for a few tense days Petras had a glimmer of hope that they'd made some progress.

Then one afternoon, ex-landgrave Nasir Asemeian was found dead in his home, traces of poison in his bloodstream. Another murder, Croulin called it, pointing the finger at Imperial assassins. Eddard pointed out that Asemeian had been the loudest remaining moderate voice in Darmian politics, and his murder benefited no one more than Croulin himself.

He met with the Circle in his conference room, as he did every day now.

"I was never a friend of Nasir Asemeian," said Petras, "but he was a saint compared to his killer." His voice was soft with exhaustion and anger. "Nasir Croulin

does whatever he wants, and I don't see that we're doing a damn thing to stop him."

"Far be it from me to speak out of turn," grouched Heryld, "but we could always call up Rikter Faze and see if he's game to join us in *attacking* the son of a bitch with overwhelming force. From what I understand, you are still technically sovereign. Just a thought."

"Sure," Sama piped up. "I bet he won't use his starkillers, or start a protracted civil war, or anything like that." She glared at Heryld. "And don't mention assassination again, not with Padrian Werner loose and just begging us for a power vacuum to fill."

"What I wonder most," Relina said, "is why they bothered with Werner at all. It's been decades since he had any real power. I know they keep saying he's some Darmian folk hero, but can Croulin honestly believe the man will be any kind of game-changer?"

"Respectively: he can, and he is," Eddard said. Quietly, but they listened. Petras wondered how Eddard managed that kind of authority. "Partly because of his reputation, yes. But mostly because Padrian Werner, despite his conspicuous failures, is an exceedingly dangerous person, and will become exponentially more so with each passing day he remains free."

"He is dangerous," said Petras, keeping his tone level even as the memory of his son's smiling face tried to overwhelm him. "What I don't understand is why Croulin's doing any of this, riling up his people and stirring for war. Does he think he can beat Senris and the Imperial Navy combined?"

"If he's built enough starkillers, he may have a closer shot than I'd care to admit," Relina said grimly. "He's still crazy if he wants to try, but I've never been impressed with his sanity."

"He believes he has no choice," said Eddard. "He thinks he's fighting for survival. He is girding his followers to defend his homeland." A glance at Petras. "He believes you're colluding with the Senrians."

"But that's absurd," said Petras. "I got the throne by betraying Rikter. Why would he think that?"

"Because," Eddard said simply, "you're not colluding with the Darmians."

The Empris Edificia ordered economic sanctions on Darmis. Rikter Faze called the response laughably weak; Nasir Croulin called it an outrage, and further proof of what he'd been saying all along. Meanwhile the sanctions did no favors to Riaadika's economy either, and Eddard extended an open offer to the Thousand to sign special trade agreements with Riaadika, further isolating Darmis. Karmindy had long believed that support from the Thousand was the key to Riaadikan supremacy. But Na Jamajna harangued against any special agreements with the Emperor, and such was Vorne's newfound influence among the Thousand that most followed her lead. In the end, not even Petras's home landgraviate of Bergschrim signed the deal.

No one in Petras's Circle was much surprised by these reactions; but, they said, what else could they do?

Eddard met privately with Petras. Already Eddard looked tired, weighed down by his new responsibility, but his voice was steady as he spoke.

"Sources close to Nasir Croulin tell me that something is changing. His confidence is growing, and not only because of the starkillers. He no longer believes the Sagittarians will protect you if he attacks."

"He's right. You know that." *But how does Croulin know?* wondered Petras.

And then he remembered.

Padrian Werner. The Truth Scanner. The Darmian fleet at Sacadoor, almost a quarter century ago. Padrian Werner knew, and he had told Nasir Croulin.

Yes, Werner was a very dangerous man.

"I am trying very hard," Eddard continued, "to see a way out of this that does not involve the Sagittarians. I cannot. You say there's no hope from them, but I confess, Sire, I see precious little help from any other direction. Anything we could get from them – a token of friendship, a show of force – anything we could use as a bargaining chip would be invaluable."

Petras said nothing.

"Sire. This fear you have of interacting with them – this cataclysm you're afraid you'll unleash – is it worse than a full-blown galactic civil war?"

In his mind Petras heard the words again, spoken in Tamil Faze's youthful voice. Dimmerok. The coming-apart. The un-gathering.~

Dimmerok, the end of all things.

Aloud he said, "Let me try something else first."

** **

Petras's bedroom was repaired. He didn't know who had done it; he hadn't spoken to Zethius about it, hadn't ordered it of anyone. He simply walked in one night, and it had all been fixed. New drapes hung over the wide windows; the furniture had been restored or replaced; no scratches remained on the ornately sculptured walls. He thought guiltily of the workers who must have rushed to undo the damage from his tantrum. What did they think of him, these invisible servants? Did they hate him? Was it just another job?

Or were they, like Sama, enraptured with his myth, honored to be cleaning up the messes of the Emperor himself?

Yet there was one thing they could not undo. On top of his dresser, nestled between his computer and a paperweight, a jar held the shards of Chiyoko's ceramic cat. The only relic she'd had from her life on Irth, in the unimaginably distant past. The symbol of her trust in him.

The broken pieces in this jar panged his conscience far worse than anything else he'd destroyed that night. But not every memento from the Star-Witch was gone. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a golden pen, holding it up to the artificial light of the lamp.

It gleamed. The texture of its metallic surface glittered like a silver-and-gold honeycomb as he turned it first one way, then another. A magical relic – the only true miracle that remained in all this vast fortress of tradition and technology. A witch's pen. An emperor's pen.

His heart knocked in his chest as he pulled up a chair and reached for a sheet of stationery. His fingers shook as he wrote in neat, careful letters, architecting his words in stark black ink across the cream-colored page:

Please come see me. I need you. A war is coming and I don't know how to stop it.

Exhaling a ragged breath, he laid down the pen and waited. He didn't know what to expect. She had never really been clear on how this would work; he would not put it past her to appear in a burst of flame. But as the minutes passed and nothing happened, such notions began to feel silly. Of course he should not expect a response right away. He went downstairs and activated his computer, planning to catch up on some official

business before going to bed.

But as he sat down, he noticed a Net message waiting for him on his screen:

Apologies on the failed delivery of your communication. This function has been deactivated. You know why.

The message had been sent anonymously. There was no way to reply.

** ** *

Petras drummed his fingers rapidly, furiously, on the arm of his chair, staring into the powder of stars that dotted the viewscreen of his little craft.

This function has been deactivated. You know why.

Yes, he knew why.

So he'd destroyed her damned cat. A priceless relic, a symbol of her trust, et cetera, et cetera. He had – *had* – felt very guilty about that. In spite of her manipulative games, her insufferable condescension, he still owed her a lot. He should not have broken the statue. If she wanted to punish him, fine, she could punish him. Perhaps he even deserved it, despite all he'd suffered already.

But this? Refusing to help stop a war?

"I'm done with you," he growled. "Hear me, Star-Witch? I'm not your toy anymore. I'll do it alone if I have to."

He sat by himself in the little craft, though its sensor display assured him that his escort of two Imperial cruisers still followed. On the viewscreen, the planet Dover came into view. His memories of this little dormant-volcanic world and its lone inhabitant were not pleasant ones, but they reassured him somewhat – after all, he had met with the Sag ambassador here twice before, and neither time had triggered an interspecies war.

Perhaps Dimmerok could wait just a little longer yet.

If only the creature didn't look so...*alien*.

And then, for the very first time, he wondered what the Sag ambassador thought of *him*.

The viewscreen indicated he was entering the atmosphere, and the vessel's automated landing sequence took over. The high scars and blackened plains of the planet's surface grew until the horizon had flattened out, and now hardened rivers of rock rushed past him underneath. Gradually he felt himself decelerating. The craft lowered over the landing site, quivered for a moment, and was still.

He pressed a control on his arm and an invisible barrier formed around his head, sealing off his comfortable, oxygen-filled suit from the air around him with a millimeter-thick barrier. Then, with a deep sigh, he passed through the airlock and stepped outside.

This place was even less hospitable-looking from the ground. The too-bright stars hovered over a darkened, inhuman landscape, even as his suit's illuminated instruments told him that the temperature was negative two hundred degrees, that the planet had no air, and indeed no atmosphere at all unless he cared for a few dozen argon atoms per cubic centimeter.

But the planet itself was like a welcome mat compared with the first message he got from the ambassador.

<Speaker. Why are you here? You are not wanted.>

As always, a pounding in his ears heralded the telepathic message. He looked toward the Sagittarian ship, a curved, black-and-purple monstrosity a hundred meters away. Normally the ambassador came out of its vessel to greet him, but apparently Petras

no longer warranted that honor. He knew the Sag was getting impatient with him, perhaps even angry. He imagined Dr. Bernabie's voice in his head, warning him to run away, to do nothing that might risk Dimmerok. But avoiding that risk could lead to another.

<Why are you here, Speaker? You are not wanted. Solitude is ideal.>

<I know. I'm sorry. But I've come to offer another trade. There are more star systems you may acquire.>

<We tire of your trades. Territory is good. Territory offers solitude. But you come to us with deals and trades and talk and you know nothing of solitude.>

I know it better than you realize, thought Petras, but he kept the thought to himself. <I apologize. But we thought you would be interested. We offer more territory.>

Impatience. *<What do you want?>*

<We ask that you use your great power to destroy several uninhabited star systems in our own territory.> It was thought that a show of force by the Sags would renew the people's confidence in their Emperor, and scare the Darmians out of using their starkiller.

<No.>

<We are prepared to offer – >

<You offer territory and ask us to destroy territory. It is not reasonable. It is not proper. You do not understand territory and you do not understand solitude. You are not wanted. Leave.>

<If you won't do that, there are other ways you could help – >

<Leave. I will have no more dealings with one who would destroy territory. Leave.>

<Don't lie to me, Ambassador, the Sagittarians destroy territory too!>

He held his breath in horror, wishing he could take it back. The Irth-secret, the Dimmerok-secret! If the ambassador knew that he knew...how could he have been so stupid? After all that talk to Eddard and the rest about how carefully the Sags had to be handled. He felt queasy. Yes, he'd been on edge because of Chiyoko, but that was no excuse...

<You refer to our attack on your Motherworld.>

He didn't dare reply.

<That was an accident caused by our failure to sufficiently protect ourselves. It was not ideal and it will not occur again.>

He considered this, stunned. *<An accident?>*

<Do you not know? Have you learned nothing from my ghost? Is that why you pester me?>

<Tell me. Please.>

Another flare of impatience. *<It is an old story. I detected a Gate beyond our borders, and wondering, I traveled there, not knowing what I would find.>*

Yes, Irth had been destroyed only a decade after the first Gate was created; that part made sense. But how had they made the jump over such a long distance?

Of course. Linear-energy jumps. He'd forgotten.

<What I found was an abomination: a world with a thousandth the surface area of my Motherworld and a thousand times the population. The horror of being so close to so many minds was overwhelming. I did the only thing I could do.>

Petras stared in disbelief. *<An accident...>*

<Enough of this. You have nothing to offer. Your trade is not accepted. You are not wanted. Leave.>

Heart thundering inside him, Petras left.

Chapter 37

Talya leaned forward and watched the video again.

It was beautiful, as weapons often were. The star burned quietly for the first ten seconds while a careful female voice counted down: Ten, nine, eight, seven, six. Just after "one," the star...twisted, somehow, as though a mischievous god meant to squeeze out its hydrogen like a wet rag. And then –

And then the whole screen went white, and the video ended.

Darmis had tested a Class IV weapon. A starkiller.

She got up and began to pace, a habit she'd acquired from her father. The tiny observation deck didn't allow much room for pacing, but then, she'd gotten used to walking her little circle around this room. Two whole years she'd spent on this tiny asteroid, Kryx Major, orbiting the Maelstrom – the supermassive black hole at the center of the Milky Way Galaxy, in Vorne. Two whole years she'd spent waiting for Anton to finish building this...machine, whatever it was. And she had absolutely nothing to show for it. Nothing, except the conviction that following Anton had been a mistake.

It had been exciting at first, going with him to this top secret location at the heart of the galaxy so he could work on his top secret project. His engineers had predicted nine months to complete the device, a timespan that everyone thought was wonderfully symbolic for giving birth to a new age. Talya had gotten swept up in their excitement...or

maybe she'd let herself get swept up, because she needed to be. But nine months had become a year, then eighteen months, and her long-dead excitement was gradually turning to fear. Not that anyone had threatened her, nor forbidden her to leave. The facility was right next to a Gate – currently deactivated, but it could be powered back on anytime. As far as she knew, she was free to leave if she wanted.

She had not tested that assumption yet, afraid of what the answer might be. But she was going to test it today. She had to get home.

Her brother was dead.

She'd read the news on the Net three days ago: Karminy's long-expected demise, Lifa's assassination, and, oh yes, one other thing. Dreslin Fairburn, son of the Emperor, nineteen years old. Cause of death? The Imperial Press Secretary had not released that information.

The thought of her little brother gone made her want to scream, made her arms heavy and cold. She pounded a fist into her hand, wishing she could pound Padrian Werner instead, hateful, hideous man that he was. If only her father had killed him while he'd had the chance...

*What am I doing here? Searching for my "purpose," like a damned teenager?
Everything's falling apart. I have to go home.*

And if she wasn't quite sure which planet "home" was on, well, she could figure that out later.

Anton Scheller entered the room in slow, easy strides, his crimson robes rustling over the pale metallic floor. How physically massive the man was – and how calm. An unsettling combination. Looking at him, she imagined a boulder rolling down a

mountain, feeling no anger at anything it crushed, nor any sorrow either.

"I see you've already heard the news," he said.

"Yes."

"And still your father talks of tariffs and treaties. Darmis grows bolder with each passing day, and with this in their hands, they will be fearless." Of course – he was talking about the starkiller. Silly to think he might care about Dreslin. "My sources tell me Hierodula is already drawing its forces together, preparing for an attack. They need not even use their new weapon; they can merely hold it in reserve as a threat against counterattack. Their fleet will be ready to launch in a week."

"Where?"

"Here – the Maelstrom. Where else? They want their power source back."

"Here?" she gasped. "Then we have to leave...Anton, we have to get away..."

"And let them destroy my last two years of work? I've come too far for that."

"So what, then?" she said, trying to smooth her voice in spite of her growing terror. "Anton, I don't know if you noticed, but my brother is dead. I need to be with my family. And now you say a Hierodulan fleet will attack in a week. I need out of here."

"Of course," he said. "Of course. But stay just one more day. It's time, Talya. The machine is ready. I'll activate it tomorrow morning. Stay till tomorrow morning. After that...after that, you can leave. Go anywhere you like. I'll have my bishops arrange a ship for you. One more day – not even that. Twelve more hours."

She swallowed, trying to steady her quivering hands. "What does it do, Anton? The machine? Are you ever going to tell me?"

"Sit down," he said, taking her fingers into his own enormous hands. She hated

him for comforting her that way, hated herself for wanting that comfort. But she sat down. He lowered himself into a chair beside her. His face looked profoundly sad, and she hated him for that, too.

"I didn't tell you before," he began, "because I feared your reaction if you knew."

She waited.

"You've heard the sermons. You know the ancient story: God so loved the Motherworld that he sent his son to save it, but we humans were too imperfect to accept his perfect gift. We killed his son; we lost our chance at salvation. It is up to us to earn it back. It is up to...me.

"God is Love, but it is the nature of our universe that all things have a price. Energy cannot be lost unless it is gained elsewhere; the equations must balance or they are not equations at all. So it is with blood. The slaughter of a perfect gift demands a perfect human sacrifice in return." Her eyes must have widened with her sudden terror, because he raised his hand. "Not you."

She nodded once, saying nothing.

"A perfect human sacrifice," he said, "means that a human being voluntarily gives up his life for another. But how can anyone do that? If I say, 'Talya, I will give up my life for you' – that is a lie. Because what I am dying for is not you at all, but only my perception of you, my internal representation of who I think you are, based on talking with you, observing you, all the data I can harvest through my senses. No matter if I know you all my life, still this internalization is not the real you, no more than that viewscreen up there is the real Maelstrom. Always you will be idealized, or vilified, or simplified in some way or another; always you will be rationalized into something

abstract, into something other than yourself that I am somehow willing to die for. There is no way I can die for *you*.

"Or rather, there was not, until now."

He raised a finger to the small rough silhouette of Kryx Minor which floated over the light of the surging gases of the Maelstrom. "Using the knowledge I gained from studying your father's medallion, I have built a machine based on Sagittarian technology. The machine I have created is nothing more or less than a means of bridging the gap between one person's consciousness and another's. It is a way of – of linking minds."

"You're going to die for me," she whispered.

"For you," he said. "For you, yourself, the actual person. I have prepared a place for us on Kryx Minor: you, me, the machine...and below, the Maelstrom. It is what I was born for, and what I will die for. It is and has always been the sum of my life."

She made herself unclench her jaw. "Why me?"

"We are all God's children. It could have been anyone. But you are very..."

"What?"

He did not answer at first, and it took her a long time to see why. When she finally did, it was like lightning in her heart. This man, this giant carved from rock, who spoke of God and sacrifice and battle fleets, who bore the foundations of the Church on his shoulders – he was embarrassed.

Anton Scheller rose and walked away from her, crossing the tiny space in a few steps. He paused at the exit. "You are very – beautiful," he said. "I thought perhaps that for you – that I could die, for you."

"Anton!" she yelled, suddenly furious. "Don't you dare leave me!" He turned

back; she rose and marched to him on unsteady legs. "What makes you think you can do this to me, Anton? Did you ever ask me if I wanted this? Did you even wonder? Maybe I don't want you in my head! Maybe I don't want your mind to...link to my mind, whatever the hell that means! Maybe I don't want you to kill yourself for me! What about that? What about me? I've spent two years on this rock for you, Anton, always for you, everything for you! What about me, Anton?" He only stared at her sadly, and she exploded in fury. "Say something! You're the messiah, aren't you? You have all the answers, don't you? Why should I do this? Why should I help you, when you've done nothing for me? Why should I care? Why?"

For a long moment he was silent. But she could see the answer twisting inside him, burning its way along the slow path from his heart to his lips; and when he spoke, it was like he had transformed his soul into a word; and so she heard the sound of his soul.

"Please," he said.

She shut her eyes tight. After a time she heard him leave.

When the door closed behind him, she held herself, shaking, and wept.

** **

The next morning she showered and dressed, and did all the things she did normally on days she was not the object of someone's suicide. Anton stood waiting at the dock, and together they entered the shuttle that would take them to Kryx Minor – he first, ducking his head, and she following after. Together they took their seats, the docking clamps released, and the engines fired gently. She was alone with him in the little ship.

"How did you sleep?" she said.

"I did not sleep."

"I didn't either."

A long silence. She resolved not to let the trip pass in silence – not these last moments, not with him. "You're always so quiet," she said. "What are you thinking?"

He looked up and smiled unhappily. "Nothing profound. Just indulging in self-pity, I'm afraid. I was thinking how much easier it would be if I had chosen a different path. It is a difficult thing to construct one's own destiny without a teacher. Of course God is a teacher, but his lessons are sometimes...opaque."

She didn't know quite what he meant, but she wanted to keep him talking. "Surely even a messiah can have a teacher."

"I have grown distrustful of teachers. I accepted a teacher once, when I was younger. She promised she would give me *something good* if I followed her path. But her promises were lies, and I have learned to make my own way."

She had even less idea what that meant, but she pushed on. "Are you afraid?"

"Yes," he said. "I am afraid that I will fail."

She stretched her legs, sighed. "I'm scared too."

"If you are worried about the machine, you need not be. It has been thoroughly tested. It is a true gift the Sagittarians have given us."

Actually she had been more worried about what would happen after he died. Would they really let her leave? Would a week be long enough to get away before Hierodula attacked? But his comment made her even more uneasy.

"The Sagittarians...they're a lot smarter than us, aren't they?"

He frowned. "Not precisely."

"They must be. We've had this...this Plateau, they call it. Twenty thousand years

of stagnation, without a breakthrough in technology, aside from occasional flukes like the starkiller. We've gone as far as we can as a species. We're done. All we can do now is spread, like a virus. But the Sagittarians – they're really powerful, aren't they? We're like bugs to them."

He seemed to think about this a long while.

"My old teacher used to say the Plateau is a self-fulfilling prophecy," he said at last. "We stopped growing because we *believed* we'd stopped growing. There's a little truth in that, I think. You see how the Darmians' fear of the Sagittarians spurred them to create the starkiller. But such advances are limited. There is another barrier, something more solid, between us and our alien neighbors."

Talya's fingers closed tight on the edge of her seat, grasping the cold metal. She felt like all the universe outside their little shuttle had gone away, that she stood on the brink of some piercing revelation.

"The Sagittarians are...strange," he continued. "Their telepathy is an awful handicap. They dare not gather in large groups, to avoid collapsing their minds into an unthinking web, but isolation can be just as cruel. One's mind becomes a private universe full of doubts and dreams unchecked by opposition."

His eyes had lost their focus, as though he were now thinking of something besides the Sagittarians. But he shook his head, reorienting himself, and went on.

"No more than six of them can live on a single planet. But they reproduce asexually, involuntarily, so they are always growing. These two facts determine the structure of their society.

"Each planetbound group has a Ruler and a Speaker. The Ruler takes care that,

once their tiny quota is reached, all new children are cast out, and any visitors are turned away. So you see there are always wanderers, traveling between the worlds without a home. Some decide on a life of permanent wandering, a kind of asceticism. But most of them go from one planet to the next, looking for one that's uninhabited, or at least sparsely populated enough to take them in.

"When a wanderer tries to join a planetbound group, it must start by talking with the group's Speaker. The Speaker is the group's ambassador, who protects the rest of the group from the discomfort of continually interfacing with strangers. The Speaker and the wanderer share their histories with each other, and if the match is good – if the stranger is not too strange but not too similar, either – then it joins the group.

"It is a sad sort of life they have, so far short of their potential."

Talya shifted her weight. Her seat felt uncomfortable now. "If they're so sad and pathetic, why is their technology so much better?"

"Well, they do have certain advantages," he replied. "For one thing, they're practically immortal. But more importantly, their minds are...not smarter, exactly...how can I explain?"

A little more of the edge came off his voice; the distraction seemed to be helping him.

"Consider the way we think about problems," he said. "If a problem is simple, you just think about it until the answer sort of comes to you. There isn't any structure to your problem-solving process.

"But if it's something more complicated, like 'How do I build a starship?', what do you do? You break it down. You start with a simpler question, like 'How can I propel

something through space?' The next question might be 'How can I store the fuel safely?' And then 'How will I make sure the passengers have air?' Each of those questions, in turn, gets broken down into simpler pieces, and so on, until little by little you have a starship. The problem was far too complicated to solve all at once, but by breaking it down, you make it a series of small problems your mind is capable of handling."

She nodded, thinking this all sounded pretty obvious.

"You see," he continued, "our whole problem-solving strategy as a species rests on the assumption that every problem can be broken down into sub-problems small and simple enough for our brains to handle.

"But what if that assumption were false?

"What if some problems are inherently so complex, so tangled, that they can't be broken down? What if they can only be solved by a single stroke of monumental insight that our brains are too simple to handle? That's why the Sagittarians have technology like the linear-energy jump – the problem's just too big for us to wrap our minds around all at once."

She considered this. It made a kind of sense. "Nonmodular thinking."

"Exactly. Though of course, even the Sagittarians have limits. Only God can hold all the universe in His mind at once."

But for all their technology and their nonmodular thinking, she realized, they still can't make any real progress, all split apart like that. They have their own Plateau, same as we do.

He fingered the medallion thoughtfully. She nodded at it. "You're still wearing that, huh? Trying to learn some more secrets?"

"No. I believe I have learned all I have time to learn. But I find it is comforting. The Sagittarians...they have no fear of death."

She felt another stab of pity and pushed the thought away. It was herself she had to worry about.

The vessel shook, and the airlock rolled aside. They were docked.

Together they rose from their seats and walked through the airlock into the central chamber of his God's most sacred monastery.

** **

The monks, attendants of this little asteroid, had all clustered in the wide, circular gray room. A wave of reverence washed through them, silencing their scattered whispers, as they turned to face Anton. Men and women alike wore rough gray robes, their hoods pulled back. A surge of wonder and revulsion washed through her. She could not imagine how this must feel for them: the culmination of three hundred centuries of waiting.

Yet for all that, the monks were only part of what set her on edge. Her real worry stood in the center of the room, dominating all else with its presence: the machine.

It extended from a wide base on the floor all the way to the ceiling, a tangle of cables and metal support beams and a mélange of other components she could not identify, dripping pulses of light and thumping complex rhythms. The power harvested from the Maelstrom shone in the machine's heart like a dimmed sun, caressed and connected by a rainbow of wires. On the far side of the room, an escape pod lay docked in its bay.

One other thing. Connected to the edge of the machine – an outgrowth of the technological labyrinth – stood a low metal object it took her a moment to identify. When

she did, her breath caught.

A chair.

"Welcome, Savior," said one of the monks, stepping forward. He bowed, sweeping the edges of his robe against the smooth floor. The bow rippled like water through the rest of them, echoing the murmur. Savior – savior.

The air was chilly. She hugged herself.

"Thank you," said Anton. He cleared his throat, and with an uneven voice he began a speech that sounded rehearsed.

"We are come to the end of it now. You who stand in this place, at this moment, to witness this great work, are God's precious children. You will watch with your own eyes the crumbling of the last barrier between Man and God. Your grandchildren's grandchildren will listen to this story someday, and wish they could have been here. They will try to imagine it, and they will ask how it was before, in the dark old days before all was transformed in mercy and light. So watch and listen well. Your memories will become the gospel of a new age.

"Let us pray."

He knelt, motioning for Talya to do the same. The floor was hard and cold under her knees. All around them, the monks knelt also. She wondered if they even noticed the coldness of the floor.

Anton prayed:

O God

You who watch all things and know all things

You who taught the oceans to flow and the stars to burn

Teach us the way to truth.

Reflect back to us our meager reason

Magnified in the light of your infinite mirrors.

Show us the path to your heart.

We are assembled as your children

Open in arms

Prostrate before you.

Reveal once more your will.

Accept once more our praises.

Forgive us of our sins.

And lift us into the glory of sacrifice.

Then he rose, and so did everyone else. They watched him like children, waiting to see what he would do next.

"Let it begin."

Monks led them to their positions – she in the chair, he in the escape pod. Her heart suddenly raced as it all became real to her. This wasn't a theory or a sermon. This was something that was actually going to happen. They strapped her into the chair, and the back of it felt like ice on her neck. She could not see the vast bulk of the machine behind her, but she felt it looming.

"Ready?" said one of the monks.

Anton stood behind the escape pod window, just a few meters away, looking like

all things at once: stern and crazy and hopeful and sad. He nodded. The machine shivered and woke.

The sound of its waking was like thunder, like the howling of alien storms on alien planets far from all decent things. It threw out sharp shadows and spilled milky light on dozens of wide-eyed faces. They were ready. They were ready. All the vast universe in its ponderous rotation turned about this chamber. They could feel it; the mantle of destiny draped heavy on their heads. They were ready.

Inhaling, she felt a heavy pulsing in her ears, and a presence in her mind.

"Anton?"

It was a warm feeling, gentle, yet foreign. Her instinct was to pull away, but she did not. The presence grew. She began to feel him in it. Slowly, gradually, he was exploring the mansion of her mind – opening doors and entering rooms. One by one her memories yielded to him. *Her mother stumbling over one of her toys, calling to her to pick it up. The way Zethius's eyebrows drew together quizzically as she begged him not to tell her father yet. Dreslin wiping away tears of laughter at some joke she'd made.*

Her breath quickened with discomfort, then alarm, as he delved ever deeper into the core of her, the center of a thing she knew only as "I."

"Anton, please. You're going too fast. You're – you're hurting me." That wasn't the right word, but she knew no other word for what she felt. "Please, I...I..."

To her surprise, he stopped. She had not been sure he would; she had not been sure he could hear her. If he could, it was not through his ears.

Finally she nodded her assent to continue.

His eyes stretched wide under closed lids; his mouth moved silently. She felt him

return. But even as he explored her brain, she realized the link worked both ways. She could see his memories too.

Climbing out on a high tree branch to get to the other side of a wall. Fleeing the monastery as a child. Chiyoko's youthful face, lined with fury. Pulling weeds as a penance, years later, watched by the kind old abbot.

Anton had known the Star-Witch? But the torrent of images left no time for wonder.

Still later, another penance, a year of fasting and cold hotel showers. This time, for the sin of stealing: slipping into that Imperial compound, taking the Sagittarian ghost, replacing it with a useless replica. The techniques Chiyoko taught him, for avoiding notice and evading security systems, had been very useful that day. He hadn't even discovered yet what the little disc would do, but it was the only known Sagittarian artifact; it had to offer at least a clue. Stealing was indeed a sin, but then so was suicide. He would do whatever it took to lead his people back to God.

His presence encompassed all of her, now, leaving nothing untouched, nothing private, no darkness under the searching rays of his light. He was her, entire and complete – except for one thing, one tiny piece of her he had left untouched. He had saved it for last.

Her thoughts about him.

He opened this final door gingerly, and she cringed. It was not a pleasant place. She respected him, even cared for him in some way, but she did not like him. The place he entered now was filled with her small and spiteful thoughts. His nose was the wrong shape. He never laughed. His religion was absurd. He was comically large. He had

wasted his life. "Please," she whispered. Please, for his sake. Don't let it end like this.

His eyes opened. She stared back in surprise. He raised one hand to the glass.

"Thank you," he said, though it was not her ears that heard him. "Thank you. It will be easier than I thought."

She was stunned. *He expected even worse.*

His mind receded from hers, and his fingers slipped lower, lower, till they found the lever. At first he only looked at it, eyebrows narrowing, the fine line of his lips drawing tight. And for a moment, just for a moment, she thought she could feel in turn a final sliver of his own thought: something neither sad nor triumphant, only cold as a razor and lonely as a razor's bitter edge. But it was so brief she could not be sure.

Then his fingers clenched, and the lever dropped, and the pod ejected.

He grew smaller and smaller and soon was lost from sight. She turned toward the viewscreen and saw there a diagram of his demise, as the pod curved toward the Maelstrom, accelerating. She tried not to imagine the tidal forces of gravity straining at him, stretching him, twisting the fabric of his small universe. In less than a minute the little light representing his pod had gone out.

He was gone.

She looked around. Everyone was weeping, and she found to her surprise that she was crying too. But they wept with grief and euphoria, whereas her own feelings were so tangled she could never have sorted them out.

"Someone please help me out of this chair."

No one did, but the straps were not tight and she rose unassisted. All around her the monks were caught in it still, stunned in the wake of his colossal passing. Not her. For

her the awful beauty had ended, and she found herself stranded on a tiny asteroid orbiting a dangerous black hole, surrounded by religious fanatics, her only ally dead, a distant invasion force still gathering for a strike in a week's time –

Hierodula. The invasion force. They were here, now.

Talya saw them as a cluster of bright dots on the long-range sensor screen across the room. She rushed to the panel and found it was the same configuration as the control panels she'd used on Kryx Major. With a few keystrokes she brought up a detailed readout that confirmed her guess: fully half a legion of Darmian warships, converging on the Maelstrom. They would reach the Church's outer automated guns in a matter of minutes; from what Anton had told her, she didn't think their defenses stood much chance against a force this size. And once they breached that line of guns, they would be here in under an hour.

Her heart, already flying on adrenaline, pounded even harder. She turned and pushed through the crowd to find the thin and ragged gray-haired monk who had spoken with Anton when he first walked in; he seemed to be their leader. "The invasion fleet is coming," she said. "They're on their way now, they'll be here soon. What are we going to do?"

He didn't answer. His eyes were shut tight, still weeping, his rough face bound painfully to lines of emotion.

"Hey! Listen to me! A Hierodulan invasion force is coming this way! What do we do? Can we call for help?"

"There is nothing we can do anymore," he said. "The Savior has opened the way. It is up to God now."

She grabbed his shoulders. "Then let's help God along a little, shall we?"

Addressing the whole assembly, she shouted, "An invasion fleet is coming and they'll kill us all unless we do something! Do you want Anton's sacrifice to be for nothing? We can't escape in the shuttles, they're too slow. We need to call for help!"

Rousing himself, the head monk called out, "She is right. We must do as we had planned. I will take care of the Machine. Go to your rooms and prepare!"

They filed out purposefully, heads bowed. He tapped a few keys on a keypad. A moment later, she smelled something acrid and looked around till she found the source.

The Machine was melting.

Thin trails of smoke crept upward as a clear liquid issued from somewhere inside it, running over its surface, bubbling as it consumed. Slowly, the whole great mass of the thing collapsed inward.

"It is safe from Hierodula now," he said. "If the Darmians set foot in these rooms, my brothers will know how to finish their own task."

It took her a moment to realize what he meant.

"Are you crazy?" she demanded. "That's your answer? You want them to kill themselves? Do you not understand, I'm trying to tell you – "

"It is you who do not understand," said the monk. "God is our shield. If we do not trust His hand to defend us, why are we here at all?"

She let him leave.

Back at the control panel, she hunted through the comm options. After a few minutes she found it: the general distress signal. She activated it, keyed in a priority Imperial frequency, and spoke into the camera. The transmitter broadcast her signal

across empty space, past Kryx Major, past clouds of gas and dust, past the invasion fleet which already was firing its first shots on the pitifully outnumbered defense force, to the nearest active Gate. From there it was picked up and re-transmitted to other Gates, and from those to yet others, and spread across the galaxy.

"To whoever hears this message," she said, "Vorne is under attack. Repeat, Vorne is under attack..."

** ** *

"...by Hierodula. They have sent a battle fleet of nearly a thousand ships and are cutting through our defenses..."

Na Jamajna glanced up from her screen and scowled at the communications officer. "Yes, we're under attack, there are a thousand more distress calls just like it. I don't have time for – "

"Ma'am," said the officer, "isn't that the Emperor's daughter?"

Her eyes narrowed.

The girl *did* look familiar, at that.

** ** *

"...and they will arrive at the Maelstrom in a matter of minutes. Request immediate assistance..."

Padrian Werner was still deaf from the surgery, of course, to protect against lifewords; but he read the subtitles with interest. And he recognized the girl. He hadn't expected her. This would certainly complicate matters.

But would it play to his advantage?

He opened a channel to the fleet. He would capture her if he could.

** ** *

"...from whoever is within striking range. This attack is unprovoked..."

Tamil Faze, too, recognized Talya. The Emperor had often provoked Tamil to anger these past few years for his failure to rein in Darmis. But he felt a pang of sympathy for them anyway. Both of them. He was a father, too, and he understood.

He did not think Rikter would be quite as sympathetic.

** ** *

"...and unjustified. The facility at the Maelstrom is operated by a peaceful religious organization..."

How calm she looked, thought Eddard. For a moment he thought it must be Karmindy's genes showing through, till he remembered that Talya was not Karmindy's.

Remarkable.

The thought lasted only a second, though. Mentally he flashed through the available options, examining priorities. With all of Hierodula concentrated in one spot, this might be an opportunity for a public relations victory beyond a merely strategic one. If Imperial forces could be properly leveraged...

Then, very suddenly, Eddard remembered Dreslin, and the man who was still technically in charge of the Imperial Navy.

He dialed the number on his netlink frantically.

** ** *

"...which means no harm to anyone. Our defenses are minimal and they have already begun to fail. They will be here in a matter of minutes. Repeat, we are under attack..."

His netlink chirped, but Petras ignored it. It is possible he didn't hear it at all.
He would not lose his daughter again.

Chapter 38

Talya kept talking, repeating her distress call over and over as she watched the ships approach on her scanner. It was thirty-five minutes now since Hierodula's fleet had breached the defense perimeter; they had not lost even a single ship. She held out little hope any longer. The enemy was nearly upon her.

Her voice faltered, and she broke off her plea in mid-sentence. She looked around. The monks had all gone back to their cloisters, thinking their private thoughts, praying personal distress calls of their own. Maybe that was right for them; this was their place, and their moment. If they died, it would be a death they understood. But her –

Why was she here?

She asked herself that question for the thousandth time, taking short quick breaths in her terror: why had she come? Why had she wanted to live this life? What had she thought she would gain? Her old answers to those questions, youthful dreams of finding her purpose in life, now seemed hopelessly naive.

Talya had never felt more alone.

Suddenly the comm screen flashed on, displaying a gray-haired man in a heavily decorated green-and-white uniform. He stood in front of a wall of indecipherable sensor screens.

"Talya," he said.

She swallowed, not yet daring to believe this might be salvation. "Yes?"

"I'm General Radilak, Imperial Navy. Listen carefully. We're sending help, but we can't come by the same Gate the Hierodulan fleet used. Wouldn't reach you in time. Now, I know there's another Gate right by the Maelstrom, but it's deactivated. Can you turn it back on?"

The Maelstrom Gate. Yes. Anton had deactivated it months ago, for security. Gates took a long time to power up, so the only ships that could use a freshly-activated Gate were those big enough to supply their own power – like Hierodula's warships. If she'd turned the Gate on earlier, she would have given the invasion fleet a free ride to her door. But now, if the Imperials had some big rescue ship waiting to get her out, then turning on the Gate made sense.

"Yes, I can activate it from here. But I hope you're ready, because the moment Hierodula notices I flipped that switch, they'll be right on top of me. This better be some kind of quick rescue."

"It will be," said the general. "Turn it on now." He cut the transmission before she could even reply.

She brought up the Gate's control display and highlighted the Activate command. Then, with a deep breath, she hit Confirm.

The Gate activated.

Seconds dragged past with agonizing slowness, and no rescue ship came. *Come on. Come on! You said you'd be ready! You're losing your chance!*

The Hierodulan fleet appeared.

With numb fingers she brought up the visual scanners on the main viewscreen, and there they were – no longer blips on a computer simulation, but actual ships, wave

after wave of them, close enough to see. She had always thought it was the Senrian ships that looked cruel, with their long sharpness and spidery curves, but this fleet somehow made the flat, dull lines of Darmian architecture seem sinister. Clusters of frigates surrounded the larger destroyers that made up the front line of the fleet; hanging behind were the frowning heavy cruisers, the giants, backbone of the Darmian Navy.

The Imperials were too late for a clean rescue, and she knew they wouldn't risk a fight. Especially not now that Croulin had his starkillers.

It was over.

She watched the Hierodulan ships as they grew larger and more terrible on her screen. This is the way it will end, she thought. She could see it, even, in her mind, a final vision: she could trace it backward in time, from the plain and hideous war machines, back to the hands that built them, not hatefully, but because contracts had to be honored; the engineers, the businessmen, the research scientists, each with their own peculiar dreams and terrors and tangled ethics, and each, too, with their families, or perhaps all alone between the stars; from the soldiers themselves, back through a web of oaths and orders and duties and second thoughts and honor, to a father or a brother who had served first, and his father, and his father, back across the centuries and the eons, each mind a link in the chain that, had one neuron fired differently, might have evaded all this and left her safe and brought them instead to a different day of doom. She could see it. Even as the lesser interceptor ships surrounded Kryx Major, and docked, and others rushed on toward Kryx Minor, toward her – even as a cold voice on the speakers informed her that she must prepare to be boarded – she could see it. Her end, and the end of all things.

Abruptly, the voice cut off.

She glanced at the viewscreen. The interceptors had halted. No new ships were docking. The fleet's advance had stopped.

She became aware of a growing bright light in her peripheral vision.

At the top of the tactical display, a great many dots were moving downward. For one brief moment, she was sure it was a malfunction.

Then she saw them.

They appeared first as a cluster of moving stars, so distant and faint she could not judge their number – but they were approaching. Hierodula's fleet broke and scattered like pollen in the wind. Closer. Closer...

And then they were rushing all around her: dozens of ships. Hundreds. Thousands. More. Imperial warships. Wave after wave of dreadnoughts and cruisers, all spewing out clouds of fighters, all assembled and advancing as one. They came and they came. No shots fired; it was not a battle; it was only ships, and more ships, and more ships: more than she had ever seen, more than she had ever imagined, more than she had ever thought could be emptied from all the ports at all the worlds in all the galaxy.

Not for the Church.

Not for Vorne.

Not for Senris, or the Empire, or the balance of power, or peace.

For her.

Through the light of their endless progression, through the prism of her tears, she saw it: panels and turrets and hard sleek metal, big as a city, white on white. The superdreadnought. The Emperor's flagship. The *Manticore*.

She wept with the joy of revelation. Her father, her father had come.

Chapter 39

Petras stood waiting at the airlock when the commandos brought her inside the *Manticore*. She ran up and threw her arms around him. "Dad."

She had never called him that before. He laughed, though they were both crying already. "Talya."

"Dad, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left."

"Come on. Let's go someplace private so we can talk."

Talya followed him to the elevator, and they rode up together. By the time they reached one of his private rooms, she had wiped away her tears and regained her composure. He struggled to do the same as they sat down on plush chairs close to each other.

"Thank you," she said. "I thought I'd be lucky to get a rescue ship. I never imagined anything like this."

"I suppose Eddard didn't either. But then he's not Emperor, is he? Not yet, anyway."

"Anton Scheller is dead. I don't know how much you've heard already. A ritual suicide for the Church. The monks can verify that, if you need witnesses. If anyone tries to blame you."

He nodded, frowning. "No, I hadn't heard that. That's good to know. I'm sorry, were you and he...close?"

"No," she said quickly.

"Well, you can tell me all about it. Plenty of time for that. Only – you are staying,

I hope? For a while, at least?"

She raised her hands reassuringly. "I won't leave again. I promise. I'll spend some time with Mom, of course, but I won't run off again. Especially now, with everything that's going on, with the starkillers and Karminy, and..." She licked her lips, arranging her words carefully. "Dad – how did he die?"

Petrus paused as the yawning icy emptiness cut through him again, as it did several times a day. *Dreslin my son I'm sorry it can't be real please I'll do anything to have you back please give me another chance please please please –*

"You must keep this a secret," he said quietly. "I could never be ashamed of him, but I don't want it public. People wouldn't understand. You promise?"

"I promise."

"It was a..." Repetition did nothing to dull the edge. "A suicide. Between the nirvana badge and Karminy and everything else...it was just too much."

"I'm so sorry, Dad. I should never have left."

He took her hand and held it. But he whispered, just loud enough for her to hear: "No. You shouldn't have." Louder, with a quavering edge: "Why did you leave?"

"It sounds so stupid to say it out loud. I thought I was looking for my purpose." A pause, then she stood up abruptly, took a few slow steps as she stared at the floor. "I don't know. I guess I just thought that everything would change when I finally met you. And then when it didn't, I thought I must have made a mistake. I thought I had to go somewhere else. But I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know anything."

Silence.

"But you're here now," said Petrus, relishing the plain warmth of those four

simple words.

"I'm here now."

"And you can't leave again. Please. Talya, if you left me again, it would...I wouldn't be able to..."

"I promise," she said again.

He nodded.

"Oh," she said suddenly. "Also. Anton told me a lot of new things about the Sagittarians. And not only that, but I think...I think maybe I could talk to them now, if I got the chance. Like you do. With your mind. I had an...experience...with telepathy, that I think is similar."

As he listened, she began to explain.

** ** *

Twelve hours later it was evening on Riaad, and Petras sat near Eddard at one end of the long table in his private conference room. They were alone. Eddard looked like a man with something to say, as Petras had expected. Eddard looked tired, too. Nothing obvious; he was too careful for that. But his spine wasn't quite as straight as usual, and his eyes seemed a shade less alert. This first week as Secretary of Domestic Affairs had been hard on him.

His voice was firm, though.

"I just met with the others. We talked about the consequences of your...maneuver. The good news is that we suffered no damage or loss of life. Neither did the enemy, for that matter. We captured four hundred thirty-six ships and arrested all their crews, almost a million prisoners. We're just beginning to scour the ship databases

and interrogate the prisoners, but already we're documenting overwhelming evidence of ties between Hierodula and the highest levels of Darmian leadership. Nasir Croulin himself has been implicated."

Petras snorted. "Not exactly a surprise."

"Not to us, but Croulin has consistently denied everything and made us the bogeyman, and plenty of Darmians believed it. This should go a long way toward bringing them around and helping the moderates gain power. Evidence on this scale is hard to ignore."

"How big is the impact on Hierodula?"

"Enormous. That fleet was almost everything they had. They're effectively finished, at least for now. They'll have to rebuild from nothing."

"And Padrian Werner? Was he implicated, too?"

"No." Eddard's jaw twisted in vexation. "Not a shred of evidence that he was involved. He's been very careful." He caught Petras's eye. "But he *was* involved, I'd wager."

"I have little doubt of it," said Petras.

You wanted her, didn't you, you son of a bitch? But I stopped you. You didn't think I'd have the guts for it, but I stopped you.

The problem, of course, would be stopping him again. Werner knew Petras would get no support from the Sags, and now Croulin knew it, too.

A little of Petras's own tiredness came through in his voice. "Say what you came to say."

If Eddard was surprised at this directness, he didn't show it. "Sire, public reaction

to the attack is mixed. A sizable minority feel it was a necessary counterattack, a powerful show of force after our previous inaction. However, our polling indicates most Imperial citizens view it as an act of desperation, made for personal reasons rather than the good of the Empire. Your overall support is down."

"Not for the first time."

"Your support in the Assembly, however, is dropping dangerously low."

And if they impeach me, thought Petras, you'll get my job. "What did the Circle say about all this?"

"The usual. Sama defended you till she was blue in the face, and Heryld called you names I shouldn't repeat. I'm surprised the guards didn't come in to break it up."

"And you?"

"Sire, I can't fault you for thinking of your daughter, of course, but..."

"But you will."

Eddard lowered his voice, as if others might hear. "If only you could have done it less...disruptively. You pulled ships from all across the Empire for that attack, and our forces were already spread thin. There were a number of incidents. The biggest trouble came between Reith and Omid Nikulu."

These were two minor landgraviates that shared a border and often squabbled. Karmindy had stationed Imperial forces between them years ago to keep the peace.

"What happened? Border skirmish?"

"That's how it started. Omid Nikulu saw our ships leaving and fired on a few of Reith's border patrols. Now, the Nikuluns weren't prepared, of course, so the attacks didn't amount to much, but Darmis saw an opportunity. They declared that a situation

was happening and they had a moral obligation to step in and stop the violence. They occupied both sides. 'To preserve the peace,' said Croulin."

"How did Senris react?"

"This is where it gets ugly. Reith is a Senrian ally, and when Rikter Faze saw Darmis rushing into Reith, he ordered fifty of his own cruisers in to defend them. By the time we got the Navy in to separate them, they were firing warning shots at each other."

"I see. The situation is stable now?"

"For now. But it was close, Sire. Very close."

Petras nodded. "What about Vorne? Any signs they'll be more cooperative now?"

"The opposite, actually. Na Jamajna released a statement. She accuses you of doing nothing to help until you were affected personally."

"And so we lose any chance of using her as leverage against Darmis."

"Yes."

Petras sighed.

"How bad is it?"

"It's bad, Sire. This is the closest we've ever come to war. Nevertheless we've offered to mediate negotiations between Darmis and Senris to ease tensions. With the Darmian radicals losing some credibility, it's possible the governments might even agree to it. We have to try."

"Good. Keep trying."

"Your Majesty," Eddard continued, clipping the words tight. *Here it comes.*

"Sending in force to stop Hierodula was the right choice. Croulin can't use it as a pretext for war without openly admitting his ties to them, which he'll never do voluntarily. But

you used such excessive force to do it that you not only destabilized the rest of the galaxy, you made us look reactive and easily provoked. You pushed us one step closer to a war that could destroyed millions of lives. Millions. Do you see that?"

"It had its consequences," said Petras.

"*Consequences?* Sire, you can't uproot the entire Imperial Navy just because your daughter – "

"I did *not* uproot the entire Imperial Navy," said Petras. "I sent in four legions. That's only an eight-to-one ratio, us versus them."

"Only!"

"Yes, only. Any less would have risked a firefight rather than total surrender. Any less would have risked loss of life, loss of data, loss of the perception that I am the Emperor and I am overwhelmingly stronger than these insects. Ask the generals. They'll tell you I'm right. I do, in fact, know a little about tactics."

"But Reith and Omid Nikulu – "

" – are nothing compared to the aftershocks that'll hit us when the real tremors come, so we'd better start getting used to it. The galaxy's changing, Eddard. The risks are real. It doesn't mean we can ignore them. Besides, if Rikter were willing to go to war over something as tiny as Reith, he would've done it a decade ago, and I don't care what he says."

They studied each other.

"Sama told me the same," Eddard admitted finally. "I thought you were only reacting to Talya's capture, without thinking of the consequences. It seems I was wrong. I...apologize."

Petras allowed himself a small smile. "You don't spend twenty years around a woman like Karmindy without *some* of it rubbing off," he said. "I'm not her, but I'm not as bad as you think. We may still avoid this war yet."

Chapter 40

Less than a year later, to nearly everyone's surprise, Darmis and Senris signed a meaningful agreement aimed at reducing tensions. Nasir Croulin had lost most of his support since his connections to Hierodula were laid bare, and the Darmian legislature – which till now had existed only to approve his edicts – found itself suddenly empowered, and approved the treaty over his vociferous objections. Meanwhile Tamil Faze had unexpectedly prevailed on his father to make one more effort toward avoiding war. Sama had led the talks personally; Rikter had not trusted Eddard's impartiality, since he was a Darmian. All sides gave Sama credit for extraordinary wisdom and superhuman patience. Petras had made only a few appearances at the talks, but he and Sama and the rest of the Circle had stayed up late every night, mapping out strategy.

The major breakthrough had come when Darmis agreed to halt its starkiller program, ending all research, production, and weapons testing, though they were allowed to keep their existing weapons. In exchange, Senris gave up its claims to several disputed territories and released a large number of Darmian prisoners captured in Hierodulan raids.

Most Senrians were skeptical that the starkiller program would actually stop, and Petras had his doubts as well, but it was a start. Limited though it was, the treaty felt almost miraculous. Petras had been certain that Padrian Werner would find a way to ruin

it somehow, but no one had heard any news of him in months, and Croulin still denied he'd ever so much as contacted the man.

The day after the treaty was signed, Eddard sent word to Petras that the Assembly of Worlds had gathered on Laussaral, preparing to vote on the Emperor's impeachment.

Na Jamajna herself made the motion, claiming Imperial negligence of duty for his longtime failure to stop Hierodula and his "unplanned and personally motivated" eventual strike against them, with its "potentially disastrous consequences" for the entire Empire. Both sides had their reasons and their rhetoric. The pro-impeachment camp claimed that Petras had neglected his responsibilities as Emperor, while the opposition said it was Darmis's responsibility to prevent terrorist activities in their own landgraviate. Behind the scenes, the maneuvering was more complex.

Reasons for wanting Petras removed varied widely. Some in the Thousand honestly feared for their security, while others wanted to show solidarity with Na Jamajna. The Croulin faction wanted Petras gone for obvious reasons, but their influence had waned greatly. Rikter, of course, had wanted him gone almost from the beginning.

Pro-impeachment enthusiasm was tempered by several factors. First, Eddard was Petras's chosen successor; and, as a two-thirds agreement on a new Emperor was unthinkable, he would surely take the throne. Few thought he would be better. Darmians didn't trust him because he had sided with the current Emperor, and non-Darmians didn't trust him because he was Darmian. Another factor was concern for the instability a removal would bring, especially in the wake of the newly-signed treaty, which Petras's administration had negotiated. And finally, even now, many feared retaliation from the Sagittarians were anything to happen to their Speaker.

The Assembly was deeply divided, and the situation was politically difficult; and this time there was no Karmindy pulling strings from the shadows to stop it. The vote would be close. Still, Eddard was not without influence of his own, and much of the debate in the coming days was shaped around the questions he raised first. Finally the day of the vote arrived.

Petras did not attend personally, but he watched over the Net as a few thousand bureaucrats gathered to decide his destiny. Political stability was his own greatest concern, and accordingly, his conscience had forced him to push as hard as he could to stay in office. Yet he could not help hoping they would remove him. To be free – to finally, after all these years, be free – it was almost unimaginable. To wake without fear each morning – to go to bed without shame – to be merely a father and no longer a symbol. A little house somewhere and frequent visits from Talya, that was all he needed in the world.

They voted to let him keep his job.

Watching on the Net through deep-lidded eyes, leaning far forward on his sofa, he saw the white lights outnumber the red by the barest of margins. In the end, Darmis went mostly for him, and much of the Thousand followed suit. But he could not have survived this impeachment had a faction not split away from the Senrian voting bloc, which otherwise went universally against him. The "Forty for Peace," as they were now known, became self-styled martyrs, instant pariahs among the Senrians. The Empris Edificia would have to think of some sort of reward for them.

In the meantime, Petras wondered how much stability this "victory" would buy them in truth. Tensions seemed higher than ever. Rikter Faze had been calling all along

for better documentation of the inspections that would verify Darmis was dismantling its starkiller program; now he claimed outright that the inspections were being faked, and demanded access to the more detailed inspection reports. Petras could hardly blame the man for being worried. The Darmis legislature, meanwhile, protested that giving Senris any further details would unacceptably compromise their own security.

The complaints and arguments went back and forth till Rikter Faze called asking for a personal audience with the Emperor on Riaad. Petras agreed. Eddard and Sama coached him on what to say.

Rikter was an old man now, and dark wrinkles had crept like spider webs into his brow and around his lips; but his gait had lost none of its aristocratic bearing, and his eyes were sterner than ever. The flowing red and gold of his uniform brought Petras back to old memories of the Sun Palace – of days when his burden was still fresh, his fears more immediate and real.

Rikter made no attempt to smile, but his handshake was cordial. They walked together into a pleasant little room in the Great Hall and seated themselves on velvet-covered chairs, facing each other across a low table which might have served tea in happier times.

"We have no great cause to love one another, you and I," said Rikter, settling back into his chair. "I gave you your power, and you chose not to return the favor. I do not fault you for that. Each man must make his own destiny, yes? But what we face today is broader and deeper than ambition, or even loyalty. When we see our enemies with a Class IV weapon, we are forced to contemplate our own annihilation. Perhaps you would not mind that? I do not know. But even were it so, you must see that our annihilation is

yours as well. You must see that your empire is supported by three legs, and if any one is destroyed, the entire structure will topple into anarchy. If you do not act out of charity, Your Majesty, act at least from self-interest."

"It is the Emperor's duty to protect all his subjects," Petras said coolly. "Whatever else you must say, please do not insult me by talking about self-interest."

"Then why will you not act?" demanded Rikter. "I've sent you our intelligence reports. We *know* they have restarted the starkiller program."

"Yes, we've been analyzing your reports. So far we've found them inconclusive. They – "

"Inconclusive? Pah! Are you afraid of them? You are the Emperor. You have already smashed Hierodula's tiny fleet. Your forces stand behind you, and so do we; and many of the Thousand yet remain loyal. A few well-placed strikes – "

"This is how it starts, you know. Those are the words people say, right before the slaughter begins. 'A few quick strikes.' 'A strong offensive.' 'Teaching them a lesson.' It's a dream, Rikter. It's nothing but a dream."

Rikter grimaced. "A price of blood cannot be avoided. It can only be paid, or deferred with interest. What is your plan for dealing with this menace?"

"The inspections will continue. Your specific allegations are currently being investigated – "

"Investigated!" Rikter spat.

"Yes, investigated. It is the way of peace. And don't be so certain they're betraying your agreement. Nasir Croulin is under investigation of his own, by his own people. His reign likely will not last more than a few more weeks. He has already lost

most of his credibility among the Darmian people – who are, by and large, still more moderate than you give them credit for. This may yet work. Give it time."

"But how can I know it will work if you won't give me inspection details? How can I know they are truly dismantling their weapons factories if you will not provide me the proof? Do you not see that with each passing day, I make my own people more vulnerable? I have a duty of my own, Sire, and you leave me with few options."

"I see the details, Rikter. I vouch for their accuracy. I guarantee your safety. I am your emperor still – or had you forgotten?"

"No, I hadn't forgotten," snarled Rikter. "I will never forget that ring of metal you wear on your head, that stone chair you sit on. If stone and metal make a leader, you must be a god. But as for me, I expect no more help from this empty throne." He rose slowly, like an angry cloud. "You are nothing to me, neither lord nor ally; and as for my people, I will defend them the best way I know how."

Petras watched him. "What will you do?"

"I'll do what I must. Whatever I must."

"You're going to attack? Without my permission?"

"The only peace lies on the far end of a sword. If you were worthy of this palace, you would know that."

It would have to be the lifeword, then. Petras looked at him with sadness. "Please don't make me do this."

One of Rikter Faze's white old eyebrows lifted. "So? Some courage after all, then. Not much, but a little. Will you really do it, do you think?"

"If you force me to."

"It won't matter, you know. Others will pick up what I leave. The thing has built its own momentum, and there is no stopping it now."

"You could stop it."

"I could." He retrieved a small cylinder from his pocket and set it on the table, where it expanded into a full-sized viewscreen. "Or, I could do this."

On the screen lay a field of stars and a planet surrounded by about fifty Senrian heavy cruisers.

"Do you recognize that planet, Sire? You should. It's Dover."

"What is this?" Petras whispered.

"It's a hostage, Petras. It's really quite simple. You bring me the plans for the starkiller, or I will destroy the Sag ambassador's ship. And incidentally, each of my captains also has a link to my personal biosensor, and orders to fire on the Sag in case I'm killed. So I wouldn't recommend using a lifeword."

"Fifty cruisers against a Sagittarian? In case you've forgotten, Rikter, that one Sagittarian ship handled an entire Darmian legion at Sacadoor."

"Of course. But I wonder what would happen if we attacked from orbit, while it was unprepared, its defenses down? What do you think, Petras? Willing to risk it?"

"Rikter," said Petras, "you don't understand the forces you're acting on. They don't think like us. Any hostile action you take could trigger an interspecies total war that would make Senris and Darmis look like a friendly rivalry. If you do this..."

"Yes," Rikter said patiently. "I can't say I'm too convinced of all this paranoia, but I understand you're quite taken with the idea. Sounds like you'd better hurry up and do what I say before your ambassador decides he's offended."

Petras nodded, heartbeat riding heavy over careful breaths. "All right. Listen. I'll show you the inspection records. You can see for yourself that they're dismantling. I'll show you myself. Okay?"

"No. I want the plans for the starkiller. You have them, and that madman Nasir Croulin has them. It's only fair. You want peace? Then level the playing field. That's the only way."

"I can't do that, Rikter. I don't have the plans. Demanding them now would upset the delicate exchanges we negotiated in the treaty. Please. You aren't being reasonable."

Rikter raised his netlink to his mouth. "Cruisers *Tourmaline* and *Sophocles*, move into firing range." Onscreen, the view changed to a close-up, where two of the warships drifted like hungry jackals toward the planet.

"No!"

"The starkiller, Petras."

"Yes, all right!" Petras was only talking, now, saying anything he could to stop this unthinkable horror. "You're right. I don't have it, but I'll find a way –"

But he stopped, because at that moment, two drops of energy, blood-red, swept up from a single point on the surface and into space, each one connecting with a ship. Two Senrian cruisers blossomed into brief clouds of dusty light, faded, and were gone. Twenty thousand dead. The view shifted again, and now the Sagittarian's tiny vessel was rising up from Dover, turning, and speeding silently away.

"Idiot," murmured Petras. He glanced up at the landgrave over the low table.

Neither moved. Neither blinked. For a long, long moment, silence settled in the warm light and soft carpet of that little room.

"It was a desperate gamble anyway," Rikter said at last. "As you said: fifty cruisers against a Sagittarian. But I had to try, didn't I?" He nodded, as if to himself, then stood up. "I know what comes next. I'll stand for it. Something like this, a man should stand up for." He straightened his uniform. "Perhaps Tamil will see a better way. But do it quickly, won't you, Petras? Don't make me stand here forever like a fool."

Petras sighed. It was all coming apart. Everyone had a thread, and couldn't they see, couldn't they see they were unraveling the tapestry?

"Senris Alpha Seven," he said.

Rikter's eyes narrowed. His lips moved silently; his legs quivered; and he fell.

Petras knelt beside him and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "You would have done it to me. I'm sorry I couldn't be better."

Outside, Rikter's personal bodyguards were carefully surrounded and contained.

Chapter 41

That night, Tamil called him in his room at the Spires.

Petras looked up at the screen into a face as tired and worn as his own, so very different from that boy in the Sun Palace who couldn't finish a sentence without apologizing, all those years ago. In Tamil's high cheekbones and thin nose, in the grim tightness of the mouth, Petras saw Rikter's pride – but not his certainty. Doubt and conviction warred on his face; the light of his intellect and the spirit of his family did battle behind his eyes. He was a terrible sight.

"I know why you did it, but I still hate you for it," he said.

Petras said nothing.

"I'll do what I can to preserve this peace," said Tamil. "It won't be easy. My people are furious. Monifice would have killed my father for far less, but their memories of Monifice are fading. There has already been violence. And with the Sag gone, their fear of you is quickly evaporating. My own support is diminishing even now; they loved my father, and each day I talk of peace, they love me less. I do not have control of my people. It may already be too late."

"Thank you."

"I'm not submitting to a lifeword."

"All right."

"Another thing. I'm working for peace, but I'm not a pacifist. We'll defend ourselves if attacked."

"I know."

Tamil stared at him.

"You killed my father," he said. "Damn you, you killed my father." The thin line of his lips wrenched into a grimace, and he pounded a fist on his desk. "Damn you, you killed my father!"

"If it helps," said Petras, "I watched my father die too. He was murdered. By the same man who murdered my son."

Tamil's eyes crackled with restrained lightning. His voice tore out of him through clenched teeth. "And how does it feel?"

"Empty. That's all it feels like, Tamil. Cold and empty."

Slowly, then, the lightning faded, and Tamil merely scowled.

"I know why you did it," he said, "but I still hate you for it."

The viewscreen went black.

** ** *

Late that night, Petras journeyed down from his rooms to another part of the Spires, to visit Talya. The wind tugged open his coat, and dark, icy rain lashed his skin. He could have taken the elevator, but he walked. It was good to be outside, to experience rain. It was good, occasionally, to touch something real.

He waited a while in front of her door, protected from the downpour by the overhang of her roof. Twice he reached out his hand to knock, but each time, instead, he waited, feeling the cold settle inside him. He had felt cold like this before, light-years away and a lifetime ago, in the winters of Winnoka. What fearful and beautiful days those had been: the rise and fall of his own father; the Star-Witch and her riddles; a bully who had destroyed his tower one day, without knowing why. Of course, even then he'd had problems, and dangers too, but back then it had not seemed so...

...so methodical.

Yes, he thought slowly – that was the word. Methodical. That was how it felt: a universe crafted to fall apart, a life designed for systematic destruction, starting from the atoms and all the way on up. It was like betting against the house; sometimes you won and sometimes you lost, but always you were part of a system, and the casino played a different sort of game.

Except, he didn't even want to win. He just wanted to stop hurting. He wanted the slow vise that tightened each day around his skull to release.

He wanted his wife and his son back.

Just then, he had a thought. Statistically speaking – run the numbers – there must

be millions of people hating him at any given time. He was famous enough; enough people disliked him for various reasons; just a mathematical artifact. At any single moment, across the galaxy, millions of people were thinking about him and hating him.

What I'm asking from you, in payment for this miracle, is duty.

You got your wish, didn't you, Star-Witch? You paid your end of the bargain, and I'm paying still.

Where are you, Chiyoko?

I need you, Chiyoko.

Petras knocked on the door, and it opened.

"Dad!" said Talya. "You're all wet! Come in! Why didn't you use the elevator?"

She helped him out of his coat as he murmured greetings and thank-yous. He took off his shoes, too. The air inside was warm. He sat on her couch, rubbing his hands together. She disappeared into the kitchen and came back a minute later with two mugs of something hot. "Are you hungry?" she said. "Can I get you anything?"

"I love you."

"Oh – Dad, I love you too."

"Sit beside me, will you?"

She did, and he pulled her close, and she laid her head on his shoulder. *This is why I did it*, he thought; *I remember, now. It was worth it.*

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"Everything. Everything. The whole thing, start to finish, top to bottom, absolutely everything, but you. Is it – " She had been about to speak. "Is it all right if we just sit for a while, and don't say anything?"

"Yeah. Sure, we can do that."

They sat together and listened to the wind and the rain.

** **

Tamil was right; he did not have control of his people.

One of his generals went rogue, claiming to have received secret orders from Rikter Faze before his death. No one ever found out if he really had. Four divisions of warships launched a blitzkrieg against the Darmian compound where their intelligence said new starkillers were still being constructed. It went up in a storm of fire and shrapnel. Preliminary reports estimated a few hundred casualties, perhaps half of them civilian. One Senrian cruiser was destroyed in the retreat. Afterward it was impossible to tell if the production lines at the facility had already been dismantled.

In a desperate play, Tamil executed the general and issued a formal apology within hours.

Nasir Croulin's popularity skyrocketed overnight. He called a meeting of the legislature, where he asked for, and received, emergency powers. He declared the treaty void, summoned all military reserves to active duty, restarted the starkiller program, and ordered an armada formed to defend the Darmian border.

The Emperor ordered him to withdraw his forces. In response, Croulin issued a statement in which Darmis formally seceded from the Riaadikan Empire and declared war on Senris. He named Padrian Werner his Supreme Commander.

Three days later, Darmis launched its counterattack.

PART V: DIMMEROK

Chapter 42

Petras sat alone before the pallid light of the computer screen. His skin and hair were white, and dark curves lay under his half-lidded eyes. He might almost have been asleep; only, his pupils swept back and forth like tiny moons, and his eyebrows rose and fell at odd intervals. His lips moved as he muttered to himself.

He was reading names.

"Amilyn Fisher," he whispered, just loud enough for his own ears. Amilyn's photo showed a bright-haired young woman, chin raised proudly, eyebrows narrowed as if looking into sunlight. Twenty-six years old – Talya's age – with seven of those in the Emperor's service. A lieutenant, grade four, with a specialization in tau neutrino dynamics. Commendation for a display of "exemplary technical proficiency" during the Maelstrom offensive. A husband, no children. Hobbies: rock climbing.

Dead.

"Feodore Jain." A middle-aged man with a broad, goofy smile. Patches of gray crept up his hair like early frost. Captain of a minor frigate, the kind Dreslin had wanted to improve with his designs. Eighteen years of service. Numerous decorations and honors. Married, two daughters. Hobbies: biofood gardening.

Dead.

Olmar Weiss.

Graam Selter.

Perstal Nevin.

All of them had died in the past twenty-five hours.

He had read close to five hundred names this morning, but yesterday's death toll ran over a million, military and civilian alike. They were carefully catalogued, these numbers, carefully arranged into crisp reports with thin black lines and primary colors. He knew the statistics. The lowest-ever single-day death toll was three thousand; the high was 18 million; the average was 1.4 million. Every day, for the past two and a half years. And every day for the past two and a half years, he had set aside thirty minutes in the morning for reading names.

He remembered that first morning of the war, when he had read the names and cried. Surely that had been a different man, younger and more sentimental. *It is not my fault*, he had told himself over and over, sometimes even believing it. But the pain and the guilt had dulled, now; they had moved deeper inside him, like parasitic worms, feeding silently. Tears didn't last. Nothing did.

That day when 18 million people died had come six months ago, when General Padrian Werner used a starkiller on the sun of a major military base. Four million soldiers, the rest civilians. So many starkiller losses. The Sun Palace at Sacadoor – and two full Senrian legions – had been among the war's first casualties. Werner knew how to use the threat of the starkiller, never permitting the Empire to concentrate its forces too much in one place. A war that would otherwise have ended in weeks, now dragged into its third year. Petras and Eddard had found a few strategies for repulsing the superweapon, but none were completely effective.

Thankfully, Tamil Faze was still alive. Thankfully, no starkiller had yet been used on a fully populated civilian world.

What kind of war made you grateful for the deaths of 18 million people?

Jienne's name had not yet appeared on these lists. Five Imperial cruisers now orbited her strategically insignificant planet. When he thought of that, he felt a little better.

A little.

His half hour was done.

He sighed in gratitude and switched off the screen, leaning back in his chair. Two and a half years he had hidden behind these thick walls, leaning back in this comfortable chair, resting his feet on plush carpets, while outside, the universe in great bloody spasms ripped itself apart. Knowing that guilt was worse than useless did nothing to relieve it. He found small ways to punish himself, sometimes; he would turn off the climate control and let the rooms get uncomfortably hot, or remain standing when he felt like sitting down. Absurd, pathetic little gestures. These, too, were worse than useless, and usually he was strong enough to resist them.

Sometimes he would drag his fingernails hard across his arms, leaving red lines, but that was not to punish himself. That was just to have something to feel.

Enough, he thought angrily, standing up. *You know better than to think like that. Besides, it's not like you're alone.*

He picked up the gift Talya had bought him from some little offworld shop, over a year ago. It was a perfectly useless lump of bright orange polycore, engraved with the words: SOMEONE LOVES YOU. Exactly the kind of thing he had always dismissed before as sentimental nonsense when he saw it on a shelf somewhere. But it wasn't nonsense anymore, because SOMEONE was Talya.

Talya had been a great comfort to him ever since her return from the Maelstrom. Something had changed her there; she was quieter. Kinder. Maybe sadder. She brought him lunches that his servants were quite capable of delivering, and she listened as he puzzled aloud over supply chains and fleet alignments, pacing long circles around her in his dining room. And on the weeks she visited her mother, he still had Zethius.

No, he was not alone.

He tapped his netlink to activate the viewscreen, wondering what the news networks were making of last night's offensive. Their precise commentary and color-coded maps and brought its own brand of clarity, deceptive though it sometimes was.

An attractive, middle-aged reporter was trying to interview a sad, heavy old man in a crowded tent, evidently a refugee shelter. She kept asking him questions about where he had come from, what had happened to his house, his family. But all he would do was shake his great head sadly, moving the shadows over his wrinkled face in the camera-light. "I have nothing," he said, dropping his great hands and raising them. "I have nothing. Nothing." Another question. "No, nothing, nothing."

Petras flicked off the screen and went outside.

A warm sun rose over a cloudless sky. He walked to the railing and looked down on the wide green fields of his Palace. These had changed, like everything else. Before, he would have seen only the occasional groundsman moving across their crisp, manicured surfaces; now huge clusters of tents sprawled over the grass, and human beings moved all in and around like ants. Riaad, too, was taking in refugees.

He had visited the tents before, but not often. A security risk, he was told. With that many people in one place, said Zethius, who knew what could happen?

If only Karmindy were still alive. If only he had her crystal-clean insight, he could have ended this war months ago, starkillers be damned. If only...

I have nothing. Nothing. No, nothing, nothing.

18 million people.

He glanced up at the immense Observatory. An old photo of Karmindy and Dreslin, posing at the top of that tower, suddenly flashed in his mind, cutting fresh pain in a wound that had long since scabbed over. He reached up and felt tears fall over aching cheeks.

Silly human nature, Karmindy might have said: that two names could succeed at drawing tears where a million names had failed. Weren't all those other deaths just as real? Wasn't each one a separate, cutting wound, a unique obscenity? Wasn't this entire goddamned war just a mindless repetition of those two deaths, changing only the details of who and when and how? Two and a half years, a million times a day, like a factory: Karmindy and Dreslin, Karmindy and Dreslin, Karmindy and –

Petras turned back, stormed through his door and up his stairs. A drawer in the bedroom unlocked at the presence of his netlink, and opened at his touch. Only two items lay in the drawer: a pad of paper and a thick gold-and-silver writing pen. He set the pad on the dresser, then picked up the pen – hesitated a while in thought, the tip hovering over the flat surface – and began to write.

I don't care what you said, Star-Witch, I know you can read this and I know you will. You're the only person in the universe who can help me. I broke your cat and I'm truly very sorry about that. I didn't tell you about the Sag ghost and I'm truly very sorry

about that too. If you want to watch the Gardenia Emperor bow his nose to the floor and beg your indulgence, you know where to find me. If you can't get past my guards, then I've vastly overestimated your abilities.

Please, Star-Witch. I need a miracle.

He dropped the pen and stepped back as if it might sting him. Breathing fast, he reread the note, wishing the fate of the galaxy didn't depend on this scrap of blocky, inelegant handwriting.

Petras paced a while. He had long ago configured his netlink to chirp if he ever got a message from Chiyoko, so he would know if she tried to contact him that way. Five minutes passed. He checked the fleet logs; no movement in the past hour. He picked up a report from one of his generals that he hadn't had time to finish last night. The day passed slowly, like so many others: reports, analysis, lunch, a meeting with the Circle, a visit from Talya.

It wasn't until that evening, after Talya had left, that he returned to the bedroom and felt the cold edge of a knife under his chin.

"Your Majesty," she hissed.

Chapter 43

He swallowed, and the knife pricked his Adam's apple. She was behind him.

"That isn't necessary," he said carefully. "I only want to talk."

She sounded amused. But then, she usually did. "You didn't mind so much when I got Monifce like this."

"I'm not Monifice. If there's something you want, tell me. We can talk."

"Talk. You always did like to talk." He drew a grateful breath as the knife disappeared, and she sauntered into his vision, the weapon already hidden. "You don't live to my age without taking precautions. Emperors get funny ideas sometimes."

"You have nothing to fear from me."

"No?" Something about her was different. Not her appearance – same nondescript civilian clothes, same twenty-year-old face, same black hair and star-bright eyes. The change was in her voice. Underneath her usual playful, half-mocking tone, she sounded...angry. A little tired. "And why might I not trust you, Petras? Hm? Can you imagine any reason?"

"I really am sorry about the cat. For what it's worth, it happened right after my wife and my son were...lost to me. But I know I shouldn't have – "

She laughed. It sounded fake. "Petras, the original cat from Japan got broken twenty-five thousand years ago, by my very first student, in a tantrum not unlike your own. Do you have any idea how many facsimiles my later protégés went through? How long ago my trust in you people evaporated?"

He stared. "So when you refused to help me because I broke it – "

" – it was *exactly* the same as if you'd done it for real," she finished. "You're boring me, Emperor. This isn't my first time having this argument, either."

He was shaking his head. "All right! You want to punish me, then punish *me*, don't drag the rest of the universe into it! Do you know how many people are dying out there every day because of your stubbornness?"

"If you want to watch the Gardenia Emperor bow his nose to the floor and beg

your indulgence..." she quoted, giggling even as more anger crept into her voice. "Oh, my. I hope someday you, too, are lectured by an infant. It's entirely surreal. You may recall, Petras, I have given *some thought* to the state of our species. I have taken some mild interest in our evolutionary cul-de-sac, some passing concern that our puffed-up king is more loyal to our Irth-killing neighbors than the woman who saved his life on three separate occasions. But when I asked *you* for a miracle, when I said I needed information on the Sags and *only you* could help – you didn't offer any bows then, did you, Emperor?"

He didn't try to salvage clarity from these twisted lines of logic. "I won't defend myself. All I care about is ending this war. You remember what a difference it made when the Sag ended the blockade around Sacadoor. If you or Rin could do something similar..."

"Rin." She had stopped pretending, now, and only grimness remained in the thin pale line of her lips. "Rin was a little kid's imaginary friend. That creature that crouches out there in the dark doesn't have a name, and it's even more of a traitor than you are. Do you believe, Petras, that it *knew*. When I ran to it crying, 'Oh, I've learned who murdered the Motherworld,' do you believe that goddamn floating Christmas ornament *knew it all along*?" The knife was in her hand again somehow, but she didn't threaten him. She only twirled it through her fingers, a kaleidoscopic motion too quick to follow, glinting quick flashes from the overhead chandelier. "As for me, the Star-Witch helps those who help themselves."

It took a mental effort to pull his eyes away from the whirling knife. Chiyoko, making no such effort, remained enraptured by her own hand. "I'll help myself," he

answered, "if you tell me what to do."

Her gaze and her tone remained so fixed that he didn't realize at first she was actually giving him what he asked for. "The Sagittarians are the key," she said. "Just like before. You can use them, and if you do it right, they'll never even know about it. But it will be dangerous. You're not going to like it."

Over the next few minutes, she outlined a plan for him. She was right. He didn't like it. But a war against Padrian Werner left little room for such niceties. Toward the end, he found himself nodding, ignoring the icewater chill that rippled through his scalp.

"What's more," she said, "you're in luck. An incident occurred just three days ago at the Thistledown border. Check your logs. It'll give you exactly what you need." She checked the time on her netlink. "I have to go."

"Chiyoko – " He couldn't bring himself to call her Star-Witch to her face. Not anymore. But he could force out these words, because they were still true, no matter how bitter they'd become. "Thank you."

She waved away his thanks with the same hand that had once again hidden the knife. "God knows why I'm helping you. Stupidity, I think. But hey: if this plan ratchets up tensions with the Sags like I think it will, it might finally push your sad, broken little Empire past its Plateau. But I don't have much hope."

He had just one more question. Part of him thought he shouldn't ask, but he knew it would come up whether he asked or not. Better to know, at least. "What's the price for the miracle this time?"

But she only gave one more inscrutable laugh.

"You'll owe me a favor," she said; and she slipped past him out of the room, and

was gone.

Chapter 44

Three Imperial frigates, cut off from the main fleet, veered away sharply; twelve smaller Darmian corvettes followed in close pursuit. The Imperials were more powerful, but they were outnumbered, and slower as well. The relentless exchange of fire was wearing them down. The three Imperial captains must have known they faced death; doubtless it was what drove them to enter this region of space.

The Darmian ships did not even hesitate as they crossed that invisible boundary plane in space, though their sensors, and helmsmen, must surely have warned them where they were. No matter; this was war. And for a time, their recklessness seemed vindicated. They drew closer to their prey – closer – closer –

A single Sagittarian ship appeared – a speck, even compared to the smaller Darmian vessels. It fell into pursuit behind the Darmians, effortlessly matching speed and course. Then it flashed, and twelve bolts of blood-red light sparked out of it, instantly destroying the twelve ships.

A few seconds later it flashed again, and three more bolts fired, engulfing the three Imperial ships in deadly fire.

Petras clicked off the video and surveyed the assembled Circle with a frown.

"This was taken four days ago by a remote sensor near the border between the Thistledown region and Sagittarian space," he said. "All fifteen ships were completely destroyed. There were no survivors.

"Gentlemen, what happened there was a tragic loss. But I believe it may be the

beginning of an even bigger opportunity."

Petras glanced down the long, faux-mahogany table, trying to gauge the Circle's reactions. Eddard sat erect and impassive as usual; but then, he already knew what Petras was going to say. Relina, meanwhile, examined her long white nails, seemingly bored with the whole production, while Sama's pretty green eyes had lost none of their devoted intensity. Only Heryld seemed truly antagonistic, hunched over the table, his dour lips tightening to little knots of displeasure now and again with the effort of restraining his outbursts.

It was the best Petras could expect.

"The opportunity," he continued, "is to remind our people – Senrian and Darmian alike, because they're all our people – that we face a much greater threat than each other. The Sagittarians are nominally our allies, but they are also a dangerous race, mysterious, powerful, and unpredictable. This destructive battle with Darmis only weakens us both, while the Sagittarians watch. If we can make our own race understand that, we can end this war."

Heryld could take no more and burst out at last: "Is anyone else hearing this nonsense? Are we really supposed to believe we can say 'Look, aliens!' and our enemies will surrender? We've known for decades that Thistledown was restricted space." He turned on Eddard. "Why are you wasting our time with this?"

Eddard ignored him. Petras did not.

"I am not suggesting the Darmians will surrender," he said. "But inciting a judicious respect of the Sagittarian threat will have at least two benefits.

"First, greater support on the home front. You've all seen the figures. Sales of war

bonds are down forty percent in the last six months. Morale is dropping. Most Riaadikan citizens now believe the Crown should pull out of the war, let Senris and Darmis fight it out. We all know what a disaster that would be, but you see the dilemma. The Sagittarians would give people a reason to care about victory.”

“What’s the other reason?” said Sama. Heryld scowled at her. She glared back.

“The other reason is that it will convince Na Jamajna.”

His answer brought a low murmur of appreciation. Na Jamajna had kept Vorne neutral in the conflict, declaring that none of the great powers really cared about the Thousand and it was time to send a message. This had deprived the Crown of Vorne’s brilliant engineers, but more importantly, Jamajna had convinced the other landgraves. She now led a bloc of over three hundred landgraviates that had declared neutrality. They were violating their oaths of fealty, of course, but Petras could not very well use lifewords on three hundred landgraves.

“Nothing will convince that woman,” Relina said finally, but she sounded unsure.

“Even if it works,” said Heryld, “has any of you spared a thought for the politics of this? You rebrand your strongest ally as an enemy, and you're going to lose supporters.”

“My supporters are few enough as it is,” said Petras, “and how many still believe I have any real sway with the Sagittarians? If I did, wouldn’t the war be over by now? Besides, what's left of the Assembly won’t risk a wartime impeachment.”

“And after the war?” said Heryld.

“Then let them impeach me, if they like. Nothing would make me happier than to trade this throne for peace.”

“I’d rather trade good intentions for warships,” grumbled Heryld.

“We have to be cautious, though,” said Eddard. “There’s a careful balance here. If we don’t make the Sags seem threatening enough, we won’t convince anyone. But if we go too far, we risk pushing ourselves into a whole new war.”

You’re worried now, thought Petras. Imagine what you’d think if you learned that the Sags destroyed Irth. Petras and Chiyoko were the only humans alive who knew that apocalyptic secret, which, if ever released, meant a short road to Dimmerok.

The Circle debated for another hour. In the end, even Heryld agreed the plan was worth a try.

** ** *

Eddard arranged a strategic public leak of the video, which spread like fire across the galaxy. Petras denied the video’s authenticity at first. Then, as analyses multiplied and a growing consensus opposed him, he admitted the truth. The effect was exactly what he’d hoped for: a few nursed conspiracy theories, but almost everyone believed the video was real. From there, the speculation began.

There had been rumors, of course, that the Sags had this kind of power. The *Rothgar*, the Battle of Sacadoor, Rikter’s two cruisers at Dover: details of these incidents had never been confirmed, but were difficult to cover up completely. But dubious rumors of a powerful neighbor were one thing; a video like this, showing their front-line defenses casually exterminated, was very different. And the indiscriminant way the Sags destroyed Imperial and Darmian ships alike sent a clear message: these aliens do not care about tribal differences; we are lesser beings to them. As a propaganda piece, it spoke for itself, and could hardly have spoken more perfectly. Petras followed it with other statements,

carefully fueling fears that the Sagittarians were becoming more dangerous, doing his best not to push the rhetoric too far.

It took three months of careful pressure, but Na Jamajna finally broke neutrality and sided with the Empire. Most of her bloc went with her.

The extra pressure opened a new front for the Darmians, who had to stretch their old defenses thinner. Eddard took advantage of the weakness and ordered a daring strike on a starkiller factory, which crippled the Darmians further. As a result, more of Darmis's allies in the Thousand fled back to their old sovereign, who had promised amnesty to any who returned their allegiance before the end of the war.

Slowly, impossibly, week after week, the shift gained momentum. After six more months – each with its fresh list of names – Petras realized it was only a matter of time. Another month after that, and the time was up.

The war was over. He'd won.

** **

When Eddard told him that Croulin was willing to sign the treaty, it was strange; for even then he did not quite feel happy. Or if he did, it was happiness in the abstract – happiness supplied by a rational mind which assured him the criteria for happiness had been met.

But he imagined Karmindy would be proud of him, and he really did smile at that.

Meanwhile he signed the papers, he shook the hands, and the celebrations went on for weeks. Eddard's team prepared speeches that Petras delivered before endless crowds in endless stadiums and parks and arenas. The real work of reconstruction and reunification would take years, of course. Nasir Croulin was arrested, publicly tried, and

privately executed. Petras would take no more chances letting such men survive. Eddard hand-picked his successor, Nasir Grellack, who began the long and difficult labor of restoring civil rights to the Darmian people.

The official memorial to the war was a simple one. A small pavilion of black polycore was set up in the Imperial Gardens, and volunteers took three-hour shifts reading aloud from the list of names of those killed. When the reading was complete, the memorial would be left empty. A plaque at the pavilion estimated how long it would take: two hundred and eighty-five years. Petras took the very first shift, and wept.

But the Imperial Navy had not yet tracked down Padrian Werner; and the thought of that stone-eyed murderer walking free filled Petras with a deep, queasy unrest, an irrational certainty that all this progress would yet evaporate.

Chapter 45

The first step toward the final crisis came at dawn, as the earliest rays of red light fell streaming through Petras's bedroom window. He had finished dressing when his netlink made that distinctive chirp that meant Chiyoko was calling. He was so surprised he didn't answer till the second ring.

"Chiyoko?"

"Petras. Get my note?"

"What note?"

"Did you just wake up? Go downstairs."

Bemused, he obeyed. He found a scrap of paper pinned to his dining room table with one of her distinctive curvy-bladed knives. CALL ME.

"You could have used a paperweight. This was a very nice table."

"It's just polycore. It'll give your servants something to do. So did I give you good advice, or what? Was it a fun, exciting plan?"

"It was good advice. Thank you. Really." Sincere, but cautious.

"Dangerous, Petras. It was *dangerous* advice. I told you that before. You know what a risky game this is, vilifying the Sags. I don't have to tell you where that leads, right? Starts with a 'D' and rhymes with *immerok*."

"We've been watching that closely. Tensions with the Sags have mostly subsided."

"For now, sure. Wait till the celebrations are over and people find a little time on their hands. They're not going to forget about this."

Petras gingerly took hold of the knife and plucked it out of the table. The metal of the pommel was cold against his skin. Holding this weapon felt oddly intimate, a connection to Chiyoko he'd never had before. "What do you suggest?"

"You need to work it from both angles. You need to talk to the Sags and fix this thing once and for all."

What? "They don't want to talk to me. They've made that pretty clear. Besides, what would I say?"

"Don't worry. I have another plan. Meet me at the Thistledown border in five hours, and bring the J-wave amplifier so we can try a little ship-to-ship dialogue. Come alone."

He didn't even try to keep the suspicion out of his voice. "Alone? Why?"

"Because that's how diplomacy works. Also, because I said so, and you owe me a

rather sizable favor." He hesitated, and she sighed. "Don't forget the last time I paid you a visit. If I wanted to hurt you, do you think I'd need to drag you halfway across the Milky Way to do it?"

"All right," he said finally. "I'll be there."

Chiyoko ended the call.

Petras paced for a few minutes, thinking. This sudden idea of Chiyoko's would make him nervous till he knew what she intended. Still, he was glad to be leaving the Palace. He was sick of his gilded rooms, sick of comfort, sick of protection.

For the first time in years, he was *doing* something instead of just *ordering* something.

He was about to leave, to hunt down a J-wave amplifier and a shuttle, when the doorbell chimed. He glanced at the security viewscreen. Talya.

"You'll have to come back later," he said through the intercom. "I'm busy."

"With what? Can't I just talk to you for a second?"

He was about to invent some excuse when he looked at her image, and realized that if something went wrong, this could be the last time he would see his daughter.

"All right. Come on in."

She opened the door, letting in cool dawn air. "I know it's early, but Zethius says today is the last time the moonflowers will bloom, and – " She stopped abruptly. "Dad, what's wrong?"

Had it been that obvious? "I have an errand to run. I'll be back tonight."

"Where?"

"Secret Emperor stuff." He smiled. She did not.

"The war is over. Why do you look so worried?"

"I didn't know I did," he said, which was true enough. "Important business, that's all. If I look nervous, it's because I don't want to mess it up. But I'll be fine."

"Who's going with you?"

"No one."

"You're going *alone*?"

"Yes," he said, getting annoyed. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Dad, when do you ever go anywhere *alone*?"

"Today," he said, the door shutting behind him as he walked outside.

She didn't follow.

He was relieved, and only a little disappointed.

** ** *

Three hours later he jumped to the Thistledown Gate, and another thirty minutes' flight brought him in sight of Chiyoko's craft. She flew a Riaadikan corvette, a tube-shaped craft like a bundle of reeds, five times longer than his own vessel and about the biggest thing a single person could easily pilot. His shuttle was a lot faster and better armed than a comparable civilian model, but it was still no match for a corvette.

If she wanted to hurt him, this was her chance.

He opened a comm channel, and she glared at him from his viewscreen. "I told you to come alone."

"I did."

"Tell that to your life support system. My sensors say it's pumping enough oxygen for two people."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're looking at me right now, Chiyoko. This isn't a very big shuttle. Do you see someone else here?"

Right then, something clicked softly behind him.

He turned around. Talya stepped out of the rear storage closet, brushing specks of dirt off her pants.

"Talya?" he said.

She met his gaze defiantly. "What?"

"What do you mean, *what*? How did you – " He glanced at the viewscreen behind him, then back to Talya. "How did you know I was going to take this shuttle? How did you get *on* this shuttle?"

"You gave me security clearance Beta, remember? And you always take this shuttle."

"Yeah, but..." He pointed at the storage closet. "I opened that."

"There's another compartment behind it." She was trying to straighten her dark brown hair, which had grown longer these past few weeks. "Kind of smaller than it looked in the diagram."

"Your pardon," Chiyoko said. "The logistics are fascinating, but perhaps the relevant question is *why is she here*?"

"Watch your tone with the Emperor," Talya snapped.

"Give me a minute," Petras added, interrupting Chiyoko's next comment. He flipped off the comm channel and turned to his daughter, folding his arms and waiting for an explanation.

"Don't look at me that way," she said sullenly. "What else could I do? I couldn't

let you go off all alone like that."

"You had no idea where I was going. You could have put yourself in a lot of danger – or me. We may *still* be in a lot of danger."

"Dad, I couldn't let you go without anybody – "

"You have to trust that I can make these decisions for myself. There are some things I have to do, that – "

"Alone is how you die, Dad!"

She turned half away from him, toward the viewscreen with Chiyoko's corvette. She went on more quietly. "I saw it happen to Anton. He lived his whole life alone. He was alone, in his mind, even after I joined him. You don't go off and kill yourself in some crazy way like that if you have friends." The words came pouring out of her now. "And I left Dreslin, and that was my fault, and now I'm back and I don't want anyone else to die."

"Talya..."

But what could he say?

Unbidden the images flashed through his mind: his father, the widower, whose life had really ended long before the final ripgun. Chiyoko, who called herself the loneliest person alive, now cut off from even her mysterious alien sponsor.

Karmindy, who had needed him for seventeen years and never said so.

Alone is how you die.

A sudden pounding in his ears made him look at the viewscreen. The Sagittarian vessel hovered there, black and purple against the stars, fangs gleaming. The power of a hundred dreadnoughts in a ship half the size of Chiyoko's corvette. It lay just on the other

side of the Sagittarian border – waiting.

<We must have an end of this, Speaker.>

The comm light flashed, and he tapped his netlink. Chiyoko's face returned to the viewscreen. "What's going on?" she said. She sounded cautious, now, rather than angry.

"Did you call it here?"

"No."

<Hello, ambassador.>

<Why have you come? There can be no more talk between us. We must have an end of this.>

"Why am I here, Chiyoko?" He imagined the creature floating in its methane, flushed red with indignation. He would have paced in the tiny shuttle if Talya weren't there. "Star-Witch! Talk to me! This was your idea, so tell me what to do!"

But she was looking at something offscreen, not even listening. He cursed.

Time to improvise.

<Speaker, I wish to apologize for the recent unpleasantness between us. The ships that attacked you were acting without my permission. I would like us to be friends once more.>

"Dad!"

"Not now, Talya. I'm talking to the Sag."

"I know! I can hear it – I can hear both of you. *Speaker, I wish to apologize...that's* what you said, right?" She tapped the side of her head. "My ears hurt, just like yours. I knew it! I *knew* I could do it, after I linked with Anton. He showed me how to listen!"

He stared at her, mouth open. The ambassador left him little time to ponder,

though.

<You offer this apology on behalf of your Ruler?>

<I am the Ruler.>

<I do not understand. You are the Speaker.>

<I am the Speaker, and I am the Ruler.>

Rage, like a furnace blast through the link. *<No Ruler can be his own Speaker! Is this why you are so confused? Is this why you waste my time?>*

Had he really never told the Sag that he was Emperor? He hadn't meant to keep it a secret, but thinking back, he couldn't remember a time when it had come up. Could he possibly have picked a worse time to mention it?

Petras began to pace after all, a tight circle in that confined space. He had to shut out the hammering of his heart and *think*.

The Sag thundered in his head again. *<Ruler, you cannot be Speaker. There must be a new Speaker!>*

"Let me do it," Talya said at once. "It's perfect! I can already hear it. I know everything you do about the Sags."

Not quite everything. "That kind of visibility is dangerous. I can't let you – "

"Dangerous? What do you think an angry Sagittarian is?"

<My patience has ended, Ruler! What is your answer?>

"Dad, you have to let me talk to it! If you want to protect me, let me do this!"

He sighed. Damn it all, she was right.

He nodded his assent.

And he heard her voice in his mind.

<I will be Speaker.>

Just like that, the Sag's anger extinguished. A child with a new toy.

<You will be Speaker for this Ruler?>

<Yes.>

Pleasure. *<Tell me your history.>*

She looked at Petras. He nodded encouragement.

<Our history stretches back over thirty thousand years, to when we all lived on a single planet – >

Chiyoko's voice interrupted. "Petras."

"Not now," he said. "Whatever you were planning on doing out here, it'll have to wait. We're in the middle of something important."

"Not as important as this," she smiled. "I want you to meet somebody."

"Whoever it is, I'm sure they can – "

Someone new spoke up. "Hello, Petras."

Icy terror flooded his veins. He looked up. Another face had joined Chiyoko on the comm viewscreen.

Padrian Werner.

A smile cut across that craggy face. Werner's short-cropped hair had gone white with age, but his rough voice was just as terrible as Petras remembered. "You still remember me, don't you?"

Petras found his voice. "General Werner, I'm sure there's a lot on your mind, but we're in the middle of very delicate talks with the Sagittarian ambassador. You know what it's capable of. If this goes wrong – "

“Oh, yes, the Sagittarians. The *ambassador*. We’re always tiptoeing around, trying not to anger our gods. Let me see if I can solve your ambassador problem.”

Werner’s face contorted suddenly to a mask of rage. He roared triumphantly. Pain and terror erupted in Petras’s mind, and just as quickly disappeared.

On the field of stars, the Sagittarian ship exploded.

Petras stared.

Werner threw his arm around Chiyoko. “The Star-Witch has taken me on as her newest pupil. Got bored with you, I’m afraid. You wouldn’t *believe* the stuff she knows how to do!”

Even as Petras struggled to sort all this out, a part of him seized on a small but crucial detail.

He can hear me. He isn't deaf anymore. He can hear my voice.

"Darmis Gamma Twelve!" he shouted.

Absolutely nothing happened.

"He tried it!" Chiyoko laughed, looking at Werner. "Didn't I tell you he'd try it?" She turned back to Petras. "Oh, Petras. Who do you think *invented* lifewords?"

Chapter 46

Petras was right: his shuttle was no match for Chiyoko's corvette.

He and Talya sat on a rough gray packing crate in the middle of the corvette's cargo hold – a wide space, mostly empty, save for a few containers scattered over the unswept floor. No ropes or manacles restrained him or his daughter. Chiyoko didn't bother with such things. She sat a few meters away on another crate, playing with one of

her knives – not her usual quick, flashy twirls, just tilting it back and forth slowly between her fingers. Padrian Werner stood on his own, facing them in a Darmian general's blue-and-black parade uniform, hands behind his back.

Chiyoko broke the silence first, not bothering to look up from her fingers. "I told you, Petras. I told you a long time ago. Get your shit together, do what I tell you, and I'll give you something good. You never could manage it, could you? Well, Mr. Werner's shit is most definitely together, and I gave him something good. I took him to visit Rin. He has all the same powers I do, now." She smirked. "Not that you could possibly guess what a prize that truly is."

Petras chose his answer carefully, fighting down the sickness of his terror, the reeling disbelief that Chiyoko could possibly betray him on this scale. They had killed the Sag ambassador, and that alone might be the end already, might push the Empire over the brink to a new and unimaginable war. If only Talya were safe at the Palace, he might have a little more room to maneuver. With her sitting here, he didn't dare anger them.

"I'll be honest," he said, "I never thought even you could do that to a Sag ship."

She giggled. "That was Padrian, actually. You see, Rin's power is a sort of balance. You can draw on it just a little, do a few parlor tricks, and leave it plenty of energy to live on. Or you can say to hell with it, hurt the fucker a bit, and pull enough power to light up a Sagittarian. An Irth-killer and an Irth-killer's friend. I say they both deserve whatever they get." She angled her head at Werner and winked. "Hope you don't mind. I told him our little secret about what happened to the Motherworld."

Petras kept his features calm even as the fear-sickness roiled inside him, even as Talya looked to him in bewilderment. If Padrian Werner knew...

This was it. This was the end. No more chance at salvation.

"I remember another scene, Petras," said Werner, "like this one, but reversed. You were the one standing, watching me, with all your power, and I was the prisoner. Something unfortunate had happened to your son. You looked at me, and you said, why, Padrian? Why did you do it? And I said..." He chuckled. "Well, I was preoccupied, and who knows what I said. But I ought to give you an answer.

"It's very simple. I did it because I thought you would kill me for it. I thought I could be more use as a martyr than languishing in jail.

"You see, I'm a patriot. Nothing more. I only want one thing: for Darmis to be strong. And I'll fight anyone who tries to make us weak, whether it's you, or Nasir Asemeian, or these..." Werner filled the word with disgust. "*Sagittarians*." He took a step toward Petras. "I don't know how you stand it, being around them. Looking at them. Having them in your *head*. What does that do to a person? Hell, you know what happened to Irth! You know what they *are*, and you're still trying to protect them? They're freaks, Petras! They're disgusting! Have you *looked* at them?"

"You're pretty fucking ugly yourself," said Talya.

The grin crept back to Werner's face. He wagged his finger at her. "Now you are a surprise. I figured I'd get your dad, and I was so hoping for the Sag, too, for the chance to see if I really could blow it out of the sky. But I couldn't have hoped for a bonus like you. You're going to make this so much easier."

"Fuck you," Talya growled. "You killed my little brother, you piece of shit."

"Your little brother killed himself, sweetie, because death is what happens to people when they're weak. If your dad understood that, I wouldn't be alive today to have

this conversation."

"Fuck you!"

"Creative, isn't she?" He pulled a palm-sized slate-gray trapezoid from his pocket.

"Do you recognize this, Petras?"

Petras heard his own voice go soft and earnest, with an edge of panic he couldn't quite keep out. "That isn't necessary. Whatever you want me to do, I'll do it. Whatever you're after, you can have it. You don't have to turn that on."

"You *do* recognize it. Karmindy used this once, on a Darmian agent, didn't she? What a tricky ethical puzzle for you! But isn't it funny how quick those abstractions get resolved when they're aimed at someone you love?"

He pointed the little device at Talya, and she writhed on the ground, howling, even as Petras fell to his knees and begged. Her knees jerked toward her chin and back down. Her fingers spasmed as her screams crested, fell, and rose high again.

Finally she stopped screaming and lay there, panting, with tears in her eyes.

Padrian Werner's hard green eyes turned deadly grim. "I held that button for just fifteen seconds. It took your wife almost ten minutes to tire of playing that game with my Darmian agent. Now I think you owe me an apology."

Petras felt tears spill from his own cheeks. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Good." Werner clapped his hands. "Well, that's settled. Here's the deal. I've got a species to annihilate, and now that I know firepower's not a problem, I'm anxious to get this war started. You, Petras – are you paying attention? – you are going to call the Assembly of Worlds in the next twenty-five hours, and you're going to deliver a speech for me. You're going to play the video of the Sag ship tearing our Mother Irth to hell, and

then you're going to explain exactly what it means, and exactly why we need to go and do the same thing to them. I'll take it from there. I don't think I'll have to blow up too many more Sags before the Impo put on blue and black again, and we've got ourselves a Darmian Galactic Empire once more. And just so we're clear..."

He glanced at Chiyoko. "The Truth Scanner, please?"

She fumbled the slim gray rectangle from her pocket, turned it on, and pointed it at Werner. She spoke with an inflectionless tone, as if reciting something she'd memorized. "If Petras Fairburn does what you just ordered, do you promise you will leave his daughter safe and unharmed?"

"Yes."

"And if he doesn't give the speech in the next twenty-five hours, do you promise to kill his daughter by leaving on the torture device until she dies of shock?"

The bastard didn't even blink. "Yes. In case you're wondering, Petras, the onset of terminal shock generally takes about four hours."

She waved the Truth Scanner. "No beeps yet." A quick adjustment to the controls, and she pointed it at Petras. "And do you, Sire, promise to follow Padrian Werner's orders, and also do your very best to launch the Empire into a full-scale war with the Sagittarians?"

Petras felt the invisible vise tighten in his mind as he looked down at Talya, who still lay quivering and silent on the ground, too weak to rise. "Yes."

"Ha!" Werner grinned. "Fantastic. I really couldn't have hoped for better. Well, Sire, you're a busy man, and I won't keep you." He glanced at Chiyoko. "You'll see him off?"

She nodded, and he left.

Chiyoko dragged her crate closer to Petras and tossed aside the Truth Scanner. She put her hands on her knees examined him thoughtfully.

"I hope you're not expecting a rescue," she said. "If you're looking for a miracle this time, you'll have to look pretty hard."

He could not make himself look at her. "I'd like to check on Talya," he said. "If you don't mind."

"I do mind," she said. "I've got important things to say. Leave her, she'll be all right on her own. Eventually."

She was correct. Physically, Talya would be fine. The torture devices were carefully designed for that. Right now he could help Talya most by keeping calm and listening carefully, searching for any hint of a weakness. Petras said nothing.

"He's much more fun than you are, you know – Werner, I mean. With you it was always 'duty' this, 'suffering' that, a little talk about responsibility and then a whole lot of failing. God, you were depressing. Still are. Just being around you makes me want to..." She mimicked pulling a trigger at her head. "No surprise about your son, I guess."

Even this did not make Petras really angry. She was only baiting him. Cold reality was so much worse than these empty words. He said nothing.

"Don't worry. It'll be over soon, and we're better off without you. Werner's got his strike against the Sags all planned out – something you never would've dared. Of course, he also has a shot of actually winning. When you combine my powers with, you know, genuine military experience, the results can be pretty devastating. Even so, I could never understand why you didn't at least *think* about going after them yourself. You know what

they've done, Petras. Doesn't that mean anything to you? Don't you have any pride in yourself? In your species? I'd almost think you like them better than your own race!"

Chiyoko glanced at the door. In that brief moment, the way the overhead light fell on her face, Petras might have guessed she had aged after all, just the least bit – something in the line of her mouth, the angle of her eyes, to suggest she was no longer twenty years old. But when she turned back, it was gone.

"Don't worry, I won't be long. You aren't much of a conversation partner, and even gloating loses its luster after thirty thousand years of superiority. This whole thing has been adorable, you know. Start to finish. Depressing, yes, but adorable. It's like a fairy tale. Small-town boy gets lucky, overcomes the odds, is crowned Emperor! He won't let his complete lack of competence get in the way. He just keeps chugging along..."

She giggled, then slowly turned serious for the first time.

"You want to know why I betrayed you, Petras? I'll tell you. I didn't betray you. You betrayed me. I trained you, I built you up from nothing, I saved your life, I handed you the universe on a platter, I gave you the thing most precious to me in the world, and you...what did you do?" Her eyes narrowed. "What *did* you do, Petras? Did you do anything? Anything at all? Did you show any hint of leadership, of insight, of initiative? I can't understand it. Even a tyrant would've been better than you, because at least a tyrant would've done *something*. Speaking as your mentor, Petras, I have to say, in all honesty – it was embarrassing.

"Why did I turn on you? Why *wouldn't* I? Can you even conceive how far above your level Padrian Werner is? Listen to me. This is important. Werner has power now

like you can't imagine. He is *everywhere*. He sees *everything*." She pointed at a camera on the ceiling that Petras hadn't noticed before. "He's watching us right now, and he'll be watching you at your Assembly speech, too. You were defined by your empire, but Werner is the opposite. His empire will be defined by him. He is the keystone – the eye of the hurricane. Everything, *everything* that will happen in this coup, will happen because of him. Do you know what it's *like* to be in the presence of a man like that? Someone who has a plan for things before he blunders into them?

"Hell, do you even care? Maybe you think you'll stumble through this crisis like you've stumbled through everything else in your life. Still expecting some miracle." Her voice got suddenly louder. "I mean honestly, Petras, did you really think it would be as easy as walking in and saying, 'I am the one true Emperor?'"

She sighed.

"It doesn't matter, does it? Time to get you onto your shuttle. I suppose this is the last time I'll see you. Not much reason for Werner to keep you alive afterward."

He knelt and hugged Talya tight. She groaned and embraced him back.

"I love you, Dad."

"I love you, Talya. I won't let them hurt you again."

They remained like that, crying silently, till Chiyoko pulled him away. He shouted goodbye to his daughter, but she was still too weak to reply. Chiyoko ushered him through the airlock and into his shuttle, and was about to return the way she'd come.

"Chiyoko."

She turned back, without much interest. "It can talk. What, Petras?"

"Don't let him break his promise."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't you have more important things to worry about?"

And then, once more, Petras Fairburn found himself alone.

Chapter 47

Werner and Chiyoko let him leave. They didn't try to follow. They had all the hold on him they needed.

Petras paced the floor furiously on the trip back to Riaad, doing his best to ignore the tears and the nausea and the voice – his own voice – that screamed in his mind *I have nothing, nothing, nothing*. He had to think.

Werner knew the Dimmerok-secret, which meant that even if Petras defied Werner at the cost of Talya's life, the galaxy was still lost. Blowing up the Sag ship was a neat trick, but it could not save mankind; it would only make the brewing apocalypse a bit less lopsided. The end was inevitable now. Unless...

Unless what?

Yes, that was the question. Because underneath the torrent of horror, another voice whispered, small but insistent: *Something is wrong*. He tried to make sense of that feeling.

Of course something is wrong. They have Talya, and the Empire's going to hell.

No. Something's wrong about Chiyoko.

Yes, she betrayed me.

No. When you talked to her, after Werner left the room. Something – was – wrong.

But though the feeling of wrongness nagged him, he could not puzzle out the

answer.

He landed at the Palace, returned to his rooms in the Spires, and immediately sent out the notice for an emergency meeting of the Assembly tomorrow morning. He ignored the flood of replies demanding the reason for the sudden gathering, and he ordered his guards that no one – not Eddard, not even Zethius – should disturb him. He had to think.

That night he did not even try to sleep.

Something's wrong about Chiyoko.

He replayed in his mind that final conversation, trying to figure out what was nagging him. The cruel joke about Dreslin? No. The way she dismissed his concern for Talya? That wasn't it either.

What was it?

The dark hours after midnight had started turning light again before insight struck.

It wasn't her *words* that had bothered him – it was her *hands*.

Always before, any object she held in her hands had been a kind of toy for her, an enchanted familiar that seemed to obey her very thoughts. Knives and coins alike pirouetted through her skillful fingers with unconscious ease, putting the best circus performers to shame. But in the cargo hold yesterday, her knife had only tilted back and forth limply between those magician's fingers; and later, when she pulled the Truth Scanner out of her pocket, she had actually *fumbled* with it for a second.

Then he remembered that moment when the light caught her face, and she seemed older – just a little, just for a second. Almost as if she were beginning to age.

And suddenly it began to make sense.

She had lost her power.

She hadn't given Werner her abilities *in addition* to her own. She had actually *lost them herself*.

But why?

In all the years he had known Chiyoko, in spite of all her mystery and all his mistrust, one thing about her had remained steadfast: her arrogance. Even the name, Star-Witch, was meant to evoke awe. She would never give up her powers willingly.

That meant Padrian Werner had somehow taken them by force. That meant Chiyoko hated Padrian Werner more than anyone else in the universe. And *that* meant she, like Petras, was searching for a way to beat him.

Chiyoko must have a plan. She always had a plan.

He remembered her first words after Werner left them:

I hope you're not expecting a rescue. If you're looking for a miracle this time, you'll have to look pretty hard.

He was looking hard. What was he supposed to see?

The sun poured in through his windows, red as an angry Sagittarian. It was time to go. His own heartbeat slammed his ribs like a war drum, drowning all other sound as he made his way to the shuttle once more. When he boarded, recycled oxygen took the place of the crisp morning air. Alone in the shuttle, he ascended once more to his doom.

Still he paced, trying desperately to think.

Werner had been gone during his talk with Chiyoko. But the camera had still been there, in the cargo hold, watching them. If Chiyoko had wanted to help him, she would've had to do it discreetly. Some kind of hidden message, perhaps, that Petras could puzzle out.

He's watching us right now, and he'll be watching you at your Assembly speech, too.

He is the keystone – the eye of the hurricane. Everything, everything that will happen in this coup, will happen because of him.

Petras would have the undivided attention, not just of the entire Assembly, but of this singular, terrible man. A powerful platform.

But how was he meant to use it?

The shuttle landed on his private pad on the planet Laussaral. A waiting green-and-white footman led him to the Grand Hall of the Assembly of Worlds, a monumental, pale building shaped like a bird's nest. They took a secluded path to a back entrance, hidden from photographers and curious Assemblymen, and the footman left him with a few polite words in a small, elegantly furnished waiting room. It seemed he was a few minutes early.

Think!

And then – even as the door opened once again and a different servant announced softly that they were ready for him, that it was time – he had it.

During all the long walk over lush carpeted hallways to the Assembly Chamber, he batted the answer around in his head. It made sense, yes. But was it correct? He longed for the precise certainty of Karmindy's voice, to assure him that yes, this path really was the right one. If he guessed wrong, Talya –

He could not bear to think about Talya.

When the servant stopped leading him and took up a position at the side of the door, Petras knew he had come to the heart of the Hall, the great Chamber itself. A dizzy

lightness filled his head and legs as he walked to the podium at the center. The burgundy carpet smelled like soap. The podium's voice amplifier hissed quietly. The simple reality of the moment rendered it utterly unreal.

He looked up.

All around him in a vast elevated circle sat the Assembly Representatives, over five thousand of them. A second level of seats above them was filled to capacity with curious onlookers: landgraves, ambassadors, other important people. The rumble of conversation had long since died. They were absolutely silent. They could not imagine why they were here.

Such an ominous, exalted silence. Such stern, disapproving faces. He was not one of them; he was only a boy from Winnoka, dashing over parking lots, playing in the snow. What place did his wild, impossible idea have in this hallowed citadel?

He stared at the crowd, searching for people he knew. Na Jamajna's grim, olive-toned face glared at him from the second tier of seats. Tamil Faze looked worried; Nasir Grellack looked bored. Sama's quiet frown suggested her faith in her beloved Emperor might finally be wavering. Eddard's gaze was an unreadable mask.

Karmindy should have been there: Karmindy, who had stood as far above these luminaries as they stood above himself. Karmindy, who had loved him nonetheless, who had held their baby Dreslin in her arms and whispered that all might yet be right with the universe. Karmindy, who had not been afraid to die.

More than anything else, Petras needed what he had always needed: clarity. A yes or a no. Take this doubtful path, or not.

But in that moment, it came to him that the Empire's infinite complexity had

never been clear for her, either. There was no such thing as clarity. You only sorted out the noise as best you could, and courage did the rest.

He felt invincible and weak, as if a bright star burned in his chest.

The faces who watched him from this sea of people were getting impatient, now, angry he had not yet begun. He cleared his throat. A flurry of whispers rose and died away.

Yes, he would do it. He would try.

Chiyoko's voice echoed in his memory.

Did you really think it would be as easy as walking in and saying –

"I am the one true Emperor."

Silence.

Petras Fairburn turned to go.

The crowd erupted in confusion and fury. They did not understand. There was no reason they should.

Eighty-three light-years away, Padrian Werner was already dead.

Chapter 48

Three weeks later, Petras awoke to the smell of flowers. On the little table by his bed stood a vase of gardenias that had not been there before.

In a chair to his right sat Chiyoko.

He sat up slowly, and smiled. "Hi," he said.

Her lips parted. She sat very still. If he hadn't known her better, he might have thought she was nervous.

"Hi," she said.

For a while, they only watched each other.

"Are you glad to be back on Winnoka?" she said at last.

"I really am. I wasn't sure if Southshire – or this house – would feel like home after so long, but they do."

"Your shop downstairs is empty. Think you and Talya will pick up where you left off? Continue the family business?"

More memories drifted back to him. His smile faded. "No."

She looked down. "I'm sorry you were impeached."

"I'm not. With the war over, it was going to happen sooner or later anyway. There was no more reason for me to stay in power. My little display on Laussaral just gave them an easier reason. When your supreme ruler has a nervous breakdown on the Assembly floor, it's time to find new leadership."

"Does anyone know what really happened?"

"I told Eddard, and the rest of Karmindy's little group. Zethius and Sama believed me. Relina and Heryld thought I was crazy, but they kept their mouths shut. God only knows what Eddard thought. He'll make a good Emperor."

"And did you tell them what happened to Irth?"

"No. That's just between us, now. And Talya, of course."

She took a gardenia from the vase and studied it. "I still can't believe that it worked. That you figured it out. But then, I've been wrong about you before."

"Chiyoko," he said. "What happened?"

The white petals turned, stopped, turned again. She smiled strangely; he got the

impression she was holding back tears.

"I'm an idiot," she said. "That sums it up, I think. But try to understand, Petras, I'd lived for so long, I had so much power...I didn't care anymore. I didn't care about anyone. People die so quickly. After thirty thousand years, generations run together like rainwater, it's all the same...that damned Plateau, an empire that gets bigger and bigger but never any wiser. Listen, I really cared at first, I really tried to help, but it was just too much...too much time...people were just so far beneath me..."

She sighed.

"It was true what I told you, Petras, about why I became your teacher. It was a hobby. That's really how I felt. Something to pass the time, an easy way to feel superior. Why do you think I put you on the throne? To benefit mankind?" She laughed, a hard, short sound. "I wanted to see what you would do – to see if you could handle it. I was amused by the thought of my student having so much power. That's all.

"Of course I should have helped you, Petras, I should have been there for you from the beginning, I should have been a real friend instead of inventing hoops for you to jump through. With all my power, I could have saved you so much heartbreak, could have saved so many lives in that senseless war, but I just...they were all going to die anyway in a few more decades, you see? That's how I thought about it. It was all the same.

"But then Padrian Werner..."

She trailed off, and Petras prompted her. "He found Rin, didn't he?"

"That's right. About a month before the war ended. I still don't know exactly how. Probably one of his captains stumbled across it during a battle. He had no idea what it

was, but he could tell it was something alien and powerful, and he was desperate for a new weapon. When he surrounded it with warships, he tripped a sensor I'd set up centuries ago, and I came to investigate.

"I tried to scare him off, but he realized he'd found something I cared about, a way to manipulate me. He threatened to destroy it unless I surrendered. And what else could I do?"

"I can't believe he could really have hurt something as strong as Rin."

"Rin is a strange creature, Petras. When it's truly awake, its powers are godlike. But it's spent so much time in this galaxy, waiting, that it mostly sleeps now. It relied on me to protect it. But I failed it, just as I failed you, and for the same reason: spiteful arrogance. I was angry it never told me what the Sags did to Irth, so I let my protection grow lax.

"Stupid as I was, though, I still managed two bits of cleverness. First, I didn't let Werner know I was angry. I laughed. I said I admired his boldness, said I was tired of my power anyway and this was the first fun thing to happen to me in millennia. I offered to be his advisor, to help him overthrow you. He never trusted me, but he kept me close, didn't kill me.

"And when he ordered me to remove the lifeword you'd placed on him, I didn't quite obey. Instead of removing it, I changed it to a different phrase. That was what saved me. You see, he used a Truth Scanner on me, as I knew he would. Two questions. *Did you remove the lifeword?* I said yes. It was true, in a sense, because the old phrase no longer worked. *Did you add a new lifeword?* No. Also true, in a sense, because the lifeword wasn't really new, just a modified version of the old one. All semantics, of

course. Both answers just true enough that I pulled it off."

They both thought about this for a little while.

"Chiyoko? You promised me 'something good' if I avoided Dimmerok. What is it?"

"It was nothing." She set the gardenia back in its vase. "Just another way to manipulate people. I mean, there was something, but it was ridiculous, it doesn't even matter. I don't..."

He stared at her, hard. He'd waited forty years for the answer to this question. She was going to tell him.

Her eyes fixed on the far wall. "I did it with almost all my students, sooner or later, whether they passed or failed. It was fairly simple technology: holograms, voice projectors, a bit of play-acting. I told them I was going to reveal my true self, let them glimpse the glory I hid behind my human facade. That was the reward. You should have seen it. I hovered a meter off the floor. My eyes were like suns, my voice was like thunder, lightning swam all around me...I was a goddess..."

She broke down all at once, tears rushing down her cheeks. "I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I'm sorry. I am so, so sorry..."

He heard the fear in her, the desperation. She thought he hated her. For he could see she believed – as everyone believed – that hatred was a kind of credit, earned by suffering, spent at will. But he had lived on the other side too long for that. He had yearned so many years for that forgiveness himself, that now, to forgive – merely, merely to forgive – was the easiest thing imaginable.

Easy like breathing.

Easy like living.

Outside, birds sang. He took her hand.

"How does it feel?" he said. "Losing your power."

"Oh, you know...it's not bad. Kind of scary." She laughed through her tears.

"Kind of terrifying, actually. I mean, I miss the power itself, but more than that, I've just been alive for *so long*, and I've...gotten used to it. It's scary to think about dying. I don't know how everyone else can be so...okay with it."

"Neither do I."

She laughed again.

Two quick knocks, and Talya came in. She nodded coolly at Chiyoko, who hastily wiped her tears away. Forgiveness there might take a little longer.

"Dad," she said, "how are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling wonderful."

"I just got a message from Mom. She and her husband wanted to know if they...if maybe they could come visit you sometime. Next week, maybe."

He was surprised at how uncertain she sounded. *She doesn't know how I'll react. She's afraid I'll get angry.* He was surprised, too, at his own tears, which sprang from so many feelings he could never have named them all.

But he knew one thing for sure: he loved his daughter more than anything else in the universe.

"That would be wonderful," he said.

Epilogue

Emperor Eddard Boll sat back in his chair with a sigh. It was nearly midnight already, and he had an eight o'clock tomorrow morning with Nasir Grellack. The new Landgrave of Darmis was, as Eddard had hoped, a moderate; many were already comparing the man to Nasir Asemeian. Grellack and Tamil had agreed to meet four times a year to discuss matters of mutual interest – like avoiding civil wars. Things were looking brighter on that front, actually. Hierodula showed no signs of reemerging yet – though of course there were always rumors. And Tamil was a good man. He would keep the peace if he could.

Eddard checked his calendar. Meetings... appointments... announcements. It was overwhelming, being Emperor – and invigorating. At least he had the title, now, to match the responsibilities.

Speaking of which...

His calendar showed he had lunch with Petras in a week.

Petras Fairburn. What the historians would make of that ridiculous chapter in Imperial history, he could not imagine. Politics he understood well enough, but the sheer extended absurdity of Petras's reign...well, the academics could sort it out. That chapter was over now. And Petras had done pretty well in the end, after all.

Lunch. What would they talk about? He could not think of a single thing they had in common.

The obvious falseness of that thought made him laugh aloud. Of course there was *one* thing...

** ** *

Talya raised her hand to the glass surface of the Sagittarian's breathing tank. Dad

had told her so much about them, and she had heard their voices in her mind, but she had never actually seen one before. What strange creatures they were – hideous, at first sight, but oddly beautiful as well. For a race with such fearful weapons, they looked almost frail in reality.

<I'm very excited to come with you,> she thought. <Even if I'm only here as a tourist. I consider it an honor.>

<Yes.>

Not very talkative, though, were they?

The Sagittarian ship was a dreary place, with its high, pale, curving walls and obscure grottoes, but then she supposed it looked different to a Sagittarian. What did they see with, anyway? Infrared? She couldn't remember, and she had a mind to ask, but decided against it. Later. There would be plenty of time later.

<This is a great opportunity for our two races to learn from each other. We hope to have other such talks in the future, with other Speakers. We think there is much room to grow.>

<Yes.>

Well, at least it was agreeing. But how was she supposed to start a dialogue with an alien who wouldn't dialogue?

Maybe she should learn its name. Did they have names? Or maybe she shouldn't ask that either. It was hard to know what to say.

At least it accepted her as Speaker. Apparently the old ambassador had communicated that news to one of the other wanderers before it died. Odd that the other Sags seemed so incurious about what had happened to it, but long disappearances and

even sudden deaths were evidently something they took in stride. *Although they don't exactly 'stride,' do they?*

But at least she was here. With this brief visit, the process had at least begun.

Because she knew, now, what had to happen. She understood the path.

Humans had reached a Plateau, a technological dead end. The Sags held the keys to get past it, as everyone knew. But the Sags had a Plateau of their own: they had no communities. And if there was one thing humans understood, it was community.

Each side had what the other needed, even if the Sags didn't realize it yet. There could be an exchange. There *had* to be an exchange.

Bernabie had preached total noninteraction, and Petras had followed his advice. The Sags had been happy to comply. But Bernabie's doctrine was a death sentence; she knew that now. She understood his caution, could see why it had seemed safe. But in the end, loneliness was poison.

It was poison for the Sags. It was poison for the Empire.

It was poison for her father.

She noticed color in her peripheral vision and looked out the window. A planet hung in that narrow frame like a yellow jewel, writhing with its own drowsy motions, turning and turning among the stars.

She knew what it was. Anton had seen it before, in a vision.

The Sagittarian Motherworld.

Her scalp prickled. She could not describe the feeling it gave her. The people who invented language had never been here.

It was a shame they couldn't get closer. She'd been surprised the Sags would want

to show her this place at all; given their fear of being trapped in the mind-web, she'd thought they would hate their home planet. But life, it seemed, was more complicated than that.

"It's beautiful," she said. And then, remembering her companion, she added:

<It's beautiful.>

The answer was like a whisper in her mind.

<Yes.>

** ** *

Rin was leaving.

Chiyoko gazed at it through the window of her ship. It hadn't told her why, but she could guess. Its compassion had found a poor welcome in this primitive little galaxy.

Eons ago, when the Sags achieved that first apocalyptic linking of minds, it was Rin who had saved the first eight from their gaseous Motherworld. One of those eight had become the Founder, ancestor of all free Sagittarians.

When one of the Founder's descendants destroyed the human Motherworld in turn, it was Rin who rescued Chiyoko, hoping to make her a kind of human Founder.

But neither of these fledgling races had protected Rin in its own hour of need. And now it was preparing to set out again, braving the Wide Dark. Finally leaving behind that lost little girl from Irth.

What would Chiyoko do with herself now? The old mysteries were solved. The Plateau was breaking. Her hobbies had lost their appeal.

Well, she would figure it out. She had her whole life ahead of her, after all.

She looked over her left shoulder, toward the Andromeda Galaxy, impossibly

distant. And then she turned back to Rin: granter of so many wishes, still waiting on its own wish to come true.

She smiled a smile that was both happy and sad.

"Someday," she whispered. "Please don't give up. You'll be home again someday."