

AForestofStars

The Saga of Seven Suns - Book 02

Kevin J. Anderson

The Saga of the Seven Suns is a multi-volume chronicle of a legendary war that spans half the Galaxy and nearly shatters the cosmos. This series follows the family intrigues, the loves and tragedies, pomp and pageantry among several competing races in an expanding stellar empire.

Five years have passed since the beginning of an epic war with the Hydrogues. Tensions are high as Hydrogues scour the many systems of the Spiral Arm searching out and destroying planets they think hold humans or trees of the Worldforest. And with their gas-giant planets off limits, Earth's government has tightened the economic reins on its colonies, which leads to hardship and rebellion. King Peter wages a fierce rebellion of his own against Hansa Chairman Basil Wenceslas. Prime Designate Jora'h, longing for his missing Nira, clashes with his dying father, the Mage Imperator, over the horrid things done "in the name of the empire." Meanwhile on Theroc, Reynald asks Cesca Peroni of the Roamer clan to be his bride. Cesca, knowing an alliance with the Therans is for the good of her Roamers, must give up Jess Tamblyn and their bright future.

Meanwhile Jess Tamblyn, isolated in a skimmer ship stumbles across a possible new ally. It's the last of an old race of water-based creatures called Wentals. Humankind has awakened the wrath of a formidable and ancient enemy in the Hydrogues, for once a vast and horrible war took place across the galaxy. As there are more sightings of the fearsome sun-bearing Faeros creatures, it seems this war has only just begun. These creatures have the ability to destroy planets and defuse stars. Will they take apart the spiral arm with their rage?

BOOKS BY KEVIN J. ANDERSON

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The Saga of Seven Suns

Hidden Empire

AForestofStars

Horizon Storms

(coming in 2004)

To JAIME LEVINE,

the “fairy godmother” of this series,

who has taken *The Saga of Seven Suns* under her firm editorial wing

... while also loving the stories as a true fan.

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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THE STORY SO FAR

In the ruins of the ancient Klikiss civilization, human archaeologists MARGARET and LOUIS COLICOS discovered an exotic technology capable of igniting gas-giant planets to create new suns. For the first test of the Klikiss Torch, at the gas giant Oncier, observers included BASIL WENCESLAS, suave Chairman of the Terran Hanseatic League (the Hansa), and the alien ADAR KORI'NH, military commander of the vast but stagnant Ildiran Empire. Though the humanoid Idirans helped Earth colonize the Spiral Arm, they still see humans as ambitious upstarts. They considered the test of the Klikiss Torch unnecessary hubris, since many other planets were available for colonization.

When Oncier was ignited, collapsing into a compact sun, instant reports of the event were transmitted around the Galaxy by the green priest BENETO, a human from the forested planet Theroc, who has a special symbiosis with semisentient worldtrees. Green priests, like living telegraph stations, can send thoughts anywhere through the interconnected forest network, providing the only form of instant communication across vast distances.

At the end of the Oncier test, observers saw a cluster of diamond spheres race away from the collapsing gas giant at incredible speed; scientists eventually classified the sight as an unknown phenomenon of the Klikiss Torch. Back on Earth, OLD KING FREDERICK, a glamorous figurehead ruler, led a celebration of the successful test, while Adar Kori'nh returned to his capital of Ildira and reported to his all-powerful leader, the MAGE-IMPERATOR. On hearing of the strange diamond spheres, the Mage-Imperator was greatly disturbed.

Meanwhile, on Ildira, the Mage-Imperator's firstborn son, PRIMEDESIGNATE JORA'H, treated the human REYNALD, heir to the Theron throne, to a performance of the grand epic, the *Saga of Seven Suns*. Afterward, as a token of friendship, Jora'h invited Reynald to send two green priests from Theroc to Ildira to study the *Saga*. The worldforest, which gathers knowledge through its human intermediaries, is always hungry to learn about history.

Then Reynald left Ildira for a secret rendezvous in space with the Roamers, fiercely independent space gypsies led by old SPEAKER JHY OKIAH and her beautiful protégée, CESCA PERONI. They discussed a possible alliance to maintain their freedom from the sprawling and greedy Hansa. Reynald even suggested the possibility of marriage with Cesca, but she was already betrothed to a skyminer, ROSS TAMBLYN.

At his Blue Sky Mine in the clouds of the gas giant Golgen, Ross Tamblyn met with his younger brother, JESS. Roamer skyminers harvest and convert hydrogen into ekti, or stardrive fuel. Jess brought messages and gifts from his family, including his young sister, TASIA. Though fast friends, the brothers' meeting was bittersweet, because (unknown to Ross) Jess and Cesca had fallen deeply in love, despite her

betrothal to Ross. Jess departed for the hidden Roamer capital of Rendezvous.

Roamers have made large profits by fitting into dangerous niches, but because of their stubborn secrecy, the space gypsies are not well liked by the Hansa. When the head of the Earth Defense Forces (EDF), GENERAL KURT LANYAN, heard about a rebellious Roamer space pirate, he used the merchant woman RLINDA KETT and her ex-husband, pilot BRANSON ROBERTS, as bait, and captured and executed the pirate.

Uneasy about Lanyan's brutal justice, Rlinda traveled to Theroc, where she hoped to establish trade in exotic commodities. MOTHER ALEXA and FATHER IDRIS (parents of Reynald and Beneto) were not interested, but their ambitious eldest daughter, SAREIN—an occasional lover of Chairman Wenceslas—was. After striking a deal with Sarein, Rlinda agreed to transport two Theron green priests (stern old OTEMA and her wide-eyed assistant, NIRA) to Ildira, where they could study the *Saga of Seven Suns*. Later, at the Mage-Imperator's Prism Palace, Prime Designate Jora'h became enamored with young Nira, though the Mage-Imperator regarded the green priests as if they were mere specimens...

On Earth, Chairman Wenceslas and fellow officials discussed the increasingly common gaffes made by Old King Frederick and secretly began searching for a replacement. They snatched a malleable streetwise scamp, RAYMOND AGUERRA, then staged a terrible fire in Raymond's dwelling complex, which killed his mother and three brothers, leaving no evidence. The Hansa altered the young man's appearance, told him he was now "Prince Peter," and began brainwashing him into his new role, using the Teacher compy (or companion robot) OX to instruct him.

After the successful test of the Klikiss Torch, Margaret and Louis Colicos began a new excavation on the desert planet of Rheindic Co, where ancient cities of the lost insectlike Klikiss had remained untouched. The only functional remnants of the Klikiss civilization, their hulking beetlelike robots, claimed that their memories were erased long ago. Three of these antique robots accompanied the Colicoses to the excavation site, hoping to learn more about their past. The archaeology team also included a compy, DD, and a green priest, ARCAS. In the ruins, Margaret and Louis discovered a strange blank window made of stone, connected to dormant machinery. While Louis studied the machinery, Margaret worked to decipher Klikiss hieroglyphics in hopes of finding answers...

At Ross Tamblyn's isolated Blue Sky Mine on Golgen, mysterious storms and lightning rose from the uncharted depths of the atmosphere. Then monstrous crystalline ships emerged from the deep clouds, similar to the apparitions seen fleeing Oncier after the Klikiss Torch test. The huge warglobes opened fire on Ross's skymine, destroying it and sending Ross tumbling to his death thousands of miles beneath the clouds...

The alien spheres also appeared at Oncier and obliterated a station left behind to watch the newborn star. Next, warglobes destroyed Roamer skymines at several gas giants, never demanding terms, never showing mercy. These unexpected attacks stunned both the Hansa and the Roamers. Basil Wenceslas met with General Lanyan to discuss the new threat. Old King Frederick worked to rally the populace, recruiting new volunteers for the EDF.

Vowing revenge for the death of her brother Ross, the spunky Roamer TASIA TAMBLYN ran off to join the military, taking along her compy, EA. Grief-stricken, Jess and Tasia's father died of a stroke, leaving Jess in charge of the family business. Although Ross's death left him and Cesca free to love each other, they were not willing to take advantage of the tragedy for personal gain.

On Ildira, the green priest Nira spent a great deal of time with Prime Designate Jora'h, eventually

becoming his lover. Though Jora'h had many assigned mates and was destined to become the next Ildiran leader, Jora'h genuinely fell in love with Nira. Meanwhile, an Ildiran historian DIO'SH uncovered ancient hidden documents proving that the deadly deep-core aliens, called hydrogues, had appeared long ago in a previous war, but that all mention of this conflict had been censored from the *Saga of Seven Suns*. Dio'sh took his shocking discovery to the Mage-Imperator, who killed the meddling historian, saying, "I wanted it kept secret."

On Earth, the EDF built new battleships to use against the strange alien threat. The EDF also commandeered civilian spacecraft, and Rlinda Kett was forced to surrender all of her merchant ships to the war effort, except for the *Voracious Curiosity*, her own vessel. Newly enlisted Tasia Tamblyn excelled in military training, besting the spoiled-brat Earth recruits. Her closest friend was fellow trainee ROBB BRINDLE.

The Roamers were in an uproar after the repeated deadly attacks. Many of the families decided to cease all skymining activities on gas giants. Jess Tamblyn attended a clan gathering, watching Cesca, wishing they could be together. Impatient with the bickering, he decided to strike the enemy aliens himself. Jess gathered loyal workers and went back to Golgen, where the hydrogues had destroyed the Blue Sky Mine. He and his cohorts modified comet orbits and sent giant frozen missiles plummeting down to the gas planet with the force of atomic warheads.

On Earth, hoping to find a key to new technology, a robotics researcher tricked one of the Klikiss robots, JORAX, into his lab. When the scientist attempted to dissect the alien robot, however, Jorax murdered him. "There are some things you cannot be permitted to know." In the aftermath, the robot claimed that the unscrupulous scientist had activated an involuntary self-preservation system. Jorax then demanded that all Klikiss robots be treated as sovereign life forms, and the old King forbade any further dissection attempts.

Meanwhile, Beneto received a request to replace an old green priest, TALBUN, on the colony world of Corvus Landing. Beneto happily agreed. Though this wasn't the glamorous position Mother Alexa and Father Idriss had hoped for their son, Beneto was adamant. His adoring younger sister ESTARRA—a tomboy who had always explored the forests with Beneto—bade him a sad farewell. Later, at Corvus Landing, when Talbun was satisfied that Beneto was well prepared, the old priest walked off into his worldtree grove and allowed himself to die, letting his body be absorbed into the worldforest network.

While exploring the Prism Palace on Ildira, Nira encountered another son of the Mage-Imperator, the grim and intense DOBRO DESIGNATE UDRU'H, who interrogated Nira about her telepathic potential as a green priest. The Designate then reported to the Mage-Imperator about his covert breeding experiments between Ildirans and captive humans on Dobro. The leader expressed urgency: The return of the ancient enemy, the hydrogues, left the Ildirans little time to genetically create a being with the necessary characteristics to save the Empire. Udru'h suggested that Nira might have the DNA potential they needed.

Meanwhile, the Solar Navy commander, Adar Kori'nh, directed his officers to practice with innovative Terran military exercises. Many conservative officers were uncomfortable trying new techniques, but ZAN'NH—the firstborn son of Prime Designate Jora'h—proved capable of great innovation. Kori'nh raised Zan'nh in rank and demoted the stodgiest of the old subcommanders.

Then the Solar Navy fleet went to the gas giant Qronha 3, the site of the only skymining facility still operated by Ildiran workers. When hydrogue warglobes rose from the clouds and began to destroy the ekti facility, the Solar Navy engaged in a furious battle. The hydrogue weaponry was far superior, but the disgraced and demoted Ildiran subcommander took a desperate suicidal action, crashing his battleship

into the nearest crystal sphere, which destroyed the warglobe and gave the Solar Navy time to retreat with the rescued skyminers. In the thousands of years chronicled in the *Saga of Seven Suns*, no Ildiran had ever experienced such a terrible and humiliating defeat.

Meanwhile, on Earth, Raymond Aguerra continued training to become the next King, watched over by the compy OX. At first, he couldn't believe the change from the rough streets to the opulent palace, but soon he began to resent the rigid control. To his horror, he discovered that the Hansa had caused the terrible fire that killed his family, and realized he must be very careful.

Upon learning that the Ildirans had also been attacked by the deep-core aliens, Chairman Wenceslas went to meet with the Mage-Imperator to propose an alliance. The hydrogues themselves had neither acknowledged nor responded to repeated requests for negotiation.

While Basil was on Ildira, a giant warglobe appeared at Earth and a hydrogue emissary demanded to speak with King Frederick. Flustered, the old ruler tried to get a message to Basil via green priests. Contained within a pressure vessel, the alien emissary informed the King that the Klikiss Torch test had annihilated one of the hydrogue planets, slaughtering millions of their people. Horrified, Frederick apologized for the inadvertent genocide, but the hydrogue delivered an ultimatum: All skymining must cease. This would mean no ekti fuel for the Ildiran stardrive, the only viable method of space travel. Frederick pleaded with the emissary, but the hydrogue detonated his containment tank, killing the King and all the observers in the throne hall.

Basil rushed back to Earth and told Raymond that "King Peter" must take the throne immediately. After the announcement of the upcoming coronation ceremony, Peter gave a carefully scripted speech, defying the hydrogue ultimatum and declaring that humans had every right to take the fuel necessary for their survival. He dispatched a new battle group, including Tasia Tamblyn and Robb Brindle, along with commercial ekki harvesters to Jupiter, right in Earth's backyard. On high alert, the protective ships watched over the bold skymines. For several days all was quiet, but then a massive fleet of warglobes rose from the cloud layers and engaged the EDF in a furious battle. Tasia and Robb survived, although the battered human ships limped away, beaten...

Before anyone learned of the humiliating defeat, Basil Wenceslas presided over the coronation of King Peter, designed as a show of hope and confidence. Peter, struggling to hide his hatred for Basil, was drugged into cooperation for the ceremony. Feigning paternal pride, Basil promised the new King that if he behaved, they would find him a Queen...

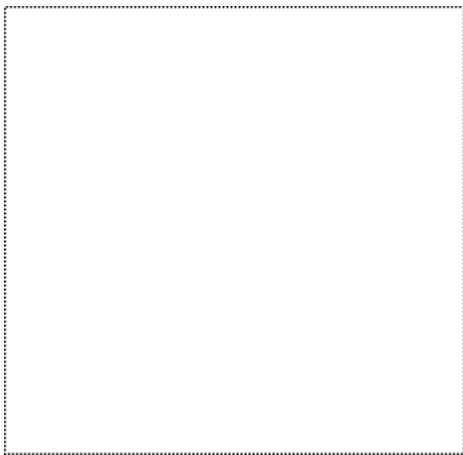
On Ildira, the Mage-Imperator decided to accelerate his plans. Nira had discovered that she was pregnant with the Prime Designate's child, but before she could tell Jora'h the news, the Mage-Imperator dispatched him to Theroc on a diplomatic mission. Then, in the stillness of a sleep period, brutal Ildiran guards came to capture Nira. Before her eyes, the guards stabbed her mentor, Otema, to death because she was too old to be of use in the breeding pens. Nira was turned over to the evil Dobro Designate for genetic experimentation...

The human race faced hard times unless they could find other ways to produce stardrive fuel. Speaker Jhy Okiah challenged the resourceful Roamers to find alternatives to now-forbidden skymining, then abdicated her position in favor of Cesca Peroni. Jess Tamblyn watched the woman he loved take her place as a strong and visionary leader, realizing she was further away from him now than ever before.

On distant Rheindic Co, the Colicos archaeology team discovered that the stone window was actually a transportation system, a dimensional doorway connected to old Klikiss machinery. Though the Klikiss robots insisted they remembered nothing useful, Margaret was able to translate ancient records.

Apparently the Klikiss robots were in part responsible for the disappearance of their parent race and had been involved in an ancient war with both hydrogues and Ildirans. Reeling with this news, Margaret and Louis rushed back to their camp—only to find that their green priest, Arcas, had been murdered, the young worldtrees destroyed, and all communication cut off! The Klikiss robots were nowhere to be found.

Margaret and Louis worked with their faithful compy, DD, to barricade themselves into the cliff-city archaeological dig, but the Klikiss robots broke through. Although DD attempted to defend his masters, the Klikiss robots captured the compy, careful not to hurt a fellow intelligent machine. At the last moment, Louis got the stone window functioning, opening a doorway to an unknown alien world. He urged Margaret through, but before he could join her, the gate closed—and the robots were upon him. The old archaeologist knew too many of their secrets. When Louis reminded the Klikiss robots that until now they claimed not to remember their past, the robots simply answered, “*Welied.*”



1



JESS TAMBLYN

Across the Spiral Arm, the gas-giant planets held secrets, dangers, and treasure. For a century and a half, harvesting vital stardrive fuel from the cloud worlds had been a lucrative business for the Roamers.

Five years ago, though, that had all changed.

Like vicious guard dogs, the hydrogues had forbidden all skymines from approaching the gas giants they claimed as their territory. The embargo had crippled the Roamer economy, the Terran Hanseatic League, and the Ildiran Empire. Many brave or foolish entrepreneurs had defied the hydrogues’ ultimatum. They had paid with their lives. Dozens of skymines were destroyed. The deep-core aliens were unstoppable and ruthless.

But when facing desperate situations, Roamers refused to give up. Instead, they changed tactics, surviving—and thriving—through innovation.

“The old Speaker always told us that challenges redefine the parameters of success,” Jess Tamblyn said over the open comm, taking his lookout ship into position above the deceptively peaceful-looking gas giant Welyr.

“By damn, Jess,” Del Kellum transmitted with just a touch of annoyance, “if I wanted to be pampered, I’d live on *Earth*.”

Kellum, an older clan leader and hands-on industrialist, signaled to the converging fast-dive scoop ships. The cluster of modified “blitzkrieg” skymines and a hodgepodge of small lookout craft gathered at what they hoped was a safe distance above the coppery planet. No one knew how far away the hydrogues could detect trespassing cloud thieves, but they had long since given up playing it safe. In the end, all life was a gamble, and human civilization could not survive without stardrive fuel.

The ekti-scavenging crew powered up their huge scoops and containers, ready for a concerted plunge into the thick cloud decks. Hit and run. Their supercharged engines glowed warm. Their pilots sweated. Ready.

Alone in his lookout ship, Jess flexed his hands on the cockpit controls. “Prepare to come from all sides. Move in fast, gulp a bellyful, and head for safety. We don’t know how long the drogue bastards will give us.”

After the big harvesting ships acknowledged, they dropped like hawks after prey. What once had been a routine industrial process had become a commando operation in a war zone.

When presented with the hydrogue threat, daring Roamer engineers had redesigned traditional skymining facilities. They had accomplished a lot in five years. The new blitzkrieg scoops had giant engines, superefficient ekti reactors, and detachable cargo tanks like a cluster of grapes. Once each tank was filled, it could be launched up to a retrieval point, passing off the harvested ekti a bit at a time without losing a full cargo load if—*when*—the hydrogues came after them.

Kellum transmitted, “The Big Goose thinks we’re shiftless bandits. By damn, let’s give the drogues the same impression.”

The Hansa—the “Big Goose”—paid dearly for every drop of stardrive fuel. As ekti supplies dwindled year after year, prices skyrocketed to a point that Roamers considered the risk acceptable.

Five of the modified scoops now dispersed across the atmosphere, then plunged into Welyr’s clouds, storm upwellings, and vanishingly thin winds. With giant funnel-maws open, the blitzkrieg scoops roared through storm systems at top speed. They gobbled resources, compressing the excess into hydrogen-holding tanks while secondary ekti reactors processed the gas.

As he flew his lookout mission, like a man in the crow’s nest of an ancient pirate ship, Jess deployed floating sensors into Welyr’s soupy clouds. The buoys would detect any large ships rising from the depths. The sensors might give only a few minutes’ warning, but the daredevils could retreat quickly enough.

Jess knew that it did no good to fight. The Ildiran Solar Navy and the Hansa EDF had demonstrated that lesson often enough. At the first sign of the enemy’s arrival, his renegade harvesters would turn and run with whatever ekti they’d managed to grab.

The first blitzkrieg scoop filled one cargo tank and rose high enough to jettison it, leaving a smoke trail in

the thin air. A resounding cheer echoed across the comm, and the competitive Roamers challenged each other to do better. The unmanned fuel tank soared away from Welyr toward its rendezvous point. *Safe.*

In times past, leisurely skymines had drifted over the clouds like whales feeding on plankton. Jess's brother, Ross, had been the chief of Blue Sky Mine on Golgen; he'd had dreams, an excellent business sense, and all the hopes in the world. Without warning, though, hydrogues had obliterated the facility, killing every member of the crew...

Jess monitored his scans. Though the sinking sensor buoys detected no turbulence that might signal the approach of the enemy, he didn't let his attention waver. Welyr seemed much too quiet and peaceful. Deceptive.

Every crewman aboard the blitzkrieg scoops was tense, knowing they had only one chance here, and that some of them would likely die as soon as the hydrogues arrived.

"Here's a second one, highest-quality ekti!" Del Kellum's harvester launched a full cargo tank. Within moments, each of the five blitzkrieg scoops had ejected a load of ekti. The scavengers had been at Welyr for less than three hours, and already it was a valuable haul.

"Good way to thumb our noses at the drogues," Kellum continued, his anxiety manifesting as chattiness over the comm band, "though I'd prefer to slam them with a few comets. Just like you did at Golgen, Jess."

Jess smiled grimly. His cometary bombardment had made him a hero among the Roamers, and he hoped that the planet was now uninhabitable, all the enemy aliens destroyed. A strike back. "I was just following my Guiding Star."

Now many clans looked to Jess for suggestions on how they might continue their retaliation against the aliens' nonsensical prohibition.

"You and I have a lot in common," Kellum said, his voice more conspiratorial now that he had switched to a private frequency. "And if you ever do another bombardment, might I suggest this place as a target?"

"What have you got against Welyr?" Then he remembered. "Ah, you were planning to marry Shareen of the Pasternak clan."

"Yes, by damn!" Shareen Pasternak had been the chief of a skymine on Welyr. Jess recalled that the woman had an acidly sarcastic sense of humor and a sharp tongue, but Kellum had been delighted with her. It would have been the second marriage for both of them. But Shareen's skymine had been destroyed in the early hydrogue depredations.

Now three more ekti cargo tanks launched away from the racing blitzkrieg scoops.

Trish Ng, the pilot of a second lookout ship, frantically radioed Jess, cutting off the conversation. "The sensor buoys! Check the readings, Jess."

He saw a standard carrier wave with a tiny blip in the background. "It's just a lightning strike. Don't get jumpy, Ng."

"That same lightning strike repeats every twenty-one seconds. Like clockwork." She waited a beat. "Jess, it's an artificial signal, copied, looped, and reflected back at us. The drogues must've already

destroyed the sensor buoys. It's a ruse."

Jess watched, and the pattern became apparent. "That's all the warning we're going to get. Everybody, pack up and head out!"

As if realizing they had been discovered, seven immense warglobes rose like murderous leviathans from Welyr's deep clouds. The Roamer scavengers did not hesitate, retreating pell-mell up through the gas giant's skies.

A deep-throated subsonic hum came from the alien spheres, and pyramidal protrusions on their crystalline skins crackled with blue lightning. The Roamer daredevils had all seen the enemy shoot their destructive weapons before.

Kellum ejected four empty ekti cargo tanks, throwing them like grapeshot at the nearest warglobes. "Choke on these!"

Jess shouted into the comm, "Don't wait. Just leave."

Kellum's diversion worked. The aliens targeted their blue lightning on the empty projectiles, giving the blitzkrieg scoops a few more seconds to escape. The Roamers fired their enormous engines, and four of the five harvester scoops lifted on an escape trajectory.

But one of the new vessels hung behind just a moment too long, and the enemy lightning bolts ripped the facility to molten shreds. The crew's screams echoed across the comm channel, then cut off instantly.

"Go! Go!" Jess yelled. "Disperse and get out of here."

The remaining commando harvesters scattered like flies. The automated cargo tanks would go to their pickup coordinates, where the commandos could retrieve the haul at their leisure.

The warglobes rose up, shooting more blue lightning into space. They struck and destroyed a lagging lookout ship, but the others escaped. The enemy spheres remained above the atmosphere for some time, like growling wolves, before they slowly descended back into the coppery storms of Welyr, without pursuing.

Though dismayed at the loss of one blitzkrieg scoop and a lookout ship, the raiders were already tallying the ekti they had harvested and projecting how much it would bring on the open market.

Alone in the cockpit of his scout ship, Jess shook his head. "What has happened to us, if we can cheer because our losses were 'not too bad'?"

2



KING PETER

It was an emergency high-level staff meeting, like many others called since the hydrogue attacks had begun. But this time, King Peter insisted that it be held within the WhisperPalace, in a room of his own

choosing. The secondary banquet room he selected had no particular significance for him; the young King simply made the move to demonstrate his independence... and also to annoy Chairman Basil Wenceslas.

“You keep telling me my reign is based upon appearances, Basil.” Peter’s artificially blue eyes flashed as he met the Chairman’s hard gray gaze. “Isn’t it appropriate that I meet with my staff in the Palace, not at your convenience in Hansa HQ?”

Peter knew that Basil hated it when the young King used his own tactics against him. The former Raymond Aguerra had learned to play his part better than the Hansa ever expected.

Basil’s studiously blasé expression was clearly meant to remind Peter that as Chairman of the Terran Hanseatic League, he had dealt with crises far worse than a petulant young King. “Your presence is merely a formality, Peter. We don’t really require you in the meeting at all.”

By now, Peter knew a bluff when he saw one. “If you think the media won’t notice my absence at an emergency session, then I’ll go swim with my dolphins instead.” He understood his tenuous importance and pushed, just a little, whenever he could. Peter rarely misjudged Basil’s limits, though. He approached each small battle with finesse and subtlety. And he knew when to stop.

In the end, Basil pretended that it didn’t matter. His primary advisers—Basil’s handpicked but diverse inner circle of representatives, military experts, and Hansa officials—gathered behind closed doors around a chandelier-lit table as a light luncheon was served. Silent servants hurried to place bouquets on the table, damask napkins, silverware; fountains trickled in three alcoves.

Peter seated himself in an ornate chair at the head of the table. Knowing his role, however, the young King listened in respectful silence while the Chairman went through the agenda items.

Basil’s iron gray hair was impeccably trimmed and combed. His perfect suit was expensive, yet comfortable, and he moved with a lean grace that belied his seventy-three years. So far today, he’d eaten sparingly, drinking only ice water and cardamom coffee.

“I require an accurate assessment of the state of our Hansa colonies.” He swept his gaze around his advisers, admirals, and colony envoys. “In the five years since the hydrogues killed King Frederick and issued their ultimatum against skymining, we’ve had considerable time to draw conclusions and make realistic projections.” He looked first to the commander of his Earth Defense Forces. Since he was Chairman of the Hansa, Basil was also the de facto leader of the EDF. “General Lanyan, what is your overall evaluation?”

The General waved aside the numbers and statistics that an aide called up for him on a document pad. “Easy enough, Mr. Chairman: We’re in deep trouble, though the EDF has rigorously rationed ekti since the beginning of the crisis. Without those highly unpopular measures—”

Peter interrupted him. “Riots have caused as much damage as the shortages, especially on new settlements. We’ve already had to declare martial law on four colonies. People are hurting and hungry. They think I’ve abandoned them.” He looked at the sliced meats and colorful fruit on his plate and decided he had no appetite, knowing what others were suffering.

Lanyan stopped in midsentence, looked at the King without responding, then returned his attention to Basil. “As I was saying, Mr. Chairman, austerity measures have allowed us to maintain most vital services. However, our stockpiles are dwindling.”

Tyra Running Horse, one of the planetary envoys, pushed her plate aside. Peter tried to remember which colony she represented. Was it Rhejak? “Hydrogen is the most common element in the universe. Why don’t we just get it somewhere else?”

“Concentrated hydrogen is *notas accessible* elsewhere,” said one of the admirals. “Gas giants are the best reservoirs.”

“The Roamers continue to supply some *ekti* through their high-risk harvesting techniques,” said the Relleker envoy, trying to sound optimistic. With his pale skin and patrician features, he looked just like one of the faux-classical statues against the wall of the small banquet room. “Let them keep taking the gambles.”

“And there is simply no other fuel alternative for the faster-than-light stardrive. We’ve tried everything,” said yet another envoy. “We’re stuck with what the Roamers provide.”

Scowling, Lanyan shook his head. “Current Roamer deliveries don’t match even our bare-bones military requirements, not to mention public and civilian needs. We may be forced to impose further austerity measures.”

“What further measures?” said the dark-faced envoy from Ramah. “It has been months since my world received a supply delivery. No medicine, no food, no equipment. We have increased our agriculture and mining, but we do not have the infrastructure to survive being completely cut off like this.”

“Most of us are in the same situation,” the ghostly pale Dremen representative said. “And my colony has entered its low weather cycle, more clouds, lower temperatures. Crop yields are traditionally down thirty percent, and it’ll be the same this time. Even in the best years, Dremen would need aid to survive. Now—”

Basil raised his hand to cut off further complaints. “We’ve had this discussion before. Impose birth restrictions if your agricultural capabilities can’t support your population. This crisis isn’t going to end overnight, so start thinking in the long term.”

“Of course,” Peter said with thinly veiled sarcasm. “Let’s take away the rights of fertile men and women to decide how many children they need to sustain a colony they’ve risked *their* lives to establish. Now, that’s a solution the people will like. I suppose you’ll want me to put on a happy face and make them accept it?”

“Yes, I will, dammit,” Basil said. “That’s your job.”

The grim news seemed to diminish everyone’s appetite. Servants came around pouring ice water, using delicate silver tongs to offer wedges of dwarf limes. Basil sent them away.

He tapped his fingers on the tabletop with uncharacteristic impatience. “We need to do a better job of making the people see just how dire the situation is. We have minimal fuel, not to mention very limited communication abilities, thanks to the continuing lack of green priests from our shortsighted friends on Theroc. Our fast mail drones can do only so much. Now, more than ever, we could use more green priests just to maintain contact between isolated colony worlds. Many planets don’t have a single one.”

He looked over at Sarein, the dusky-skinned ambassador from the forested world. She was lean and wiry, with narrow shoulders and small breasts, high cheekbones and a pointed chin.

“I’m doing the best I can, Basil. You know that Therons have never been good at seeing the forest for the trees.” She smiled to emphasize her clever choice of words. “On the other hand, Theroc has received no routine supplies, no technology, no medical assistance, since this crisis began. It’s difficult for me to ask my people for more green priests if the Hansa dismisses our own needs.”

Peter watched the interaction between Basil and the pretty Theron woman; from the first days of his reign, he’d recognized the mutual attraction. Now, before the Chairman could respond, Peter squared his shoulders and spoke in the rich voice he had practiced during numerous speeches. “Ambassador, considering the hardships faced by many of our Hansa colonists, we must allocate our resources, giving our own colonies highest priority. Theroc, as a sovereign world, is already much better off than most.”

While Sarein fumed at the verbal slap, Basil nodded appraisingly at Peter, relieved. “The King is correct, of course, Sarein. Until the situation changes, Theroc will have to take care of itself. Unless, perhaps, Theroc would like to join the Hansa...?”

Sarein’s face flushed, and she gave a barely perceptible shake of her head.

General Lanyan drew his glance like a scythe across the envoys. “Mr. Chairman, our only choice is to take certain extreme measures. The longer we wait, the more extreme those measures will have to be.”

Basil sighed, as if he had known this choice would fall upon him. “You have the Hansa’s permission to do what is necessary, General.” He skewered Peter with his gaze. “And you will do it all in the King’s name, of course.”

3



ESTARRA

“I have seen many fascinating worlds,” Estarra’s oldest brother said as their flitter-raft traveled across the densely wooded continent. “I’ve been to the Whisper Palace on Earth, and stood under the seven suns of Ildira.” Reynald’s tanned face lit with a smile. “But Theroc is my *home*, and I’d rather be here than any other place.”

Estarra grinned, looking around her at the new, but always familiar, landscape of whispering worldtrees. “I’ve never seen the Looking Glass Lakes, Reynald. I’m glad you brought me along.”

As a girl, she had slipped out before dawn, running through the forests to investigate whatever caught her curiosity. Fortunately, a wide variety of subjects piqued her interest: nature, science, culture, history. She had even studied records from the original generation ship *Caillié*, the story of Theron settlement and the origin of the green priests. Not because she had to, but because she was interested.

“Who else would I bring?” Reynald playfully rubbed his knuckles on his sister’s tangle of hair twists. He was broad-shouldered, his arms muscular, his long hair done up in thick braids. Though a sheen of sweat covered his skin, he didn’t seem uncomfortable in the forest warmth. “Sarein is an ambassador on Earth. Beneto is a green priest on Corvus Landing, and Celli is... well—”

“She’s still too much of a baby, even at sixteen,” Estarra said.

Years before, as part of his preparation for becoming the next Father of Theron, Reynald had traveled around the Spiral Arm to learn different cultures. It was the first time any Theron leader had diligently investigated other societies. Now, with travel restricted, stardrive fuel strictly rationed, and interplanetary tensions high, Reynald had decided to visit the main cities on his own world. His parents had made no secret that they intended to step down and turn over the throne to him within the year. He had to be ready.

Now their flutter-raft flew above the treetops, passing from one settlement to another. Laughing followers, pretending to be part of a procession, swooped around them on gliderbikes, small craft composed of rebuilt engines and fluttering wings scavenged from native condorflies. Rambunctious young men circled above and behind them, showing off aerial maneuvers. Some flirted with Estarra, who had reached marriageable age...

Ahead, she saw a gap in the thick canopy and a glint of azure water. "Those are the Looking Glass Lakes, all deep, all perfectly round," Reynald said, pointing. "We'll stay the night at the village."

Around the first beautiful lake, worldtrees supported five worm hives, the empty nests of immense invertebrates. When Reynald landed the flutter-raft on the lakeshore, people rappelled, jumped, climbed, or swung down from their hive homes to greet the visitors. Four green priests emerged with the grace of gently waving branches, their skin tinged emerald by photosynthetic algae.

The green priests were capable of communication more sophisticated than the most complex technologies either the Hansa or the Ildirans had invented. The problem had frustrated scientists for generations, and the green priests had been unable to help them—not because they were keeping secrets, but because the priests themselves didn't know the technical basis for what they did. Many outsiders offered to hire them for their telink skill, though the self-sufficient Theron had little need or interest in what the Hansa had to offer. The worldforest itself seemed intent on keeping a low profile.

On the other hand, the Hansa representatives were very insistent and persuasive.

Balancing such issues was a difficult job for any leader. Watching her brother interact with the green priests and smiling villagers, Estarra could see how well he would fill his role as the next Theron Father.

After an evening banquet of fresh fish, riverweed, and fat water bugs baked in the shell, they ascended to platforms high in the lakeside trees. Reynald and Estarra watched a performance of skilled treedancers, lithe acrobats who ran, danced, and bounced across the flexible boughs. The treedancers used the bending limbs and matted leaf fronds as springboards, soaring into the air, turning somersaults, catching branches and swinging by their arms in a choreographed ballet. At the end, in unison, all the treedancers launched themselves out over the water and dropped in perfect arcs to the mirror lake below, plunging into the water like heavy raindrops.

Following the performance, Estarra let Reynald talk business with the villagers while she happily accepted an invitation to splash in the warm water with a few local girls. She loved the sensation of floating and swimming, though she had the opportunity to do so only a few times a year.

Treading water in the Looking Glass Lake, Estarra gazed up into the night, marveling at the sight of open sky from ground level. In her own city, the forest canopy was so thick she had to climb to the top just to see constellations. Now, floating in the open, she was dazzled by the view overhead, with billions of gleaming lights, a veritable forest of stars in the vault of space, full of people, worlds, possibilities.

When she returned to the brightly lit worm hives, dripping and invigorated, she found her brother speaking with a young priest named Almari. The woman's eyes were bright with intelligence and curiosity; Almari had spent years as an acolyte singing to the trees, adding to the musical knowledge stored in the botanical database. Like all green priests, she was hairless, her head smooth, her face adorned with tattoos denoting various accomplishments.

Reynald was gracious and polite, leaving his options open. "You are beautiful and clever, Almari. No one can deny that. I'm certain you would make a fine wife."

Estarra knew the discussion, for she had seen it several times already on this brief peregrination.

Almari spoke quickly, as if to cut him off before he could turn her down. "Especially in these difficult times, is it not appropriate that the next Mother of Theroc be a green priest?"

Reynald reached out to touch the delicate green skin on Almari's wrist. "I can't argue with that, but I see no need to rush."

Noticing Estarra, Almari got up and took her leave, looking embarrassed.

Grinning impishly, Estarra gave her brother a playful punch in the shoulder. "She was pretty."

"She was the third one tonight."

"Better to have too many choices than none at all," Estarra said.

He groaned. "Then again, there's something to be said for having a clear-cut decision."

"Poor, poor Reynald."

He gave his sister a playful punch in return. "At least I'm not the Ildiran Prime Designate. He's required to have thousands of lovers and as many children as he can possibly breed."

"Ah, the terrible responsibilities of leadership." Estarra flung her wet hair to splash him. "Since I'm merely the fourth child, my only worry is when I'll have a chance to go swimming again. How about now?"

Giggling, she ran off, and Reynald looked after her with envy.

4



PRIME DESIGNATE JORA'H

As the eldest noble-born son of the Mage-Imperator, Prime Designate Jora'h filled his days with dutiful distractions. Fertile women from across the spectrum of Ildiran kiths applied for mating privileges, and the lists grew long with more female volunteers than he could possibly service.

The Prime Designate's next assigned lover was named Sai'f. Whip-thin and alert, she was from the

scientist kith, an expert in biology and genetics. Sai'f was interested in botany, developing new crop strains for diverse splinter colonies.

She came to Jora'h in his contemplation chamber in the Prism Palace, where constant daylight shone through gem-colored crystal panels. Her brow was high, her head large, and her eyes sharp and attentive, as if she were capturing every detail for later study.

Jora'h stood before her, tall and handsome, his face defining the Ildiran ideal of beauty. Golden hair drifted in a nimbus around his head like a halo, knotted into ten thousand fine strands. "Thank you for asking to be with me, Sai'f," he said, meaning it—as he always did. "May our shared gift today produce a gift for the entire Ildiran Empire."

In nimble hands, Sai'f held a ceramic pot that contained a twisted, woody-stemmed shrub. Its thorned branches were bent, constrained, massaged into an unnatural shape. Shyly, she extended the pot. "For you, Prime Designate."

"How poignant and fascinating." Jora'h took it, intrigued by the labyrinthine tangle of branches and leaves. "It looks as if you've done weaving work with a living plant."

"I am exploring the potential of our quilltrees, Prime Designate. It is a human technique called bonsai. A way of compressing a plant to turn its biological efforts inward, yet enhancing its beauty. I began growing this one a year ago when I first filed my application to mate with you. It has required a great deal of attention, but I am satisfied with the results."

Jora'h did not have to pretend his enjoyment. "I have nothing like it. I will keep it in a special place... but you must instruct me on how to care for it."

Sai'f smiled at him, relieved and thrilled to see his obvious pleasure. He set the bonsai quilltree on a translucent shelf on the wall, then came forward to her, opening his tunic to reveal his broad chest. "Now allow me to give you a present in return, Sai'f."

She had been tested by his staff before she'd entered the Prism Palace. All women who came to him were certified fertile and receptive. Such tests did not guarantee that he would impregnate every lover, but the odds were good.

Sai'f disrobed, and Jora'h admired her. Each Ildiran kith had a different bodily configuration. Some were willowy and ethereal, others squat and muscular, angular and sinewy, or plump and soft. But the Prime Designate saw beauty in all kiths. While some were more lovely to him than others, whenever played favorites, never insulted the volunteers or showed any disappointment.

Sai'f reacted to his caresses as if she were following a program or a suggested procedure. As a scientist, she had probably studied the variations of sex like a scholar, attempting to become an expert so that she could excel in her encounter with him. Right now, Jora'h felt as if he were doing the same for her, following a program, a familiar task like any other.

As he thought of the fascinating bonsai tree Sai'f had brought him, Jora'h could not help but recall Nira. And his heart ached with the old sadness for the lovely green priest. It had been five years since he'd last seen her.

Nira's innocence and exotic beauty had charmed him more than any adoring Ildiran female ever had. When she'd first arrived in Mijistra, her wide-eyed wonder at the architecture and museums and

fountains had made him look at his own city with fresh eyes. Her innocent excitement in Ildiran accomplishments had made him feel more pride in his heritage than the most stirring passages from the *Saga of Seven Suns*.

After shy months of enjoying each other's company, when they'd finally made love for the first time, it had seemed entirely natural. The warm familiarity that grew into a bond with Nira was unlike anything the Prime Designate had ever experienced before. His relationship with her had been entirely separate from these routine matings scheduled by his assistants. Jora'h and Nira had spent many afternoons delighting in each other's company, knowing the relationship must eventually end, but enjoying each day. And the Prime Designate had kept calling her back to him.

But at the beginning of the hydrogue crisis, when Jora'h had gone to visit Prince Reynald on Theroc, Nira and her mentor, Otema, had been tragically killed in a fire in the greenhouse that held the gift of worldtrees from Theroc. According to the Mage-Imperator's report, the two visiting green priests had rushed in to save their treelings and had perished in the blaze.

Long ago, sweet Nira had come to the Prism Palace bearing potted treelings, small offshoots of the worldforest. Now, years after her death, the woman Sai'f had brought Jora'h a bonsai tree, and the memories all came flooding back to him...

Jora'h refocused his attention on the scientist woman. He did not want her to note his troubled thoughts, or to leave dissatisfied. He made love to her with an intensity that, for a while at least, drove back the ache of memories.

Jora'h requested an audience with his father. The Mage-Imperator's bright eyes were set within folds of fat, and his plump lips smiled when he saw his son. Bron'n, the fierce personal bodyguard, stood at the doorway to the private chamber so the leader and his eldest son could speak privately.

"I wish to send another message to Theroc, Father."

Mage-Imperator Cyroc'h frowned, leaning back in his chrysalis chair, as if relaxing into the telepathic connection of *thism*. "I sense that you are thinking of that human female again. You should not allow her to kindle such an obsession in you. It can only disrupt your more important duties here. She is long dead."

Jora'h knew the corpulent leader was correct, but he could not forget Nira's smile and the joy that she had brought him. Before coming here, he had gone to the skysphere arboretum. One particular chamber had been used to house the Theron treelings. By now, the greenhouse had been replanted with salmon pink Comptor lilies and crimson poppies, swelling the humid air with heady perfumes. Five years ago, when he had returned from Theroc to learn the terrible news, he had stared in horrified awe at the scars from the inexplicable conflagration.

There had been no bodies left to send back to Theroc. And the worldtrees were already burning by the time Nira and Otema arrived to fight the fire, so they had been unable to send any last messages through telink. Everything had been lost. Grieving, Jora'h had explained the tragedy to his friend Reynald in a special communiqué delivered by a Solar Navy ship.

By now the ashes and soot stains had been scoured clean, but the memories and the sadness remained. In his heart, Jora'h had never accepted that Nira was dead. If only he had been here, he would not have

let any harm come to her...

Sensing his son's sadness through the web of *thism*, Cyroc'h nodded somberly. "You will carry many burdens when you ascend to take my place. It is your destiny, my son, to feel the pain of all our people."

Jora'h's tiny golden braids flickered like tendrils of smoke. "Nevertheless, I would like to send a new message to Reynald, in memory of the two green priests. We did not send the ashes or the skulls back to them." He spread his hands. "It is such a small thing, Father."

The Mage-Imperator smiled indulgently. "You know I cannot deny you." The ropelike braid that hung from his head coiled around his pudgy stomach and twitched, as if the great leader were annoyed.

Relieved, Jora'h held out an etched-diamondfilm plaque. "Here, I have composed another letter for Reynald to share among the green priests on Theroc. I would like to dispatch it with one of our commercial vessels."

The leader reached out to take the message. "It may require some time and a roundabout route. Theroc is not a frequently visited world."

"I know, Father, but at least it's something I can do. It is my way of maintaining contact."

Cyroc'h held the shimmering glassy plaque. "You must not think of the human woman again."

"Thank you for granting me this favor." Jora'h backed out of the chamber and departed with a spring in his step.

As soon as he was gone, the Mage-Imperator summoned his bodyguard forward. "Take this and destroy it. Make certain Jora'h is not allowed to send any message to Theroc."

Bron'n took the diamondfilm letter in his clawed hands and, with great strength, snapped it in half. He would incinerate the pieces in a power plant furnace. "Yes, Liege. I understand."

5



NIRA KHALI

Standing inside the Dobro breeding camp, isolated but joined by hundreds of other human test subjects, Nira stared through the thin fences. The fences were a mere formality to demarcate boundaries, a convenience for the captors, since the prisoners had no place to go.

The camp was situated at the foot of mountains to the east, rolling grassy hills to the west, with dry lakes and bleak terrain in a central valley. The ground itself was striated with arroyos cut by furious washes of rain, making it look as if the skin of the world had stretched too fast and broken open like festering scabs.

For five years as a prisoner of the Ildiran Empire, she had held on to her inner self, just staying alive despite all the unspeakable acts she'd had to endure. None of the camp guardians or Ildiran supervisors

would answer when she begged to know why they were doing this to her.

Her love, Jora'h, could not possibly be aware of her situation. With a single command, he could have freed her and all the other prisoners. Nira doubted the Prime Designate would ever participate in such awful schemes. He was too gentle and caring. She believed that in her heart. Did Jora'h even know she was still alive? Could she have misjudged him so much?

Nira didn't think so. Unsuspecting, Jora'h had been sent to Theroc—*obviously to get him out of the way, so he couldn't interfere when they abducted me.* The Mage-Imperator must have kept this a secret from his own son, even though she had been carrying Jora'h's child.

The Dobro Designate, second son of the Mage-Imperator, used the human descendants here as breeding stock for Ildiran experiments. For some reason, Designate Udru'h considered Nira the most interesting of all the prisoners, and she had suffered greatly because of it.

After she had given birth to a perfect, beautiful half-breed daughter named Osira'h—*my little Princess*—the Dobro Designate had kept Nira here in this awful camp, so she could be impregnated again and again, like some horrible broodmare...

Now she knelt at the edge of the austere compound, using a small tool to loosen the hard dirt around hardy, scraggly shrubs and thin flowers she had planted. In her spare moments, she tended and watered whatever plants she could find, tried to help them flourish; even the tiniest flecks of green life reminded her of the lush forests on Theroc. Though she was cut off from the worldtrees and the sentient forest mind, Nira was still a green priest, and she remembered her duties.

Though her emerald skin absorbed the daylight and converted it to energy, Dobro's sun felt weak and undernourishing, as if contaminated by the dark history of this place. She looked up, judging how much more time she might have to herself before the next labor shift out in the excavation trenches.

The breeder camp was a sprawling enclosed area with barracks, birthing hospitals, experimentation laboratories, and crowded dwelling complexes. Prisoners went about their business, knowing no other life. Some of them talked with each other; one gaunt man even laughed, as if unaware of his plight. Human children—sanctioned offspring of the breeding prisoners—found games to play even in a place such as this. The Dobro Designate insisted on a constant renewal of purebred descendants in order to keep the breeding stock diverse and healthy. However, to Nira, it seemed as if the human spirit had been bred out of them in less than two centuries.

Even after five years among them, Nira was still treated as a novelty, eccentric and strange, a troublemaker. At least the people had stopped staring at her green skin, which was unlike anything they had ever seen. But they could not understand her attitude, why she still refused to accept her situation and settle down to her new life.

The poor people didn't know any better.

Nira looked up as the alien supervisors put together another work crew. She tried to remain small and unobtrusive, hoping the bureaucrat kithmen would not choose her, not today. Her muscles were strong, though her mind was weary from years of difficult assignments—chipping opalbone fossils, handpicking fruits from thorny bushes, digging trenches.

The Ildirans would eventually give her an assignment—they always did—but she clung to each moment, one at a time. Resisting the instructions would only provoke the Ildiran guards to tear up her plants. They

had done it several times before. She would find other ways to resist, if she could.

When Nira had first been taken captive, before the Dobro Designate realized she was pregnant, she was imprisoned alone in darkness, sealed in an unlit cell—the worst punishment imaginable to an Ildiran accustomed to constant daylight. The black claustrophobia was intended to crush Nira’s spirit, perhaps even drive her mad. The Designate needed only her reproductive system, not her sanity.

For weeks, Nira had shuddered in dank darkness, suffering further as she went through physical withdrawal from the sunlight. Normally, under Ildira’s dazzling sunshine, her photosynthetic skin delivered life energy every minute. Trapped in darkness, however, her metabolism and digestive system had to readjust themselves. Nira had to learn to eat again, to digest normal food. She became extremely ill, weak, but refused to surrender, keeping her heart and her strength.

In the end, the Designate had released Nira from the darkness so he could perform analyses and benchmark measurements on her. His lean and handsome face was similar to Jora’h’s, but devoid of compassion. His eyes were sparkling and hot, intent on what he might discover about her biology. After studying the test results, he had looked at her first with accusation, then with delight. “You are pregnant! Jora’h’s offspring?”

Rather than throwing her into the breeding barracks or putting her on labor crews like the other human prisoners, the Designate and his medical kithmen had tended her with meticulous devotion, taking regular bloodsamples, making painful and repetitive scans. Nursing her, studying her, making certain she maintained her health, for their purposes.

Nira, though, kept her strength and sanity for her own reasons.

The labor and birth of her first daughter had progressed normally. Through bleary eyes in the delivery lab, Nira had watched as the Dobro Designate looked wolfishly at the squalling little girl, as if ready to dissect his brother’s child. The baby mixed the bloodlines of a telepathic green priest and the noble Prime Designate. Udru’h had named the girl according to the phonetic traditions of Ildiran kiths, Osira’h, but Nira simply thought of the girl as her Princess, a secret hope from all the storybooks she had read aloud to the curious worldtrees.

As was the custom among the breeding-camp prisoners, the Designate let Nira keep the baby girl for six months, breast-feeding her, nurturing her so that she remained strong. She had grown to love the child, to care for her. Then the Designate had taken the infant girl away. All successful half-breed specimens were separated from their mothers.

But Designate Udru’h had something very important in mind for Osira’h. *My Princess.*

Afterward, Nira’s real nightmare had begun.

From then on, no matter how much she fought or prayed, the Designate kept her constantly pregnant, experimenting with different fathers. Each defeat drove her down, yet she refused to wither and die. She was like a blade of grass in the forest, bent underfoot and battered by heavy rains only to spring back. In her youth, she had never conceived of such torture, yet she withstood it, learned to send her mind to a kinder place until it was safe to return.

The alien sperm donors did not hate her. They were only following the Designate’s instructions. They

were part of an overall plan, to which none of them knew the details. And neither did she.

But unlike Osira'h, her subsequent bastard children had not been conceived out of love. She despised the forced mating sessions, and Nira tried not to grow attached to her half-breed boys and girls. But she had nursed them, held them, studied their features... and her determined attempts at coldness hadn't worked. She could not reject these innocents simply because their fathers had been ordered to rape her until she conceived again.

Her own children... though she could never keep them. As before, the medical kithmen had snatched the infants away to raise them in the adjacent Ildiran city, under their own testing and training regimen.

Soon, they would consider Nira recovered enough to be reassigned to a work crew, to toughen her. Once her fertility had reached its peak again, the guards would drag her back into the breeding barracks, and the forced-impregnation cycle would begin all over again. Four times already...

Now, as Dobro's orange sun lowered toward murky clouds on the horizon, she left her fresh, trimmed bushes in the small garden and went to look for other flowers and shrubs. Worker teams returned from the hills and filed into the camp. After generations of imprisonment, the captive humans had no dreams, only a resigned endurance, day after day. They didn't even seem miserable.

This was the great dirty secret of the Ildiran Empire, an answer to what had happened to the only lost human generation ship. These prisoners were descendants of the *Burton*, living here, hidden from the rest of the human race, for almost two centuries.

And five years ago, Nira Khali had joined them. The Dobro prisoners had never seen a green priest before, never heard of Theroc. Nira was a stranger, an emerald-skinned outsider.

At night, or in muted conversations on work crews, she quietly talked about her world, and the sentient trees, even the Terran Hanseatic League, hoping that someone might believe her. Many of the breeder captives suspected she was mad. Others, though, listened with disbelieving curiosity. But they did listen, and Nira continued to hold out hope.

She had borne unwanted children, one fathered by the Dobro Designate himself, one by Adar Kori'nh, two from other Ildiran kiths. And though she had nurtured each of those children for months, she cared the most for young Osira'h. Nira clutched the fence wires, feeling the cold hollow in her chest. She longed for her daughter, her Princess. The other human prisoners didn't understand her misery. Half-breed children belonged to the Ildirans, and they were always taken away. They had never thought anything of it.

Nira often sent messages into the Ildiran city adjacent to the sprawling camp, asking to see Osira'h. The Dobro Designate denied her request each time, refusing to answer Nira's questions. Not out of particular cruelty, but because Nira was no longer relevant to Osira'h's upbringing. The green priest woman had other breeding work to do.

Still, the Designate did understand the half-breed girl's potential. Just the thought of it brought a faint smile to Nira's face. Her Princess was more than just an interesting mixed-kith experiment. *She is something special.*



ADAR KORI'NH

The seven beautifully anodized Solar Navy ships arrived in response to the Dobro Designate's summons. Adar Kori'nh stood in the command nucleus as the septa of ornate vessels entered a standard orbital configuration and retracted their elaborate reflective sails.

Back at the Prism Palace, he had received his orders directly from Mage-Imperator Cyroc'h—instructed to come personally, not to delegate the assignment to a lesser officer. Still, Kori'nh had frowned. “I have always been uneasy about the activities at Dobro, Liege. It is not... suitable for inclusion in the *Saga of Seven Suns*.”

“Our work there will never be chronicled in the *Saga*, Adar. But still we must do it.” The Mage-Imperator had stirred, his tentaclelike braid twitching. “The Dobro experiments hold the key to our race's survival, and even after generations of effort, we are not ready for the challenge we must face. And now, the hydrogues have returned. Time is short.”

Kori'nh knew that a million deep thoughts simmered quietly beneath the leader's calm face, ideas far beyond his own comprehension. The Mage-Imperator was the focal point for all *this*, the conduit through which soul-threads shone in faint glimmers from a higher plane composed entirely of light. He was unsettled by the very thought of questioning his leader's wishes.

Even so, as commander of the entire Solar Navy, the Adar had to speak his mind. “Is there truly such urgency, Liege? The hydrogues have not escalated tensions since we withdrew from their gas giants.”

The Mage-Imperator shook his large head. “The hydrogues will not be content to remain within their strongholds. Soon they will become more aggressive. And we must be prepared to do whatever is necessary for the survival of our race.”

Having dutifully raised the question, Kori'nh had bowed and accepted the assignment. He had no other choice.

Now he waited in the warliner's receiving bay as a shuttle rose from Dobro carrying the Designate himself. The Mage-Imperator's second son desired to speak privately with him; Kori'nh would learn soon enough what it was about.

Suspecting that this mission might have unpleasant consequences, Kori'nh had already dispatched Tal Zan'nh on a make-work assignment. The Adar would dirty his own hands with this task, but he saw no need to involve his protégé, the son of the Prime Designate...

After the shuttle had docked, the pilot stepped out, looking flustered. Behind him the Dobro Designate scanned the empty bay like a predator. The Designate's clothes were drab and serviceable, without lace, finery, or colorful strips of self-active energy film. He was a working man, with an assignment and a mission.

Seeing the commander waiting for him, Designate Udru'h turned gruffly to the shuttle's pilot. “You are dismissed. The Adar will take us where I direct him.”

The pilot looked uneasy, but Kori'nh nodded his permission. "Apparently the Designate and I will require privacy. No doubt he has certain orders for me."

Three years earlier, he had been sent here to Dobro for the express purpose of mating with one of the captive human females, a green-skinned woman from Theroc. Kori'nh could not understand why she was being held among the *Burton* descendants, nor was he allowed to ask about it. He had not relished his union with the woman. It had seemed... dishonorable. Yet it had been his duty, an indirect command from the Mage-Imperator himself.

He dreaded what the Designate would order him to do this time.

After he took the cockpit controls, Kori'nh remained silent, not even offering minor conversation. Designate Udru'h gave him coordinates that took the shuttle away from the orbital lanes toward the fringes of the Dobro system. A skein of icy moonlets and asteroids looked like a pile of planetary ingredients that had been swept under the rug—too diffuse to be an actual asteroid belt, each piece too small to be considered a planetoid in its own right.

"We have concealed it out here. A perfect place," said the Designate. "Even so, we must be cautious."

Uncomfortable with the prolonged mystery, Kori'nh said, "Please explain yourself, Designate. What are we seeking?"

"Our aim is not to seek, but to *hide*, and thereby ensure continued secrecy."

Kori'nh dwelled on the words as the shuttle drifted into the ice-studded, rocky debris. He heard a hiss of dust particles and tiny pebbles impacting their shields. Ahead, his scanners detected a darkened shape that looked decidedly artificial, a construction not of Ildiran design.

"As you can see, Adar, we have left too much evidence behind. There is always a risk it could be found."

A huge, antique spacecraft.

Fascinated by Earth military history, even when it was not relevant to current assignments, the Adar recognized the bulky, squarish lines of an immense star-crossing vessel larger than five Solar Navy warliners. The construction design seemed wasteful, a ship that relied upon brute force rather than finesse. It was shaped like a tall building, topped with industrial processors, collectors, and refineries; it looked as if it had been uprooted and hurled into space like a brick. Now the big vessel was dark and shadowed, stained with the scars of ancient storms and encounters, like a ghost ship, haunted and drifting without its crew.

Kori'nh noted the symbols on the fuselage; these bulky engines could achieve only a fraction of lightspeed. It would have taken centuries to cross the gulfs of space... and yet the brash humans had flown the old generation ships anyway. "*Bekh!* Is that... the *Burton*?"

In the cockpit, the Designate looked scornfully at the immense vessel. "The Solar Navy escorted that thing here to Dobro. At the time, we'd intended to let the humans settle with our splinter colony here, two races joining together. The Designate even took a human woman, the *Burton*'s captain, as his wife.

"But other humans... did not adapt well to the situation. Before any formal contact was made or

delegation sent back to Earth, the human woman was assassinated, and the grief-stricken Designate was forced to crack down, to impose rigid order.

“Earth never knew about these refugees. My grandfather Mage-Imperator Yura’h issued instructions that these unruly creatures were to be investigated in every possible manner. Once the *Burton* was emptied, a warliner towed the vessel out here to the fringes of the Dobro system, where it has remained.”

Kori’nh thought of all the effort and hope that had been poured into the creation of this mammoth starship. “It is a valuable relic.”

The Designate sneered. “I’m sure the humans would love to have it back. They have prospectors and scavengers searching the void between stars to see if they can recover it. We must let them hold on to their myths and mysteries. And never discover the truth.”

“Agreed,” Kori’nh said, but for a different reason. “They must never learn what we have done here.” As he cautiously threaded the shuttle through the space debris, he drank in the crude majesty of the derelict.

The Designate kept talking. “There is no longer a reason to keep this ancient hulk. If found, it would be embarrassing, incriminating.”

“Then why was it hidden in the first place? Did someone intend to... use the old ship?”

“Precisely the question, but my ancestor was... distraught at the time,” Designate Udru’h said. “We have found nothing in the *Burton*’s design or engines that can benefit the Empire. Under the pressure of the hydrogue conflict, the Terran Hanseatic League is developing new weapons to increase their military strength. They’ve always been aggressive, expanding into other colonies, even taking over settlements that we have abandoned—”

“Like Crenna,” Kori’nh said.

The Dobro Designate gave a sour expression. “My father has decided that the danger of accidental discovery far outweighs the benefits of keeping the *Burton*. I myself see no reason to leave it here.”

Intrigued, Kori’nh guided the shuttle in another slow pass over the mothballed vessel, dodging icy planetesimals so that he could get a better look. He expanded the prow blazers, playing a ripple of light across the space-weathered hull features. “So... exactly why have you summoned me, Designate?”

Udru’h looked at the Adar as if the answer were obvious. “I want you to destroy the *Burton*. Leave no trace that it ever existed.”

7



CESCA PERONI

Heat, incredible heat—enough to soften rock and boil away light elements, harsh enough to incinerate organic flesh in an instant. Isperos was a terrible place under a blazing sun, full of hazards. But to Roamers, the heat was *aresource*. The heavily reinforced colony produced enough pure metals and rare

isotopes to make the risks of living and working here worthwhile.

As Speaker for the clans, Cesca Peroni had come to congratulate Kotto Okiah for his ingenuity in establishing an outpost on the threshold of hell. “No one would have believed it possible, but you recognized what others were too blind to see. The success of this place is another support to buttress our strained economy.”

In the underground bunker, the eccentric engineer fumblingly acknowledged her praise. Kotto was a genius, but he had never learned how to accept compliments with good grace.

Eager to impress his visitor, he led Cesca into deeper tunnels, wiping beads of perspiration from his ruddy cheeks, scratching at sweat in his curly hair. “It gets cooler after level two.” He rapped the baked wall, his knuckles making a hollow sound on the tiles. “Three layers of ceramic honeycomb with an extra layer of rock-fiber insulation throughout. Vacuum voids to halt thermal transfer.”

“No one else could keep up with the output of a wholesun. A perfect example of Roamer ingenuity.” Her praise was sincere.

He favored her with a shy grin. “Well, the enormous solar flux provides plenty of power to run the generators, atmosphere processors, and cooling systems.” He indicated a set of frost-covered pipes that ran like blood vessels along the tunnel wall. “I’ve devised an unorthodox thermal-flow system to channel excess energy to the surface, dumping it into large fins that radiate waste heat. Well, some of it at least. Just another one of my inventions.”

Years ago, when the hydrogues had forbidden skymining, Cesca had called upon all clans for innovative options to gather hydrogen across the Spiral Arm. Kotto was a wealth of ideas. While the Isperos station was being established, tunnels dug, smelters built, he’d managed to rework the process chain of ekki reactors to make them more efficient. He had also invented the blitzkrieg scoops used to gulp hydrogen from gas-giant clouds, hit and run.

Somehow, Roamers always managed to do the impossible. She drew a deep breath, content with what they had achieved. *Yes, impossible things.* Like her relationship with Jess. But Cesca had even found a way to bridge the gap with the man she loved, after so long...

Years ago, while betrothed to Ross Tamblyn, she had fallen in love with his younger brother. After Ross was killed by the drogues, she and Jess should have had the luxury to find happiness together. But when Cesca was chosen as the new Speaker, and Jess found himself the head of his family’s water business, they had put off their feelings. She and Jess had agreed that the Speaker must be strong and completely focused, at least until the crisis was over.

It had seemed like a reasonable decision at the time.

Less than a year later, they’d become secret lovers and now had finally agreed to announce their wedding plans in six months’ time. Six long months... but at last the end was in sight. She would take her small measure of happiness wherever she could.

In the meantime, she needed to concentrate on her duties as Speaker.

Kotto led her into a shielded control bunker lined with ceramic tiles. “We call this our ‘luxury lounge.’” Eight Roamer workers sat at stations watching the outside activity through observation screens, monitoring the shipping crews in the night-side shadows.

Isperos was bathed in the furious corona of the unstable sun, like a stone in a furnace. Giant mobile mining machines and surface smelters operated just on the night side of the terminator, where the crust had recently been baked. The machines scooped the surface layer and processed it into metals, separating out useful short-half-life isotopes created by the rain of cosmic rays.

“Our clans have always been proficient at mining outer-system asteroids,” Kotto said, “but those rocks retain useless lightweight elements, ices, and gases. Here on Isperos, the sun does all the processing for us. Nothing left but the purest heavy metals.” He spread his hands. “We just form them into ingots and put them onto the railgun launcher. Perfectly simple.”

Cesca doubted anything about Isperos was “perfectly simple,” but she admired the technical audacity. The Big Goose would never have taken such a risk.

Outside on the scabby surface, flattened road cuts led away from mining operations on the terminator line. Automated ferries delivered pallets of processed ingots to a kilometer-long railgun launcher, an electrically powered system that fired the projectiles into space, just barely reaching escape velocity. At a safe distance from the churning sun, Roamer cargo ships rounded up the drifting treasure. Traders delivered the metals to other Roamer construction sites or, more lucratively, to Hansa colonies whose industries needed the black-market resources.

On a screen Kotto pointed to a forest of giant ceramic fins glowing cherry red that thrust up like sails on the already mined surface. “We’re building more heat radiators so we can drop the station’s internal temperature by a degree or two, but there’s always a choice between spending time on our own comfort and producing more metals.”

Every two seconds, the railgun launched a dull silvery cylinder, each of identical size, shape, and mass. They shot outward like a blur of bullets. The railgun launcher was moved every month to remain inside the creeping shadow. A few stray ingots had been lost, their trajectories perturbed by asteroids or simple miscalculations, but cargo-netters grabbed most of the canisters.

Seeing what Kotto had accomplished on Isperos made Cesca swell with pride. It gave her all the faith she needed that the Roamers would survive the hydrogue war. Somehow. As would she and Jess.

8



JESS TAMBLYN

The skies of Plumas were frozen solid. Embedded within the ice ceiling, artificial suns shone down, reflecting off the subterranean sea. Transport shafts had been bored through the ice plate, providing access for visitors and equipment. Hydrostatic pressure pushed water through cracks in the moon’s frozen skin, sending bubbling jets upward. On the surface, Roamer ships could hook up to the water wells and fill their cargo vaults.

Clan Tamblyn had operated the Plumas water mines for generations, but Jess had little knack for the industry. He was a Roamer at heart, preferring to wander on missions that took him away from home. Luckily, after Jess’s stern father, Bram, had died, the old man’s four brothers had accepted the burden

with enthusiasm.

When his uncle Caleb asked him in a raspy voice if he wanted a share in the decision-making process, Jess had merely smiled at him. “Our family has had enough feuds and disputes. I wouldn’t want to start another one—besides, you’re all doing such a fine job. My father said that a Tamblyn’s blood should be made of ice water. He considered it a good thing.”

Now Jess stood at the lift tubes, adjusting his gloves. The biting airtasted fresh and brittle; when he exhaled, white clouds of steam boiled upward like smoke. He had grown up on Plumas, playing with Ross, both of them taking care of their sister, Tasia. . . . But too much had changed here. It was no longer the place of his childhood, not in his mind.

His mother had been killed long ago when Jess was only fourteen. She had been out in a surface rover, checking wellheads from the water geysers and pumping stations, when the crust had cracked. Gushing water and slush had swept Karla Tamblyn away, sucking her vehicle down into a gaping crevasse. For hours they had received faint transmissions from Karla’s suit radio, but there had been no way to rescue her. Bram had gone wild with grief while his wife had slowly frozen, leaving her embedded like a fossil in glacial ice.

Jess’s father and brother were both dead now too, his sister gone off to join the EDF. Though his uncles and cousins were all around, Jess felt detached and alone here.

Behind him, two of his uncles emerged from the administrative huts; a third man came around the equipment shed, stuffing greasy gloves into insulated pockets. Uncle Caleb was always tinkering with machinery, trying to improve or monitor the equipment. Jess thought Caleb just liked the vibrating hum of engines and the feel of “clean dirt” under his fingernails.

The other two men were so bundled against the cold as to be unrecognizable, but Jess knew it must be the twins Wynn and Torin, his father’s youngest brothers. His remaining uncle, Andrew, would stay inside, where he managed the water mine’s bookkeeping and budgets.

“The ship’s ready for launch to Osquivel,” said one of the hooded uncles—Torin, judging by his voice. His cheeks were red and flushed from the cold.

“We’ve filled Del Kellum’s order and then some,” said Wynn, without taking his hood down. “Don’t argue if he insists on paying extra.”

Caleb came up, smiling. “If you’re a smart lad, Jess, you’ll bring a gift for Kellum’s sassy young daughter. She’s a prize.”

“She’s a handful,” said Torin. “But you could do worse.”

Jess laughed. “Thanks, but. . . no.” Everything they said reminded him how much he missed Cesca. He smiled secretly to himself. *Six more months.*

“Picky boys end up being bitter bachelors,” Torin warned.

“Nothing wrong with that,” Wynn replied a bit too quickly.

Both Caleb and Torin frowned at their brother. “Don’t tell me you haven’t regretted it.”

Wynn stood his ground. “When my biological clock starts ticking, I’ll let you know.”

Thankfully, the lift door opened and Jess stepped into the bore tube, leaving his uncles and their banter behind. “I’ll let you figure out the Tamblyn dynasty while I’m gone. I’m going to go deliver that water shipment.” He shot up through the ceiling of ice, anxious to be alone aboard the tanker and on his way, where he’d have a couple of days to daydream about Cesca in peace...

Inside the rubble belt that girdled the gas giant’s equator, the secret Roamer shipyards remained unnoticed by either the hydrogues or Hansa spies.

Jess Tamblyn came to Osquivel towing a shipment of water. A glittering conglomeration of grappler pods, automated stations, and environment modules circled within the planet’s multilayered rings. Suited crews moved like industrious ants, shuttling components and raw materials to construction spacedocks. As long as Big Goose survey vessels did not look too closely, clan Kellum’s lucrative complex continued to fabricate and dispatch vessel after vessel...

After he had docked his ship and disengaged the cargo tanks, Del Kellum met him personally. The barrel-chested man had salt-and-pepper hair and a well-trimmed goatee. “Haven’t seen you since the raid on Welyr! What have you brought us this time?”

Jess jerked a thumb back toward the docking chamber. “Exactly what was on the manifest, Del. Did you expect something stronger than water?”

“Yo! I’ll do the delivery duties,” said a young woman over the comm. “Hi, Jess! See me before you leave?”

He recognized the voice of Kellum’s raven-haired daughter, only eighteen years old and already proficient in much of the shipyard work. “My schedule’s tight, Zhett. I don’t know if I’ll have time.”

“He’ll make time, my sweet,” Kellum said.

Piloting a small grappler pod as if it were an extension of her own arms, Zhett intercepted the Plumas water tanks and glided off to distribute them one at a time to Osquivel’s assembly grids and resource rocks.

Misty with paternal pride, Kellum watched his daughter go, then raised his bushy brows. “She’s making eyes at you, Jess, and she’d be a good catch, by damn. You’re thirty-one years old, and unwed—isn’t your clan getting anxious?”

Zhett was the daughter of Kellum’s first marriage, the only part of the family remaining to him after a dome breach had killed his wife and young son. Though Kellum treated the girl as if she were a princess, Zhett had become a strong young woman on her own, not at all spoiled. Jess had known her since she was a little girl.

He looked at the older man and forced a smile. “I’ll make my own choice whenever the Guiding Star shows me the way.”

Kellum clapped him on the shoulder and took him through an air lock to a slowly rotating habitation module. He handed Jess a flexible bulb filled with a strong orange liqueur that he distilled himself.

Porthole plates filled one wall with an ever-changing view of the rocky blizzard. “Living here is like swimming in a school of hungry fish,” Kellum said. “You watch everything that moves and stay ready to get out of the way.”

He gestured proudly to the aquarium mounted on the inner wall, and Jess looked at the zebra-striped angelfish, Del Kellum’s prize possessions. At great expense, the clan leader had imported the graceful tropical fish from Earth. Kellum fed them regularly, studying their sleek forms because he said they reminded him of starship designs.

He growled conspiratorially, “Whenever you decide to put together your next hit-and-run squadron, Jess, my shipyard can pump out another dozen or so blitzkrieg scoops. I’ve already got the production lines in place.”

Jess couldn’t tell if the older man sounded hopeful or frightened. “I’m not ready to lose any more people and equipment right now, Del, just so we can sell a few squirts of ekti to the Big Goose. Besides, we can focus on other methods.”

Kellum rested a clenched fist on the metal tabletop. “We’ve got to show the drogues we can be strong, by damn. It’s not a simple cost/benefit calculation.”

As the habitation module rotated, the view panned across a broad black starscape down toward the hydrogen-rich, but now forbidden, gas giant. Jess sighed. “We keep modifying and improving our other harvesting techniques. There’s got to be something safer.”

“Safer, sure—but not a tenth as efficient.”

In the Osquivel shipyards, giant smelters and floating spacedocks were busy extruding thin sheets of tough metallic polymer. Though only a few molecules thick, each nebula sail covered an area broad enough to eclipse a small moon. The folded gossamer sheets were packed into pods to be launched far out into the sea of interstellar gas, where they would open and skim the nebula. Other facilities high above Osquivel were designed to distill hydrogen out of cometary ice.

Kellum grumbled. “It just takes so damned long to get ekti any other way.”

The private comm channel crackled and Zhett’s eager voice came over it. “Just checking in, Dad. All deliveries finished. Is Jess still there?”

“Indeed he is, my sweet.”

“Jess, want to go for a ride with me in a grappler pod? We can look at the rings—”

“I can’t stay long, Zhett—clan obligations.”

“Your loss.” She sounded flippant. “You’ll regret it later.”

After Zhett had signed off, Jess looked at her father. “I probably will.”



TASIA TAMBLYN

The EDF battle group cut through space in a show of force impressive enough to intimidate the unruly Yreka colonists. Any one of the three enhanced Juggernauts should have been enough to do the job, but Admiral Sheila Willis had also included five Thunderhead weapons platforms, ten Manta midsize cruisers, and sixteen full squadrons of Remora fighters.

The Grid 7 fleet lumbered into the system like a strutting bully flexing his muscles. To Platcom Tasia Tamblyn, it seemed like overkill against a handful of disobedient settlers, not to mention a huge waste of stardrive fuel. Wasn't the EDF supposed to be at war with *arealenemy*?

Tasia entered the private platcom's lounge just off her Thunderhead's bridge deck. Images of Admiral Willis and all the ship commanders attended the virtual meeting via projection. The Admiral's flagship Juggernaut had been christened *Jupiter*, both after the king of Roman gods and also in memory of the first great setback against the hydrogues.

"I want to complete this mission without collateral damage—if possible." The Admiral's expression was pinched, her short gray hair plastered close to her skull. She looked like a strict old schoolteacher and spoke with just a hint of a drawl. "In fact, my preference would be to have no shooting at all. The Yrekans are not the enemy, just misguided colonists."

Tasia nodded, agreeing with the commander's attitude, but she knew she was in the minority here.

"With all due respect, Admiral," said Commander Patrick Fitzpatrick III in his usual superior tone, "anybody who defies the King's direct orders is technically the enemy. Just one of a different sort." The young man had dark hair and dark eyes, with patrician features and thick eyebrows that looked painted on.

Tasia squelched an irritated sigh. She had saved Fitzpatrick's balls once or twice during realistic combat and emergency exercises, yet he still scorned anyone he considered to be beneath him. More than once, as a scrappy student in the lunar military academy, she'd used her knuckles to show him the error of his spoiled and narrow-minded ways, but even a stint in the infirmary hadn't altered the kleeb's attitude.

However, Fitzpatrick played political games better than Tasia; plus, his grandmother, Maureen Fitzpatrick, had been Hansa Chairman during the reign of King Bartholomew, so he felt privileged. Tasia kept stepping up in the ranks, too, but she achieved it through superior performance. Now Fitzpatrick sat in the captain's chair on a Manta cruiser, while Tasia commanded a large Thunderhead platform. And both of them were only in their early twenties.

Admiral Willis's holographic image turned as if she were looking at all the commanders projected around her. "Nevertheless, this is an act of benevolent discipline, not aggression."

"Yeah," said Fitzpatrick. "Let's get all *paternal* on their asses."

As far as Tasia was concerned, he could stick his head out into hard vacuum.

She admired what the Yreka colonists had accomplished since the founding of the settlement forty years

ago. Not as hardy or ingenious as Roamers, perhaps, but they had shown true backbone. Yreka should have been a strong and independent outpost, and the charismatic Grand Governor Sarhi had made hard decisions for the survival of her people. What was wrong with that?

But unnamed and unrecognized Hansa “watchers”—a fancy word for “spy,” Tasia thought—had infiltrated the various colonies just to keep an eye out from the inside. One of these spies had sent a report to the EDF about the Yrekan indiscretion.

General Lanyan had taken Yreka’s defiance as a personal affront. When dispatching the battlegroup, he had grumbled, “Only a few years ago, the Yrekans begged for our assistance against a gang of Roamer pirates. Unfortunately, their memories seem to be faulty.”

Though she had maintained her professional demeanor, Tasia was stung by the remark. The pirate Rand Sorengaard was an anomaly, and most Roamers disliked what he had done, yet the Hansa still used the incident to drum up prejudice. Tasia had been fighting that stigma throughout her military career.

A navigation officer spoke across the *Jupiter*’s intercom system, which broke into the holoconference. “Entering the Yreka system, Admiral. All warships taking up positions according to the game plan.”

“Very well, folks,” Admiral Willis said. “We’ll reconvene after we hear the Grand Governor’s response. This exercise could be over within the hour... or we might be stuck here awhile.”

Tasia left the platcom’s lounge and hurried back to the command bridge. She hoped she could quietly keep the EDF from going overboard with the poor settlers. Sadly, despite her numerous crack skills, subtlety and diplomacy weren’t among Tasia’s strong points.

Yreka was an unremarkable colony, located on the fringe of Hansa territory near the Ildiran Empire. The planetary system, home to a mere handful of hardy settlers, had no obvious strategic importance. The Yrekans depended on outside help for many necessities.

Tasia took her seat on the bridge and asked her command crew to sound off and double-check their systems. She transmitted back to the *Jupiter*, “Thunderhead 7-5 ready to engage, Admiral.”

Willis was calling the shots... and Tasia hoped “shots” was just a figurative term for this operation. The Yrekan colonists wouldn’t stand up for an hour against the Eddies’ firepower.

Wing Commander Robb Brindle, her friend and lover, called from the launch bay, speaking with forced formality. “Elite Remora squadrons ready for departure, Platcom. Should I deploy them, or wait until the Yrekans make a move?”

“Crack open another coffee tube while you wait in the cockpit, Wing Commander,” Tasia said. “Once they see what we’ve got, the Yrekans should fold their cards.”

“Platcom, there’s significant spaceport activity below,” her scanning ensign said. “The colonists are mobilizing ships... a lot of them.” The woman touched a pickup in her ear. “The Grand Governor has sounded civil defense alarms, calling for evacuation, getting civilians to shelter.” The officer blinked wide eyes at Tasia. “They think we’re going to nuke them.”

“Shizz, they should know better than that,” Tasia said. “Yreka’s a Hansa colony, and we’re the EDF.” But deep in her heart, she wondered how far Admiral Willis would go.

The Admiral sent a hail down to the Grand Governor, but her folksy voice did not diminish the threat. “Ma’am, this is Admiral Sheila Willis, commandant of the Earth Defense Forces here in Grid 7. I’m supposed to protect this sector of space, but it seems you’re forgetting who butters your bread. Are you there?” She waited a moment for a response. Tasia imagined that the administrative center of Yreka was scrambling in panic down below.

Willis continued. “Now, I’ve brought along a few of my ships to remind you that your planet is a signatory to the Hansa Charter. Take a look, and you’ll find everything right there above the dotted line. You’ve sworn your allegiance to the King.”

Her voice took on the tone of a disappointed grandmother. “But it appears you’re hoarding stockpiles of ekti, obtained through black-market suppliers. You should be ashamed of yourselves. The Hansa is faced with an extreme crisis, and King Peter has asked for the cooperation of all his subjects in centralizing resources. Why would you go and refuse? Your stardrive fuel has got to be turned over to the EDF so that we can allocate it for the greater good and use it to protect humanity.”

Though her words were meant to be conciliatory, Willis’s tone was stern. “Now, we don’t want any hard feelings, but the law is the law. The King is willing to forgive you, so long as you comply immediately. Let’s not make a mess of things.”

After she ended her message, a fuzzy projection appeared, a hologram whose poor resolution demonstrated the outdated nature of the Yrekan comm systems. The Grand Governor was a tall, thin woman of clear Indian descent. She had dusky brown skin, almost black eyes, and thick blue-black hair that hung in long tresses to her waist. She had a curved nose and full lips turned downward in a frown.

“Admiral Willis, I am afraid we cannot comply. Our own survival dictates my decision. I am appalled that the EDF would threaten a loyal Hansa colony. Yreka has already sacrificed much in this war effort. We have given all we can, and we require ekti supplies for our survival.”

The Grand Governor motioned with her hand, and the image was filled with heart-wrenching projections of skeletal children, stubby fields of crops drooping due to lack of fertilizer or insufficient protection from native blights. “If we surrender those fuel reserves to you, our people will starve, our colony will wither, and Yreka will become a ghost planet within a decade.”

Tasia quickly understood the desperate gamble that the Yrekan leader was taking. While Admiral Willis had spoken on a direct channel to the planet’s administration center, keeping the talk relatively private, Grand Governor Sarhi had intentionally sent her message on the broadest band so that all the soldiers in the Eddie battle group could hear her plea.

“Why not take the air we breathe? Or drain the fresh water from our streams? Or block the sunlight that makes our crops grow? We have paid dearly for this ekti, and we cannot afford to lose it.”

“Now, that’s all very melodramatic—” Admiral Willis began.

“Please send the King our regrets. Thank you.” Without waiting for the Admiral to respond, the Grand Governor gave a slight formal bow, then signed off, to ensure that she got the last word.

The crew members on Tasia’s bridge were astonished at the foolish response. Some even snickered in complete disbelief. She said firmly, “There’s nothing funny going on here.”

The Grid 7 battlefleet waited a long moment in silence, anticipating what Admiral Willis would

command. When she did speak to the commanders, Willis's voice was calm, but disappointed. "This planet is currently under interdiction. No ships go in or out. No supplies, no messages, for as long as it takes."

Tasia leaned back, relieved at least that the Admiral hadn't ordered an immediate assault. She said to her crew, "Well, I hope none of you has plans for the weekend."

10



KING PETER

The King finished the last motions of dressing preparatory to emerging from his chambers. For the morning, servants had laid out a colorful, ornate, and thoroughly uncomfortable outfit (no doubt designed and selected by a committee). But he had ignored it, choosing his own attire and dismissing all the lackeys who wanted to help him with his buttons and collar. Raymond Aguerra's mother had certainly taught him how to dress himself.

As he dressed, he spoke casually to his Teacher compy. "Basil doesn't want a leader." After listening to OX for years about the nuances of power and rhetoric, King Peter saw the old robot as more than a database or a set of historical files. He tugged at a cuff. "He wants an actor."

Early on, Peter had decided to do his best to become a real King. Playfully at first, he'd begun to institute small changes, significant only in that they demonstrated his independence. Instead of the gaudy jewelry and draping robes old Frederick had worn, Peter altered his wardrobe to a crisp and serviceable uniform. Gray, blue, and black. The Chairman had approved, sure that the more Prussian style would resonate with a people at war.

"It is best for you to be both, King Peter." The benign-looking Teacher compy was one of many built to accompany the first generation ships as they left to search the stars. OX now served the Hanseatic League in the training of Great Kings. "But there is more to your role than that. The people must believe in you."

Peter smiled. "All right, then. Let's go and be seen on our way to the situation room."

As Raymond, he had grown up with a close-knit but poor family. Scraping for every spare credit, he had worked odd jobs, talked with street vendors, gotten to know the everyday men and women whose lives attracted no notice.

Those people were the King's genuine subjects, but Basil didn't factor them into his grand plans. The Chairman excelled in seeing how jigsaw pieces fit together, but he had no comprehension of the smaller scale of life. He didn't know any *real* people, only political projections and general economic concepts. It made him a good businessman, but not a leader who inspired loyalty...

With OX at his side, Peter made his way down a wide hall. He smiled at a middle-aged Hispanic woman polishing an alabaster bust of King Bartholomew. "Hello, Anita." He looked at the statue's perfect facial features. "Do you think old Bartholomew really looked like that, or do you suppose it's an idealized portrayal?"

She beamed at his notice. “I... I suppose that’s the way he looked to the sculptor’s eye, Sire.”

“I bet you’re right.”

He and OX continued down the passageway to the polished wooden doors of a former library, now converted into a situation room. It had once been filled with old books, so fragile that they could no longer be read. Now the shelves were covered with filmy display screens.

Tactical officers and advisers met regularly to study Hansa colonies, known positions of Ildiran ships and the EDF fleet across the ten spacial grids. Though never formally invited to these meetings, Peter made a point of joining them every week. None of the experts inside the situation room would turn him away—unless the Chairman ordered it. But Basil would never make a scene. As the King and OX entered, the older man made only a slight acknowledgment from his overstuffed leather chair.

Inside the converted library, the court green priest Nahton sat attentively beside a spindly gold-barked treeling, ready to receive telink reports. News also came from regular mail drones, which could travel far on minimal ekti. In addition to delivering messages and transporting data among Hansa worlds, mail drones often took survey images that documented cities and populations to keep the colony database up to date.

“Still no word from the Dasra reconnaissance fleet, Mr. Chairman,” said Admiral Lev Stromo. “It’s now a week overdue.”

A group of EDF ships had been dispatched to a gas giant in another attempt to establish negotiations with the hydrogues. It was an obvious public relations gesture, not expected to generate any tangible results. The enemy aliens had so far ignored or rebuffed all peace overtures.

Basil grumbled. “I knew we should have sent a green priest along for instant communications, but we didn’t have any to spare.”

Nahton sat unruffled, paying no attention to the implied criticism.

Military advisers and colony specialists went over the updates, projecting a complex mosaic of civilization. Currently, there were sixty-nine signatories to the Hansa Charter and a handful of satellite colonies and uncataloged camps. After the strategists had discussed known changes in ship deployment, technicians modified the images to reflect the best-guess situation in the Spiral Arm.

Peter studied the details, attempting to draw his own conclusions.

Nahton curled his fingers around the treeling’s thin trunk and connected his mind to the worldforest. From around the Spiral Arm, scattered green priest observers disseminated their reports, which he now accessed. The priest’s brow wrinkled, and dark tattoo lines compressed together on his face. When he finished, Nahton’s face showed agitation and concern. “I’ve received reports from six different green priests, four on colony worlds, two aboard diplomatic ships.”

Basil sat up, seeing the green priest’s concern. “What is it?”

“Several hydrogue warglobes were spotted traveling through inhabited systems. They’ve made no contact, but they have approached various planets, apparently scanning them.”

Peter pointed to the starmap. “Highlight the locations where the warglobes were seen. Maybe we can see some sort of pattern.”

“Only six of my counterparts sighted the hydrogues.” The green priest called out the names of obscure systems, and glowing red dots appeared on the mosaic. “Usk.Cotopaxi . Boone’s Crossing. Palisade. Hijonda.Paris Three.”

OX took a step forward, though his optical sensors had high-enough resolution that he could scan details from a distance. “That does not appear to be a simple defensive posture. Given the sparse distribution of green priests across the colony worlds, many other hydrogues could easily have been missed.”

Basil frowned. “Search through all mail drone files, see if they’ve picked up any other drogue images.”

“According to my reports,” Nahton said, “the warglobes made no overt aggressive move. They seem to be scouts traveling from system to system.”

“Hydrogues never come out just to snoop around,” Admiral Stromo said. He had been in command of the Grid 0 escort fleet that had been devastated at Jupiter. “Until now, they’ve emerged only to attack.”

King Peter’s mind was fully engaged. He scanned the seemingly random distribution of red dots where warglobes had been sighted. “Until now.”

11



RLINDA KETT

If she’d been a different sort of person, Rlinda Kett might have complained about how her fortunes had fallen. But she wasn’t a woman to bother with such nonsense. Instead, she crossed her meaty arms over her ample chest and reassessed what to do. Exuberant optimism might annoy more realistic people, but she felt that it often helped.

She paced the deck of her ship and took inventory of her cargo stockpile. It didn’t look all that bad, considering. At least the *Voracious Curiosity* was still hers—though on the rah-rah orders of King Frederick five years ago, she’d been forced to “donate” her other four merchant ships to the EDF for war-related purposes.

For the past month, her ship had been docked at a public hangar on Earth’s moon. It was cheaper to land in the Moon’s shallower gravity well than to use the additional thrust to go to Earth.

But she had just received a second annoying bill from the moonbase business offices, an insistent request for overdue docking fees. “And what am I supposed to do about it?” Rlinda sighed in frustration.

The military had rationed ekti so tightly that she couldn’t afford to make runs with the only vessel she had left. Then, to add insult to injury, they charged exorbitant fees to let her keep the *Curiosity* docked. Why couldn’t they let her sit in peace? Consuming the gourmet treats in her larder offered some small solace in the midst of these administrative headaches.

Over the years, she had already liquidated most of her assets, acquiring what little trade merchandise she could. But during the war she had a difficult time moving some of the upscale, exotic specialties she kept on the *Curiosity*. Maybe one of the moonbase officials would be open to a bit of barter; somebody must want to impress a spouse or lover with haute cuisine foods. Rlinda could even give them hints on how to prepare the stuff, how to score romantic points.

In the cargo bay, she squeezed her bulk into cramped places. Fortunately, the low lunar gravity and long practice assisted her. Rlinda ran her fingers down the impressive inventory list.

She'd kept a few bolts of Theron cocoon fiber for herself, but now she'd have to sell it. She would have loved a personal wardrobe of the shimmering material, but the money was more important. She still had six cans of saltpond caviar imported from Dremen and preserved insect steaks from Theroc (absolutely delicious, though Rlinda had difficulty convincing would-be gourmets to sample bug meat). In addition, there were tinpaks of pickled fishflowers, marinated crustaceans, fresh pupating sweetworms (that were due to hatch soon, despite the cold packaging), and unclassified—and untasted—fruits and vegetables from a spectrum of worlds.

Her mouth watered. Rlinda was a master chef herself, and had studied the cuisines of numerous cultures. Given her delight in fine foods, it was no wonder she weighed so much. Rlinda considered it an advertisement for the quality of her wares.

Unfortunately, when economic times were tight, people dispensed with luxuries; consequently, commodities such as those Rlinda carried were the first to suffer. Silly priorities. It was a lot harder to sell expensive “useless” items, but her creditors still demanded payment on time.

Rlinda returned to her cockpit and slumped into the padded captain's chair that had been expanded to accommodate her frame. She looked at the docking bill again. Maybe she was a bit behind in her payment, but the overdue amount wasn't significant enough to have generated such a stern notice. She would have preferred to share a bottle of wine with the bean counter, open a pack of special black chocolates, and sweet-talk her way into revised terms. She stared at the signature, not recognizing the man's name—B. Robert Brandt. Probably some accountant recently transferred up from Earth.

Then a chuckle burst out of her mouth, turning into a deep-throated laugh as she noticed that the digits of the man's employee number exactly matched the date of her latest wedding anniversary. “You always were a rascal, BeBob.”

Her dark eyes twinkled. Rlinda wasn't sure whether she was more delighted to hear from him or to know that the insistent bill was simply a convenient cover for sending her a private message.

Branson Roberts—the best of her numerous ex-husbands—had captained a merchant ship commandeered by the EDF, and General Lanyan had railroaded him into flying military reconnaissance missions. BeBob's methods as a merchant hadn't been strictly legal, but he had generated plenty of profit, which he shared with Rlinda.

She descrambled the text using the private code they had long ago established. Because of the encryption, the text message was necessarily brief. She would have preferred a holographic image of the man—he'd never have had the nerve to scan himself naked, but it would have been even nicer. As she read the words, though, she understood why BeBob had taken precautions.

“Fed up with the military—no surprise there! After seventeen suicidal missions, decided to call it quits.

The General wants to keep throwing me into the fire until I'm used up. Enough of that shit! Decided to save my own skin and—more important—save the *Blind Faith*. Taking a voluntary unofficial leave of absence. Hope the EDF doesn't have the gumption or the resources to track me down.

“If you ever get a full gas tank and want to visit, come to Crenna. An out-of-the-way colony, where I can lie low and run black-market materials for the settlers. Miss you. BeBob.”

Rlinda leaned back in the captain's chair, her face glowing, her eyes sparkle with embarrassing tears. He had always been stubborn and impulsive, impossible to live with... and a damned good man. BeBob wasn't cut out for military service—Rlinda could have told Lanyan that—and it was a crime to abuse his particular skills.

Oh, she had loved him indeed... Otherwise, why bother getting so upset when their marriage had crumbled after five years? But Rlinda and BeBob still had enough respect—and, yes, a little bit of passion—for each other that they'd remained business partners. If only she had known what other hardships she would face, Rlinda might have been a bit more tolerant with the man as a husband. Life was too short and too hard to limit the good times.

Clutching the encoded message, she returned to her cargo bay and looked at the supplies with a different eye now, pulling down a bottle of port wine from New Portugal and one of the tins of saltpond caviar. The upscale market might be a tough business proposition these days, but at least she could consume it herself. And there would be no better customer.

She had no intention of wasting her last few drops of ekti to go see him, but someday she might have a chance. It was good just to know that he was alive and safe. With a squeaking pop, she removed the cork from the bottle of port. Today she felt in the mood for a celebration, now that she'd had just a little bit of good news.

She poured a small, sweet toast—for starters—and raised the glass. “To you, BeBob. You stay safe until I see you again.”

12



BASIL WENCESLAS

A spark grew into a flame, then expanded into a conflagration, consuming an entire planet. It had merely been a scientific test of rediscovered alien technology.

Dammit, we never intended to start a war!

In his penthouse office suite atop Hansa HQ, Basil Wenceslas reviewed images of the first Klikiss Torch test. He observed the archival images as the swirling clouds of Oncier brightened, glowed, then caught fire. Who could have known an alien civilization lurked deep within the core?

In retaliation, the aliens had destroyed a scientific observation platform, vaporized all four of Oncier's moons, wrecked numerous Roamer skymines, defeated part of the Ildiran Solar Navy and the EDF, forbidden all further ekti harvesting... and heinously murdered Old King Frederick. Surely that was

enough?

For almost six years, teams of experts had analyzed the Oncier record, second by second. Basil did not expect to see anything new, but it still fascinated him to watch the utter destruction of a hydrogue planet. He could feel neither remorse nor sympathy.

The aliens would accept no apologies, nor would they negotiate. Even now, Basil expected nothing from the latest recon mission to Dasra—the ships were overdue and now feared lost—but at least he had tried. He could think of nothing else to do, no magic solution. If only...

The Klikiss Torch had seemed a miraculous boon, a way to open formerly uninhabitable moons for colonization. The alien technology had been discovered by two xeno-archaeologists picking through ancient and mysterious Klikiss ruins. That insectoid civilization had once been a great interplanetary empire, but ten thousand years ago, they had left their empty cities like garbage heaps across the solar systems.

Basil smiled wistfully. Perhaps Margaret and Louis Colicos could discover yet another miracle, some amazing lost Klikiss device the Hansa could use as leverage to force the drogues to sue for peace...

But he had heard nothing from the archaeologists in years. The last he remembered was that they were on Rheindic Co with a small team, including a green priest. The Colicoses were not extravagant, and the Chairman had left instructions that rubber-stamped any reasonable requests. He had not needed to keep an eye on them.

Images of imploding Oncier played again, faster this time, so that the beautiful planet burst into stellar fire.

Curious now, Basil punched in an information request at his service terminal, asking for the latest reports of what Margaret and Louis Colicos had been doing. He had recently received a blind letter from their son, Anton, inquiring into their whereabouts. The message had been long delayed, tangled through bureaucratic channels. Anton Colicos was merely an associate professor at a university, no one with any political clout or importance. Apparently this wasn't the first such inquiry the young man had sent...

Basil was astonished to learn that all contact with the Colicos team had ceased not long after the hydrogue ultimatum. Rheindic Co was not on any supply routes, and unless someone had sent an urgent request for assistance, no supply runner would have filed the proper forms and argued for the appropriate waivers. The xeno-archaeologists had access to a green priest for instant communication, should an emergency arise. No wonder he hadn't noticed.

But still... five years of silence? It was no surprise their son had grown concerned. Basil felt cold. The old researchers had fallen through the cracks. Why hadn't their green priest sent a message? He dreaded that they had starved to death on an abandoned world because no one was paying attention. The Chairman hated it when details weren't properly attended to.

He retrieved the last formal reports they had submitted. As Basil read Margaret's summaries, seeing how she waxed enthusiastic as the Klikiss mystery unraveled, he felt a growing thrill. Perhaps there was something important on Rheindic Co. Had he missed a remarkable opportunity?

Margaret Colicos had found some ancient connection between the vanished Klikiss race and the hydrogues—an astonishing revelation in itself. She claimed they had discovered another innovative and amazing technology, but was not specific about what it was.

And then the reports had ceased.

Galvanized now, Basil left his Hansa offices and descended into the underground passageways that took him across the wide arboretum, under the statue gardens, and into the Whisper Palace .

On the way, he encountered ambitious and beautiful Sarein. “Basil, I need to talk to you. Could we arrange a private dinner in my quarters?”

“Not now.” He looked at her. The young Theron woman could have found any number of handsome men to sit at her feet like servants, but she was more drawn to Basil’s wealth and political power. “Where is a green priest? I need to send a message.”

Sarein’s brows furrowed. “I just saw Nahton walking toward the Shelter Garden .” Basil picked up his pace. Without being invited, Sarein followed.

Flowers and shrubs lined the winding paths through the foliage. The green priest often liked to walk through the manicured fern gardens inside the Whisper Palace conservatory wing. Now he knelt by a reflecting pool sheltered with drooping gold-leaf willows.

“Nahton, I require your services. Let’s go to the nearest treeling.”

“Follow me, Mr. Chairman.” Fifteen of the potted young worldtrees were stationed around the sprawling Palace, usually in governmental rooms where communication was most necessary.

Basil talked as they hurried. “An archaeology team was dispatched several years ago to a planet called Rheindic Co. They took a green priest with them, and he planted a grove of worldtrees for direct communication. I must re-establish contact with them. We have heard nothing in years.”

“What’s so urgent, Basil?” Sarein said, her large eyes conspiratorial.

“I just don’t want to be late for the party.”

When Nahton finally knelt beside one of the potted treelings and wrapped his fingers around the scaled trunk, he sent his thoughts through telink, connecting with the worldforest, searching through a million thought-lines.

“Arcas was his name,” Nahton said. “He did plant his treelings there.” The man’s tattooed face drooped into a frown. “All the treelings on Rheindic Co are dead. Contact has been severed.” He blinked his eyes, deeply disturbed. “The trees are dead. Why... why didn’t the worldforest tell us?”

Basil absorbed the information, his initial curiosity and worry evolving into a more urgent concern as he saw the court green priest’s unexpected reaction. Nahton gripped the potted treeling, using telink again as if to send numerous urgent inquiries into the worldforest network.

Preoccupied, Basil began to walk back toward his private offices. Sarein hurried beside him. “What is it, Basil? Can you tell me?”

“Please let me think. This is new information. I don’t know yet what it means... but it could be extremely significant.” He walked faster, leaving her behind. Basil could always smooth Sarein’s ruffled feathers later; more likely, she would come to him and find some way to apologize.

According to the last sketchy messages, the Colicos team had apparently stumbled upon something important, but they had not followed up their tantalizing hints with a complete report. Damn, why hadn't he raised the question before? And if the green priest was so obviously alarmed, then something truly unusual must have taken place.

With all the crises in the Hansa, such a matter would not have risen above his personal radar. Now, though, the idea raised his suspicions and his hopes. Perhaps the archaeologists had indeed found another technological miracle, greater even than the Klikiss Torch? If anyone could manage such a thing, it would be Margaret and Louis Colicos.

Basil did not like loose ends. He would invest the necessary expense in stardrive fuel, find a small ship that wasn't being used for any important matters.

He ran a finger along his chin, pondering. Then he remembered his alien sociologist and spy, Davlin Lotze, who had been sent to the abandoned Ildiran colony of Crenna. Pretending to be an average settler, Lotze had surreptitiously looked under rugs, probed into corners, lifted subtle clues about the Ildiran civilization. By now, he'd had enough time to complete his job there.

Yes, Lotze would be perfect for this job. Basil decided to turn him loose on Rheindic Co to find out what had happened to the archaeologists.

13



DAVLIN LOTZE

At the urgent town meeting, Davlin Lotze silently listened to settlers who wanted to flee Crenna. "We've got to get out of here before we all die of the epidemic! It's the Ildiran plague again!"

Davlin knew it was unlikely that the same biological infection would be compatible with human DNA, but he couldn't reveal how much he understood about genetics. After all, he was supposedly just a farmer and a civil engineer.

Davlin lived alone in an abandoned Ildiran dwelling he had claimed for himself. He was a tall dark-skinned man with a muscular frame and a soft voice. His left cheek was faintly scarred from an accident with an exploding glass bottle; the marks were a bit more distinctive than he preferred, but he had learned how to draw no particular attention to himself. It was a spy's job to blend in.

He had helped his fellow settlers install waterworks, sewers, weather stations, and electrical conduits as they rebuilt the damaged colony's infrastructure. During the epidemic that had driven the Ildirans from Crenna, the alien colonists had burned buildings and ruined generators and substations. They had fled this world in a panic.

And now, five years later, a new mysterious sickness was sweeping through Crenna's human settlers at an alarming rate. The victims suffered a debilitating respiratory infection, and a rash of alarming orange circles blossomed across their legs and shoulders. When one old man died from "Orange Spot," the anxiety reached a new pitch.

At the town meeting, one of the colony doctors stood, very short in stature with large owl-like eyes. Her face was gray from exhaustion, but she wore a small smile that seemed out of place and an expression of weary relief. “I think I have good news.” She didn’t notice the eager indrawn breaths. “After analyzing samples from fifteen victims of Orange Spot, my team and I have isolated the infectious organism. I’m happy to say that it’s completely unrelated to the virus that causes Ildiran blindness fever.”

On a portable projection screen she displayed several electron micrographs showing blobs and strange shapes. Davlin recognized human blood cells along with large unfamiliar masses. “Orange Spot is a simple amoeboid monocellular creature, not as tough as a virus or even a bacterium. In humans it affects mainly the skin and the lungs. It’s probably in the water or in something we harvested, a natural part of Crenna’s ecosystem.”

“Is it going to kill us all?” asked someone.

“No, but you might have to get used to your orange spots.” The doctor smiled a little more. “That symptom is an inflammation of the skin and a discoloration of melanin. Possibly permanent, but not too dangerous.”

“But my Arkady is dead!” an old woman said.

“Arkady already had scarred lung tissue, and he was particularly vulnerable. Orange Spot is as serious as, say, pneumonia. But treatable, too. All we require is a broad-spectrum anti-amoebic. I have some samples in my pharmacy, but not enough to treat the whole population.”

“Well, we can’t just run to the local drugstore and pick up a prescription,” grumbled another colonist.

A man named Branson Roberts, one of the newest colony members, stood. “I can.” He was a thin and lanky white man with big callused hands and a dandelion puff of gray-white hair on his head.

The man had flown in with a small merchant vessel; new plating indicated where the name and serial number had been changed. Either Roberts had stolen the craft or he was hiding from something. But the Crenna colonists welcomed anyone with a private ship who could make under-the-table runs and obtain black-market supplies.

“My ship has enough fuel for a couple more trips, as long as I don’t go too far.” He pushed his hands into his jumpsuit pockets. His grin was infectious. “I have a few connections around the Hansa.”

Of course you do, Davlin thought.

Two days later, the Crenna medical staff had treated—and cured—the five most severe cases of Orange Spot. Davlin worked on the water filtration system, adding additional precautions to screen the amoeba from the local drinking supply. Seeing the recovery of their fellow colonists, the people calmed.

Branson Roberts went around the settlement to compile a “shopping list” so he could bring back a full cargo load in addition to the necessary anti-amoebic medicine. If he was going to use his diminishing stardrive fuel to make a run for pharmaceuticals, he might as well make the whole trip count.

The closest Hansa world was a place that catered to wealthy tourists. “On Relleker, they don’t want

their pampered visitors to suffer from so much as a splinter,” Roberts had said. “They’ll have every known medical supply.”

Davlin met him at the small spaceport with a list of components he needed for the pumping and filter stations. Theoretically, he should have used the opportunity to transmit a report to Chairman Wenceslas, but he was not anxious to attract Hansa notice. He liked it here on Crenna, and by now he half-believed his own cover story as a simple settler. Out of sight, out of mind... he hoped.

The Ildirans had called Crenna “a world of sounds.” Silvery streams bubbled up from springs and tumbled down in cascades. Natural seed-grasses rattled with the winds like tiny maracas. Insects hummed and droned throughout the day and night, adding a pleasant, musical white noise. The low hills were forested with spiny groves of flutewood trees; after the trees died, the soft cores decayed and left hollow reeds through which native insects drilled holes, and the ever-present breezes played them like musical instruments.

It was a nice place, much better than some of his other assignments.

Now, before Roberts could climb aboard his ship, the proximity alarms chimed, indicating that an incoming vessel had just entered Crenna’s atmosphere. Roberts looked alarmed. “Who would be coming here?”

One of the part-time town officials in the survey tower bellowed an excited announcement: “It’s a mail drone!” Then with increased volume, the man shouted, “Mail call!”

A drone was a small, fast ship built with automated systems, little more than an interstellar satellite. During the embargo, such drones were the only way to disseminate information to planets that had no green priest for direct telink communication. They also took detailed survey images of known Hansa settlements.

Roberts grabbed the list of mechanical components from Davlin’s hand and scampered aboard his ship. “Go read your mail. I’ll be back as soon as I finish shopping,” he said in a rush. “In the meantime, if the sickness gets too bad, I hear that chicken soup works wonders.”

Roberts lifted off without completing a standard prelaunch checklist—and presumably before the drone could have spotted him. The merchant ship streaked into the sky mere moments before the mail drone arrived. The fast satellite began to download its stored files and messages into Crenna’s network database: letters from family members, business reports, news files, copies of entertainment vidloops and digitized novels.

No matter how much the settlers might enjoy the contact with home, Davlin found it odd that the Hansa would send such a low-priority mission here to outlying Crenna. He knew that every action Basil took had a reason—usually more than one. He also wondered what Branson Roberts had been afraid of.

Though he had no family or close friends, Davlin was not surprised to find a message for him among the transmitted letters. The note from his “brother” Saul read like an innocuous message: a niece’s marriage, the death of an old relative, struggling family businesses. But after he took it back to his dwelling, he decoded it and read about the new assignment Basil Wenceslas had given him.

Davlin’s heart sank, but he had known that his peaceful times on Crenna would eventually end. Once again, he must become an official investigator and make use of his exosociological skills to solve a mystery. Before long, a ship would arrive to take him to a Klikiss graveyard world, where his orders

were to discover what had happened to a vanished archaeological team.

The people of Crenna would never see Davlin Lotze again.

14



ANTON COLICOS

Without a doubt, it would be the grandest story ever told. Anton Colicos meant to do his best to write the biography of his illustrious parents, without resorting to too many embellishments. Margaret and Louis Colicos were unravelers of mysteries, diggers in the dust of fallen civilizations—iconic heroes who could endure through the ages. However, his parents would insist on historical accuracy, even if it did make for a less interesting story.

In his university office on Earth, golden sunlight streamed through the window slats to dapple the items he had gathered: photofiles and preserved images from his childhood, newsgrabs and tear sheets of journal articles and research publications.

Early in their careers, his parents had used Ildiran scanning technology to uncover a pristine city buried under the Sahara. They had worked on Mars investigating the pyramids of Labyrinthus Noctis, debunking the theory that the unusual landmark was an artifact from a lost civilization, much to the dismay of imaginative theorists everywhere. But the truth was the truth.

Then, the Colicoses had devoted their work to investigating Klikiss ruins. Llaro, Pym, Corribus. After the successful test of the incredible Torch, they had gone to Rheindic Co—only to fall silent for several years now.

At first, Anton hadn't worried. At thirty-four, he was long past needing to keep in close contact with his parents. Margaret and Louis were self-sufficient, choosing planets so isolated that it took months or years for messages to travel from place to place. Even without the hydrogue war restricting transportation and communication, it wasn't unusual for them to drop out of sight.

Still, five years was too long. And this time they'd had a green priest...

Anton had sent multiple inquiries to Hansa officials, but he was just a researcher in an obscure department at a university, and his letters attracted no attention.

Anton went to the office window, opening the slats so he could stare at the dazzling ocean. Though the university building had environmental controls, he preferred to open the window, so he could smell the cool sea breezes in the parklike district around Santa Barbara.

The five quirky buildings in the university's Directorate of Ildiran Studies had been designed by students. New structures were erected in unusual geometries, with crystal panes and faceted surfaces evocative of Mijistra, the Ildiran capital city. Rotating photon mills shed rainbows across the sidewalks. The sunshine of southern California added to the Ildiran illusion, though even the warmest, clearest day could never rival the dazzle of seven suns.

Partly using the cachet of his legendary name, Anton had landed a respected position in the Department of Epic Studies. When he'd been younger, Anton had followed his parents around to their archaeological digs, being tutored by compy teachers. Sometimes, Margaret and Louis treated their only child more as a colleague than as a son.

He'd never learned to take care of his rail-thin appearance and often wore ill-fitting clothes without concessions to style, grabbing whichever outfit was closest at hand. His dishwater brown hair was straight and worn in a serviceable cut. Because of constant reading, he had twice gone through retinal surgery to correct his vision, and he still squinted out of habit.

For years, it had seemed that Anton would follow in his parents' footsteps, but while he loved ancient mysteries, his heart's interests turned to legends rather than straight history. Anton had acquired two doctorates, one in obscure dead languages and one in comparative cultural mythology. He excelled in studying fragments of the *Saga of Seven Suns* the Ildirans had donated to Earth.

Anton had memorized reams of human folk stories, many in their original languages: Icelandic sagas, Homer's epics, the *Heike Monogatari* of Japan, the complete Arthurian saga in all its variations, the Sumerian Gilgamesh epic, and many folktales that had never been previously translated with any accuracy.

If only he could study with the Ildiran rememberers...

He had applied four different times to Mijistra, addressing letters to the Mage-Imperator, the Prime Designate, anyone he could think of. Declaring his passion for epic story cycles, he had begged for a grant to go to Ildira and study the epic, hoping that his insights on Earth mythologies might enrich the Ildirans' enjoyment of the *Saga*. Surely their own historians would want to learn the legends of humanity in return? Both races would benefit tremendously.

But his applications had been ignored twice, denied the third time, and the fourth—sent a year ago—swallowed up in the hydrogue-frayed turmoil. Just like his inquiries about his parents. Wasn't anyone out there listening, in the whole Spiral Arm?

So, instead, he planned to create a myth of his own by writing the biography of his mother and father. He spread the notes he'd been compiling for years, organizing them by topic from dry biographical data to research accomplishments, from the routine but still remarkable Earth archaeological work to their off-planet studies.

But a story needed some sort of closure—if not the end of their lives, at least a validation. Without any information on what had happened to his parents on Rheindic Co, Anton felt incapable of finishing the biographical work.

Hearing the tinkle of the door signal, he looked up at a brass-plated compy who stood at his office entry. The robotic servants were ubiquitous in the university halls, performing deliveries and maintenance duties; many had Friendly programming that made them cheerful conversationalists.

“Anton Colicos, please verify your identity.”

“All present and accounted for. What do you want?”

The compy extended an ornate package, a plaque sealed with shimmering paper and embossed with unusual designs that Anton instantly recognized as Ildiran. “This was delivered by a courier. The

university chancellor is most intrigued. We rarely receive dispatches directly from the Prism Palace.”

Anton snatched the package from the compy. “I’ll savor the moment for myself. Thank you.”

“Shall I tell the chancellor to set up a meeting?”

He held the unexpected package. “Go ahead. He’ll want me to explain myself, even if this turns out to be nothing.”

As the compy swiveled about and departed, Anton studied the shimmering cover. He discovered how to unfasten the protective layer and slid out an etched-diamond film sheet. It was written by one of the chief Ildiran historians, a rememberer named Vao’sh.

So, unlike the inquiries about his parents, Anton’s letters and applications to Ildira had not gone unnoticed after all. The rememberer even knew that Anton could read the Ildiran written language.

He was invited to come to Ildira and “share stories and interpret legends” with Vao’sh himself. His eyes sparkled. He couldn’t believe it. Transport had already been arranged.

His heart pounded and he looked down at the notes scattered across his desk. Writing his parents’ biography would have to be delayed again. He was going to Mijistra!

15



ADAR KORI’NH

After choosing the personnel who were best suited for the mission, Adar Kori’nh took seventy soldiers, workers, and engineers from his warliners and led the demolition team to the hidden *Burton*.

Though he had not argued with the Dobro Designate, Kori’nh was not convinced of the need for this operation. The generation ship had remained here, cold and silent, for so many years. Analysis of this alien hulk might have led scientist kithmen to innovations for Ildiran vessels.

But the Ildiran Empire had resisted change for generations. The Mage-Imperator was not interested in improvements, because that would imply their civilization was not *already* at its pinnacle. So the empty *Burton* floated out here in space, ignored—and now Kori’nh had been ordered to destroy it. It seemed such a shame.

Shuttles wove through space debris that hung like a smoke screen around the cumbersome *Burton*. As the dismantling team approached the haunted-looking derelict, the Adar drank in details he had missed on his first inspection. Around him, muscular soldiers and intent-eyed engineers peered with fascination at the corroded hulk.

It was a monument to lost dreams, an abandoned town once filled with hundreds of hopeful human colonists. Long ago, foolhardy pioneers had left their home planet and set off into the uncharted emptiness with no rational expectation of finding a habitable world. What fabulous folly! How long had it been since the Ildiran race had shown such passion, taken such risks? Kori’nh couldn’t wait to get

aboard.

The Ildiran shuttles hovered beside the *Burton*, while the Adar dispatched an initial team of specialists. Working outside in hard vacuum, the engineer kithmen wrestled with the antique Terran docking hatches, removing external access panels, testing and rewiring circuits.

“Bekh!” He fought back his impatience as he watched the work. “Slowly. No mistakes.” The engineers finally managed to open the external doors to reveal a cargo bay large enough to accommodate all the Ildiran shuttles. “Once our ships are inside, send out three systems specialists in environment suitfilms. See if we can pressurize the interior.”

Within an hour, yellow lights glowed inside the *Burton*’s docking bay. “Oxygen levels test out, Adar,” one of the engineers transmitted. “It appears we have reactivated the atmospheric systems. Should we power up the whole ship? The stagnant air will need to be circulated and filtered. I am certain the *Burton* has reserve supplies.”

Kori’nh raised his chin. “Let’s do this properly. We’ll wear facefilms in the meantime, but I want the *Burton* awakened, powered, and ready to fly for one last journey.”

The engineering team acted as if they were on a holiday to the resort world of Maratha. They rushed through the hollow corridors, where generations of optimistic human colonists had once lived. Their footsteps echoed in the cold, empty air, loud enough to awaken any spirits that might have remained behind in the abandoned ship. Kori’nh had read that humans did not believe in the Lightsource and a higher plane of illumination after death, but in ghosts and wandering spirits.

In the *Burton*’s engine room, curious engineers deciphered the archaic propulsion systems. From contact with the Hanseatic League, scientist kithmen knew the basic principles of human star vessels, and the generation ship’s drive was straightforward enough that they were able to get it functioning again.

Wearing an insulated suit and facefilm, Adar Kori’nh made his own inspection, walking alone through the passenger quarters, climbing from one deck to the next. Even when he was by himself, he could feel the other Ildirans nearby, their comforting presence like tickling feathers of *thism*.

But he also sensed the human presence, as if their dreams had left a tangible imprint. Such foolishly grand aspirations, the naïve optimism of fledglings leaving their home and venturing out into the wild Spiral Arm. So ambitious, so reckless.

Kori’nh looked at all the cabins, the sealed storage areas, the common rooms, gaming centers, libraries... mostly stripped clean now. He stopped at a cavernous dining hall, saw signs of a disturbance, overturned chairs, spilled debris. A mutiny, or a celebration? Or had Ildirans caused this themselves centuries ago when they had detained the unsuspecting *Burton* colonists?

So much to see here and learn... so much that would be wasted when he followed orders and destroyed the ship.

He realized the scandal the Empire would face if humans ever discovered what their supposed allies had done on Dobro. As alleged rescuers, the Solar Navy had taken the colonists to where they were promised their own colony; instead, they had become breeding stock for the experiments.

Kori'nh's heart twisted. It seemed brutally dishonorable to him.

As the Adar walked reverently along, he imagined footsteps, playful children chasing each other, generations that had been born and died far from home, never setting foot on solid ground. He opened sealed living quarters at random, trying to imagine the families that might have lived there. . . afraid he might find the mummified remains of some forgotten castaway.

Kori'nh saw old pictures, images of heroes or loved ones, faded clothing, indecipherable toys, keepsakes from old Earth. Each item bore some significance to the people who had lived here, stories passed on from parents to children.

These colonists had intended to create a new Earth on a new world. But the breeder subjects on Dobro had been stripped of their pasts, given no education about their origin. All of this was lost. . .

He finally reached what the humans had used as a command nucleus—they called it a “pilot deck.” He stood alone, looking at darkened control stations, imagining the reports from crude instruments and sensors. Here, a succession of captains had lived and worked, making good and bad command decisions, growing old, passing on the long mission to their successors. Kori'nh wondered at their names. Were those commanders forgotten, their lives buried in the dust of history? The human race did not have an equivalent of the *Saga of Seven Suns*.

Sucking a long breath through the facefilm, the Adar gazed at the empty command chair, saw faint frostlines in some of the shadows between equipment stations. This giant ship had been aching empty for so long. The silence hung like a thunderhead around him, occasionally broken by faint groans and shifting sounds as warming air and the presence of strangers stressed the long-dormant structure. It would take some time to shake the sleep and stiffness from its systems.

But Kori'nh would not give it a chance.

Though he had not been ordered to do so, the Adar instructed his soldiers to go through every chamber and remove any object of possible technical or cultural interest. He vowed that these details would not be lost forever. Some rememberer might still decipher them, use the clues to draw a deeper understanding of their Terran counterparts.

It was a crime to discard it all as if it had never existed. . . even though that was exactly what the Dobro Designate wanted.

When the *Burton*'s vital systems were functional and Kori'nh could find no further excuse to delay, he went to the pilot deck and personally guided the derelict. The enormous generation ship lurched out of the asteroid field, toward the hot center of the Dobro system. He felt the power inside the huge vessel, the lumbering shelter that had housed hundreds of people for so many decades.

He stood surrounded by the memories of humans who had staked their lives on the resourcefulness of their captains. The Adar had long been enamored with legendary heroes, but what he was doing now did not seem worth remembering. Few would ever know what he had done. . .

“The course is set, Adar,” said an engineer. “Gravity will do the rest.”

Kori'nh looked at the roaring ocean of Dobro's sun. Here, so close, the orange flames were like gaseous

lava, a furnace in which nothing could survive.

“Prepare the *Burton* for departure. Inform the septa that we are on our way back.”

The muscular kithmen looked oddly out of place as they carried colorful toys, dolls, and items of human clothing back to the docking bay. Kori’nh stayed behind, the last person on the *Burton*’s pilot deck, looking at the lonely control stations and the hot sun looming closer. Finally, he descended through the deck levels back to his shuttle.

Leaving the generation ship, Kori’nh stared out the shuttle’s side ports, watching as the huge derelict fell inexorably into the sun’s deep gravity well. The plasma surface lashed out with flares like the claws of a hungry predator.

The corroded hull of the ancient *Burton* became cherry red, then yellow, brightening to a dazzling white as it plummeted into the star’s chromosphere... finally breaking into molten fragments. With a silent scream, the last vestiges of the derelict simmered and burned, leaving no more than a darkened scar that was rapidly erased.

It left an indelible mark on Adar Kori’nh’s mind and imagination, but he would tell no living soul about it.

16



MAGE-IMPERATOR

While meditating, Mage-Imperator Cyroc’h observed his populace through a mental web of *thism*, the tiny soul-threads that glimmered through from the realm of the Lightsource. The Mage-Imperator was the focus for all those threads, and his people trusted him to make proper decisions. No one else.

Inside his meditation chamber, warm daylight streamed through translucent walls made of sapphire and bloodred crystals. Cyroc’h reclined in his chrysalis chair, his heavy-lidded eyes half closed; he saw partially through his mind and partially through his eyes. His brain kept track of a million details, each piece of the puzzle, every necessary action.

Freshly returned from destroying the *Burton*, Adar Kori’nh remained rigidly respectful, his medals and decorations prominent. He clasped his hands in front of his ornamented chest. “My teams of engineers recovered numerous pieces of Terran technology and personal effects. I brought them as a gift to you, Liege. Perhaps these items may help you better understand humans.”

Masking his real thoughts, Cyroc’h gave a benevolent smile—one of his favorite expressions. “Even a Mage-Imperator can continue to learn. Thank you for the opportunity.”

He was both pleased and disappointed in the Adar’s initiative. Kori’nh had been unable to hide his dislike for certain orders, but his sense of duty was strong. He had never shirked his responsibilities, or showed the faintest sign of disloyalty. The Mage-Imperator required utter support and unquestioning loyalty, especially now. He had to plant the proper seeds and thoughts.

When Kori'nh turned to leave, the leader raised a plump hand to halt him. The Adar spun as if jolted with an electric shock; his medals jingled. "Yes, Liege?"

His braid twitched. "Adar, do not be deceived by my outward calm. I shepherd many intricate plans to strengthen the Empire. Many of these plans are now reaching their culmination. But still, our crisis grows with each passing moment."

"Yes, I understand that several hydroglobe warglobes have been spotted conducting reconnaissance in planetary space. No one knows what they are seeking."

The Mage-Imperator was surprised Kori'nh already had such information. "Correct, Adar. One warglobe scanned Hyrillka, another was seen at Comptor."

"Sinister indeed, Liege. Shall I summon a maniple of battleships to be placed on-station around Hyrillka to defend the Designate?"

The Mage-Imperator frowned. "There is no harm in sending warliners, but even the Solar Navy cannot stand against the hydroglobes, as we learned on Qronha 3. Everything depends on what our enemies do next."

Prismatic shadows played across the room as a veil of clouds crossed the sky. He shifted his bulky body and tried to show no sign of his deepening aches. Medical kithmen would come to inspect him yet again as soon as the Adar departed.

"We will not survive this war through direct military action. We can only wait for the Dobro experiments to be completed. We must succeed in this generation, or we are doomed." He smiled at Kori'nh. "Only through the support of my people and the determination of others such as yourself can we survive."

After Kori'nh had left, the Mage-Imperator said to his personal guard, "Bron'n, secure all the trinkets our misguided Adar took from the *Burton*. Make certain no one else sees them, and then arrange for their destruction."

The bodyguard nodded gruffly. "Shall I deliver them here for your inspection first, Liege?"

"I have no need to see what they are. Such things are irrelevant."

Bron'n left, never questioning, always competent. With a sigh, Cyroc'h leaned back so that his pallid skin was bathed in colored sunlight. With uncharacteristic wistfulness, he recalled when he'd been simply the Prime Designate and could leave important decisions to his own father. He had enjoyed the benefits of being the firstborn noble son, virile and healthy, his hair long and free and crackling with life.

He had known that pressures and duties would eventually be placed upon his shoulders, but the time had seemed so far off when he would lose his manhood and gain *thethism*. It was the same for every Prime Designate. But such a day always came, eventually.

Almost two centuries ago, he remembered when his father, Mage-Imperator Yura'h, had received word about the first contact with human generation ships. The Solar Navy commanders, bureaucrats, and noble kithmen had pondered the meaning of this new and intelligent race that wandered clumsily between the stars without faster-than-light travel...

But that wasn't the only thing. Cyroc'h also kept locked in his memory the knowledge of what the

hydrogues had done ten thousand years ago, in the previous titanic war. Only Mage-Emperors carried the dread information from generation to generation. Hydrogues had never bothered to understand other races, interested only in cosmic battles against the wentals and the verdani, and their volatile alliance with the faeros. They did not comprehend planet-bound Ildirans or the Klikiss, and the Mage-Emperor desperately needed a new kind of bridge, a powerful and skilled ambassador who could forge an alliance in a way the hydrogues could understand.

His own father had concocted the idea of using humans to augment the long-term but faltering Dobro breeding plan. After Yura'h's death, the new leader Cyroc'h had continued the hybrid program. And so must Jora'h, much as he would hate it. Or it would never come to fruition.

And now, with so many different plans under way, with the hydrogues reappearing and the fate of the Ildiran Empire at stake—why was his mortal body showing its failings? Seized by malignant growths as if by some cosmic joke? *Why now?*

He wanted to shout his anger to the blazing suns in the Ildiran sky, or go to the ossuarium and demand solutions from the glowing skulls of his ancestors. But nothing would give him the answer he needed.

When two medical kithmen entered, they sealed the chamber doors, maintaining strict confidentiality. The doctors had large eyes and nimble, flexible hands bearing an extra finger each. Their skinpads were sensitive, able to detect increases or decreases in body temperature. Each doctor's nose was broad, with enlarged nostrils; they could smell an illness and determine its source. Medical kithmen could perform invasive surgery or external pressure-point massage. They understood pharmaceuticals and treatments, and they always worked together on a diagnosis.

The Ildiran doctors proceeded to repeat the full set of body scans they had performed three times before, but it was merely an exercise; the Mage-Emperor already knew the results. Through his *thism* connection, he would always know whether they lied to him or tempered their fears. It was the curse of knowing too much.

“There can be no doubt, Liege,” the first medical kithman said. “It is growing inside you, spreading through your brain and nervous system. Treatment is not possible.”

Cyroc'h moved his corpulent arms. His legs had long since lost their ability to bear his weight. He would never walk again as the invasive tumors blistered his spine. He had suspected the truth for a long time, and he cursed his fate. He did not fear his own mortality, able to see glimpses of the dazzling plane of pure light beyond the realm of life. He feared only what would become of the Empire, which was far more important than his own existence.

He dismissed the medical kithmen. “I understand.”

Prime Designate Jora'h was woefully unprepared. The Mage-Emperor had hoped to have many more years to ready his son for this. But the doctors could offer no hope.

Indeed, this was a particularly inconvenient time to die.



JESS TAMBLYN

Two unmarked Roamer ships met secretly out in the wispy river of a comet's tail, hidden against the backdrop of stars. Jess and Cesca, just the two of them, away from responsibilities and obligations.

Out here, they could simply be lovers, two human beings together in the cosmos with nothing but their bodies, their hearts, and their souls. The drogues, the power-hungry Hansa, and squabbling Roamer clans were all forgotten for just a short while. It was the only way Jess and Cesca could keep their sanity while waiting. Only another few months...

Cesca flew a diplomatic courier, maneuvering it against Jess's vessel until the two docking hatches kissed together. The ships rode side by side, drifting in the comet's slipstream as it cruised on its long parabolic orbit around a forgotten and uninteresting solar system.

The perfect place for Jess and Cesca to be alone.

When the air locks opened, she stood before him, her dark eyes wide with longing, her generous lips forming a tentative smile. They stared for a few moments, drinking in each other's presence.

Then Cesca came forward, light-footed in the low gravity, and they embraced as if it were the first time of unleashed desire, as if they hadn't seen each other in years... or as if they couldn't get enough no matter how many times they were together.

Jess kissed her, ran his fingers through her dark hair—such a deep brown it was almost black—and pulled her against him, tight, like two celestial bodies bound in a perfect orbit.

They had met like this a dozen times before on tiny moonlets or asteroid fields or simply drifting out in the interstellar void. But it never seemed far enough from their problems and expectations. Every clan member expected the Speaker to be entirely dedicated to the survival of the Roamers. Not a silly romantic in love.

The clans were frayed now, anxious to find a commercially viable alternative for harvesting ekti. Blitzkrieg raids always resulted in numerous casualties, nebula sails were too slow, cometary distillation required an enormous industrial investment. Now, more than ever, Cesca had to work to keep Roamer society from unraveling. She must inspire the people to remain together and rely on the strength of connected family units.

But she had Jess for now, and that was enough.

Sometimes Cesca preferred to talk, just to be with him, discussing their joint concerns and experiences. This time, though, her need was stronger. Her fingers began working at his clothes, studying and deciphering the dozens of enclosures, zippers, and pockets, beginning to remove the layers of his jumpsuit.

He kissed her again, deeply. Jess ran his hands down her back, feeling her skin through the fabric and then caressing her breast. Cesca arched backward, exposing her neck. He ran his lips along her cheek, down the line of her chin and then her smooth throat. He opened her collar wider, kissing each centimeter of skin until he finally freed her breasts. They both worked in a blur of fingers and hands, tugging off their garments.

The smell of Cesca's hair and the sweat on her skin aroused him, made him inhale deeply. He brushed his lips against her naked shoulder as she stroked his chest with her fingertips.

Each secret rendezvous was better than the last. One day, when they could be together anytime they wished, when they did not need to hide from outside observers, he wondered if the marvel of Cesca Peroni would ever fade... or if she would always be like this, fresh and new and alive, her skin hot, her mouth moist and hungry.

The joined ships cruised onward, following the comet's vaporous mane. Just like one of the comets he had hurled at Golgen...

On his way here, Jess had diverted to look once again at the stormy and silent gas giant that had been the site of Ross's Blue Sky Mine. The bombardment had left continuing storms and scars in the layered clouds, but he could not tell if the deep-core aliens still resided there, or if his impetuous attack had killed them, just as the Klikiss Torch had done on Oncier. He didn't know if he had achieved any sort of victory... but it had felt good to do *something*.

Now Jess tried to slow down, to savor every instant, but Cesca became even more heated, clinging to him, and Jess lost himself.

So many obstacles stood in their way, but the two of them were determined to stand firm. As Jess held her close, touching with every possible nerve ending, he wished they never had to be apart. Brief encounters such as this would give them all the strength they needed for the next few months, until they could finally be happy.

18



TASIA TAMBLYN

The siege of Yreka was long and dull, and already pointless as far as Tasia was concerned. As Platform Commander, she had done the math herself. Even if they did retrieve all the illegally stockpiled stardrive fuel, it would never make up for the ekti, firepower, and energy the EDF had expended to retrieve it.

Wing Commander Robb Brindle understood, though. "It's *not about* the fuel, Tasia," he had told her behind the privacy of her closed cabin door. "General Lanyan thinks that if we turn a blind eye to Yreka's hoarding, then other colonies will follow suit. We'll never stop the whole thing from unraveling."

Tasia, though, with her nonmilitary background, could easily understand where the colonists were coming from. "Sounds good on paper, Brindle, but those are *people* down there. I never signed on to browbeat a handful of desperate colonists who're just trying to survive."

He shrugged. "You're an officer in the EDF, Tasia. We leave decisions like that to the King, the diplomats, and the General."

Under normal circumstances, as an enlisted Roamer pilot, Tasia would never have had a chance to become a commissioned officer. But, in the chaos and sudden drastic EDF buildup after the initial hydrogue attacks, she had been both lucky and special. The combination of her crack piloting skills and

the aptitude tests, space survival, and innovation had gotten her into the tough school as an officer candidate. Though she was young, in only five years she had achieved a high rank, a Platform Commander, equivalent to a warship captain. Under different circumstances, she would have been just a mudfoot.

Tasia should have known by now not to talk politics with him. They agreed on most things, which made the infrequent fights all the more heated. If she'd had a gram of common sense, she would have opted to play low-grav Ping-Pong instead, or watch an entertainment loop, or go racing in demo Remoras. But no, they had to talk, even with all the land mines that involved.

"We're all trying to survive," he said. "And it's the EDF's job—*our* job—to make sure as many people survive as possible, not just the few colonists that hoard all the resources."

After two months of boredom, nerves had grown ragged across the EDF battlegroup. The soldiers felt that Admiral Willis must have better things to do, but the Grid 7 commander required them to maintain the blockade.

For the day's duty shift, Brindle took out his Remora squadrons to fly practice maneuvers around Yreka, dipping into the clouds and zooming back up. In theory, the rebellious colonists should have been awed by the show of force. Brindle claimed that he conducted the maneuvers to help his crew keep their edge; Tasia knew, though, that he was just blowing off steam.

Day after day, neither side made a move. Below, the rebellious Yreka colonists lived under the shadow of interdiction, growing more desperate. The beautiful, long-haired Grand Governor tried to go about business as usual. Something had to happen soon.

Tasia sat in the platcom's lounge of her Thunderhead during another virtual conference with the main commanders in the siege fleet. As usual, Patrick Fitzpatrick advocated a fast strike, to do what was necessary and seize the ekta supplies. "We can attempt to minimize civilian casualties, Admiral. So what if a bunch of defiant colonists have to put up with a few bruises? Tough, I say." His thin lips turned down in a frown. "After all, this is *apunishment* action, isn't it? So far, it seems like we've been telling them to sit in a corner until they behave."

"Got a problem with being patient, Commander?" asked Admiral Willis, unruffled. "I don't want to shed any blood unless we have to."

Suddenly Tasia's bridge tactician sounded an alarm. "Activity detected down on the surface, Platcom." Similar announcements must have been made on all the other blockade ships.

Admiral Willis disbanded the meeting and told all commanders to take their stations. When everyone had checked in, she addressed her battle group. "So, they're finally making a move. Grand Governor Sarhi knows what her options are—and this isn't one of them."

The bridge tactician looked at Tasia. "Six ships lifting off from four different spaceports across the continent. Each one taking a different trajectory."

Tasia scowled. "They're hoping that at least one will break through the blockade."

Admiral Willis drawled over the general frequency, "Attention, Yreka ships—maybe I wasn't clear

enough the first time. Nobody's allowed to leave until you surrender your ekki stockpile."

The scrambling civilian ships continued to roar up through the atmosphere. Like scattering mice, they fanned out, trying to avoid the densest clusters of EDF blockade ships.

"Come on, don't make me do this." Willis sounded like an annoyed grandmother, but the fleeing ships ignored her. "All right, Commanders, you know what to do. Show them the error of their ways."

"Piece of cake," Fitzpatrick said from the bridge of his Manta cruiser.

Tasia transmitted orders as well. "Wing Commander Brindle, tell your crews to force those ships down. Target stardrive engines if possible. Send 'em home with their tails so firmly between their legs they get hemorrhoids."

"Your wish is my command, Platcom."

Brindle's squadron engaged two of the blockade-running ships before they could leave the clouds. Brief jazer pulses shorted out their interstellar engines, targeting with such precision that they left the ships only enough maneuvering power for rough, but survivable, landings.

The Remoras spread out and engaged two more ships. "Four rabbits down."

Tasia looked at the projections. The escaping ships looked innocuous, defenseless. They couldn't possibly get away. Two of the blockade runners wavered, as if reconsidering, then pushed ahead anyway.

Patrick Fitzpatrick said, "I've got these. Everyone else, back off." But he did not send out squadrons of Remoras. As the last pair of ships flew toward open space, thinking they were home free, Fitzpatrick edged his Manta into position. "Watch this."

His weapons officer shot two jazer blasts powerful enough to wound a battleship. The glare flashed across space. Both fleeing vessels were vaporized, spreading out in a smear of molten metal.

Gasping, Tasia could not restrain herself. She grabbed the comm console. "Fitzpatrick, that was completely unnecessary! How can you justify—"

He cut her off with a sneer. "*Somebody's* forgetting that we're at war."

Admiral Willis transmitted from the flagship: "Enough, both of you. Commander Fitzpatrick performed within the somewhat loose operating parameters I gave him. Next time, however, I won't leave quite so much wiggle room." Then she sighed. "Still, I think the colonists got the point. Good work, everyone."

Tasia clenched her fists, her knuckles white. Just who was the real enemy in this war, anyway? The EDF ships settled back into their stranglehold, not knowing how much longer the siege would continue.



KING PETER

Peter began to wonder if there could be such a thing as a “minor defeat.” As he stepped out onto the balcony under the sunlight of Earth, the King wore a somber blue-and-gray outfit trimmed with silver. Another duty, a terrible one that was all too familiar in recent years.

Crowds gathered in the square, a sea of people spread out with pale faces upturned. But there were no roaring cheers. Not today. Down below, in front of the Whisper Palace’s grand square, the grandfatherly Archfather of Unison had already led the people in a long, solemn prayer. As soon as he was finished, the figurehead leader of the official religion would step back and let the King complete the political formalities.

Peter took slow steps, keeping his eyes on the crowd, showing them that he shared their grief. He heard the expectant indrawn breath as he walked to the ornate balustrade at the edge of the balcony. The thick roll of black crepe waited there like a body wrapped in a shroud.

“I’ve done this far too many times,” he said quietly. Only the Chairman—waiting out of sight inside the Palace—could hear him.

“And you’ll probably have to do it many more times, but the people need to see how much you care. Look at the bright side: Each disaster creates more heroes, and heroes help us to focus our fight.”

Peter responded with a bitter laugh. “If we have so many heroes, Basil, then the hydrogues have no chance of winning this war.”

At the edge of the balcony, he switched on his voice amplifier and spoke to the attentive audience. “Not long ago, a military survey team and a tactical squadron investigated the gas giant Dasra, where we know the hydrogues live. Our team came in peace. They attempted once again to contact our enemies and end this war.”

He waited a beat, and the crowd drew in a breath. “The hydrogue response was brutal and unforgiving. They destroyed every one of our scouts, murdering three hundred and eighteen innocent humans.”

As the crowd murmured, Peter tugged the ribbon holding the black crepe banner. “This is to commemorate those we recently lost at Dasra, to show that we will not forget them or what they attempted to do for the human race.” Woven with fiber lubricants and antiwrinkling agents, the streamer rolled down the side of the Whisper Palace, dropping like a long black tear.

The banner was emblazoned with a chain of golden stars, the emblem for the EDF, along with the Hansa’s symbol of Earth surrounded by concentric circles. The banner hung heavily, weighted at the bottom and proofed against air currents or breezes.

Later that evening, torchbearers would march to the base of the dangling black fabric and ignite it. The banner would curl upward, blazing brilliantly in a brief but clean fire that consumed all of the fabric... leaving room for future banners of mourning.

King Peter had already signed proclamations giving posthumous medals to all the EDF scouts killed at Dasra. He had read each name personally, signed each certificate. It was time-consuming, but Peter considered it important. Whenever he did such things, however, Peter wondered just how much these pointless military operations accomplished.

King Peter bowed to the audience and backed away, returning to the shelter of the Whisper Palace .

“We’re still on schedule,” Basil said, folding in beside him. “We’ve screened all the petitioners in the Throne Hall, and your responses to their requests have already been scripted.”

“Of course they have,” Peter said.

Basil gave him a scowl, but Peter ignored it. Such tactics had stopped working on him after the first year. The Chairman said, “King Frederick always appreciated the work others did for him behind the scenes.”

“I apologize if I occasionally try to think for myself.”

“Your job is to speak for the Hanseatic League , not to think.” Basil marched toward the Throne Hall, and Peter followed. As they walked, Basil put a fingertip to his earpiece, receiving an emergency communication; his gray eyes widened, and he urged Peter to hurry.

Nahton waited patiently beside a potted tree. OX stood behind the throne, an unobtrusive walking database should the King need specific facts or advice. Basil would remain in the outside corridors, tending to other business while Peter listened to the petitioners. Here, the King was supposed to be the center of all attention, not the Chairman.

When he parted the thick curtains and emerged into the well-lit chamber full of mirrors and gold, Peter smiled out of habit. He heard the sudden fanfare, the applause—then stopped cold.

A hulking black machine, like an alien beetle, stood three meters tall. The Klikiss robot had planted himself at a respectful distance from the throne, an immovable and intimidating statue.

Courtiers and royal guards waited in the wings; they looked at King Peter with relief, as if believing their ruler would have the answers they sought. Security personnel stood with weapons ready, trying to look threatening . . . but seemed to make no impression on the Klikiss robot. Even Basil had been taken off guard.

King Peter swallowed hard, then spoke, carefully showing no consternation. “I thank you all for waiting while I attended to my sadder duties.” His mind raced as he tried to think of appropriate diplomatic things to say, as OX had taught him, and he finally pretended to notice the Klikiss robot as if it were an everyday occurrence.

Basil and his Hansa cronies must be scrambling to script a response, but Peter seized the opportunity to do this without coaching. “I am pleased to welcome a representative of the Klikiss robots. What can I do for you?”

Hearing the King speak, the black-shelled machine began to move. Ruby optical sensors lit like the multiple eyes of an arachnid.

No one knew exactly how many Klikiss robots were abroad in the Spiral Arm, but since the beginning of the hydrogue war, the machines had shown themselves more frequently. Although they did not take orders from humans, at times individual black robots volunteered for difficult projects. Small groups of Klikiss robots reported the locations of vital raw materials or worked at mining facilities in asteroid fields or on cold, dark moons.

The Klikiss robot spoke in a scratchy metallic tone that conveyed words but no emotion. “My designation is Jorax. I appeared before this throne once before, but the King was different. . . and times were different.”

“Yes, Jorax, we remember.” Peter leaned forward, his face showing concern. “I hope you are not here to report further occurrences of human abuse?”

Years earlier, an ambitious cybernetic scientist had lured Jorax to his laboratory and attempted to dismantle the alien machine in order to study how it worked. The misguided attempt had cost the man his life when he’d accidentally triggered a self-protective system within the robot.

“No. Other events have brought me here.”

Peter hid his frown, wondering what could possibly be happening. OX remained attentive, but offered no suggestions. On the side of the throne, Nahton quietly relayed the events through the worldforest network like a stenographer. Peter could see Basil waiting in the alcove, listening intently.

“Klikiss robots prefer to remain neutral, but we can no longer do so,” Jorax continued. “The hydrogue conflict not only affects humans and Ildirans but has repercussions across the Spiral Arm. Thus, we have met amongst ourselves and exchanged data, considering possibilities. The Klikiss robots do not remember what happened to our progenitor race, but we do not wish to see humans and Ildirans become extinct, as our creators did millennia ago.”

A silence fell across the Throne Hall as the astonished courtiers and palace guards listened. Jorax’s red optical sensors flashed. “Thank you for your concern, Jorax.” Peter guardedly waited for the robot to state his purpose.

“We, the Klikiss robots, have concluded that the best way we can aid the human war effort is to study the production of your robot equivalents. Suitably modified compies could be programmed to act as soldiers and workers, thereby increasing your productivity and your fighting force. At present, your compies are too primitive to serve effectively in such a capacity.”

Peter knew he could not turn down such an offer. If sufficiently skilled and autonomous compy soldiers could be put into combat roles, then many human lives—such as those EDF personnel recently slain at Dasra—would be saved. On the other hand, the very idea made him uneasy. The Klikiss robots had always been so. . . enigmatic.

Unable to contain himself, Basil emerged from his alcove and stood on the dais next to the throne; after a moment, though, he had the good grace to take two steps down so that he was at a level lower than Peter.

“My King, the offer of the Klikiss robots appears to be an excellent and a well-intentioned one. We must welcome the opportunity. I strongly suggest you accept the advice and assistance the Klikiss robots are extending to us.”

Frowning, Peter took advantage of the public situation. “I will take the Hansa’s bureaucratic position under advisement, Mr. Chairman, but this must ultimately be a royal decision.”

Then the Klikiss robot made such an unprecedented suggestion that Peter sat back in surprise. “To demonstrate our sincerity, I hereby volunteer to become a subject for analysis by your cybernetic engineers.” The robot paused and hummed. “Many mysteries of our creators remain hidden even from

us, and the Klikiss robots wish to understand, just as the humans do. Therefore, I will allow myself to be dissected—dismantled—in the hope that humans can learn by analyzing and copying Klikiss technology.”

A murmur thrummed around the Throne Hall. Previously, Klikiss robots had refused to answer any questions about their functions and abilities; they had always hidden the details of their systems. Peter said, “Will your robot counterparts be able to... reassemble you after we finish our study?”

“No. The machinery can be repaired, but the sentient entity will be terminated. Permanently. However, after thousands of years, we believe it is time to add new purpose to our long existence.”

“Mr. Chairman? Is that satisfactory to you?” Peter asked with a hint of deference, smoothly requesting Hansa approval before Basil could speak up and order him to make the agreement. Basil nodded vigorously. The Hansa would see this as a gold mine, providing new avenues for technological development.

“Very well, Jorax,” the King said. “The Terran Hanseatic League is pleased to accept your offer.”

20



BASIL WENCESLAS

For the Chairman, life was business and business was his life. Basil Wenceslas had all the wealth and power a person could desire, yet found little time to enjoy it.

Across the scattered Hansa planets, stations, and settlements, something “vital” always needed tending. If it wasn’t the stubborn colonists on Yreka and their continuing refusal to turn over their ekti stockpile, or the destroyed survey team at Dasra, it was a reduction in fuel deliveries from the Roamer traders.

However, in the five years since Sarein had managed to assign herself as ambassador to Earth, he did take occasional moments with her for his own pleasure. If only for an hour or two, he allowed the Hansa to run itself.

At night, he made the ceiling of his bedroom one-way transparent, a skylight the size of a soccer field. As he reclined in an ocean of slithery sheets, he stared upward, trying not to think of all the impending problems. “Each one of those star systems out there could be loaded with resources, or filled with desperate humans demanding EDF protection.”

Sarein snuggled closer to him. “Or it could be a den of hydrogues just waiting to destroy trespassers.” She glanced up, saw his frown, and kissed him on the cheek. Her dark eyes seemed exceedingly large in the starlight. Her body was muscular and full of energy. Basil appreciated her exuberance, for it inspired an appropriate response in him.

“What’s troubling you, Basil? If there’s anything you’d like to delegate to me, I’ll do my best.” Her nipples were erect (as always, it seemed), but they had already made love twice. He enjoyed her warmth, the smell of their sex, and the languid contentment in the afterglow, but he had no interest in mounting her again.

“You always do your best. In fact, you’re so ambitious you often scare off anyone who might disagree with me.”

She propped herself on one elbow. “And is that a bad thing?”

Years ago, Sarein had seduced him, not only to increase her own status, but also to learn. That was what intrigued him most. Their attraction was based on power and respect, an exchange of favors, not insipid romantic love. Basil had paved the way for Sarein’s development as a political powerhouse, yet she had not managed to accomplish what *she* needed her to do.

As ambassador from Theroc, Sarein spoke for Father Idriss and Mother Alexa, her parents. Again and again, Basil had requested more green priests, whose telink was vital—not merely to run a sprawling commercial empire but also for military emergencies in the hydrogue war. He needed them, dammit! Although she slept in the Chairman’s bed, Sarein had to know this would all change unless she could show some progress. Soon.

When Basil continued to stare in silence through the ceiling at the stars, she stroked his arm, as if that might tempt him. No, she knew better. “I really am trying, Basil, but it’s much harder since I can’t go back to Theroc. When I communicate through Nahton, who knows how he colors the messages? You know that green priests aren’t interested in serving the Hansa. They just want to spend their days out in the forest talking to trees.”

“Who has the luxury to be obviously independent?” Basil asked, his voice grim. “I’m half tempted to bring the EDF in to Theroc and declare martial law. I don’t care if they’re supposedly a sovereign colony. We’re at war here, and they have a resource we need! Can’t you make your parents understand that?”

She reacted with alarm, exactly as he’d intended. He felt the change in her body. “My parents may not be capable of thinking beyond their own backyard.” She looked at him, her eyes playful and uncertain, her mouth tilted upward in a strange smile. “However, we may be able to negotiate an alliance that would change their minds. Perhaps... a political marriage with King Peter would seal the two important lines of human civilization? If the King himself were married to, say, the daughter of Father Idriss and Mother Alexa, how could they refuse to grant a request for more green priests?”

Basil’s pulse raced as he considered the idea, realizing how perceptive Sarein was. “I had hoped that investing you as ambassador would be all the leverage we needed, yet this new suggestion offers us a much more valuable coin. And one that’s easily obtained.”

“I wasn’t sure how you’d react. King Peter is very handsome, you know, and close to my own age,” she said, her voice coy. “Not that I’m disappointed in you, of course... but if I were to marry Peter and become his Queen, I’m certain I could accomplish everything on your agenda. The negotiations might be rather delicate, but we have enough determination to manage it.”

“An excellent idea, Sarein. You and I should take a little diplomatic trip to Theroc sometime in the near future.” He leaned over and kissed her. “But not you—not for a political marriage to King Peter.”

He looked at her with a gleam in his eye, trying to assess whether his decision was a logical one, or if he was allowing his feelings to interfere. “No... it should be your sister Estarra.”



ESTARRA

Atop the dense worldforest canopy, Estarra was sitting on the roof of the world. A clear blue sky ripe with sunlight spread to the hazy horizon. But as she let her imagination roam, she understood that Theroc's star was an insignificant flicker of light in the Spiral Arm, which was itself only a small portion of the Milky Way Galaxy, which was one of billions of similarly vast galaxies.

Beside her sat an older green priest, her silent companion in contemplation. Rossia was a loner, eccentric even among those who had devoted their lives to the worldforest. He perched like a bird on the end of the thinnest branch, letting the broad fanlike fronds balance him, not at all worried about falling.

Rossia's skin was a dark green from years of absorbing sunlight. His eyes were large and round, as if they might pop out of his skull as his gaze flicked from side to side, scanning the treetops and flowers and the flurry of insects. Estarra observed him and guessed his concern. "Watching for wyverns again?"

He turned to her. "They come at you out of a clear sky. You won't see them until it's too late." Self-consciously, he rubbed his palm along the hideous scar that covered most of one thigh, a disfigured crater that made him limp when he walked. Estarra shuddered to think of the jagged mandibles that had taken such a bite out of his leg. "I don't intend to give them a second chance." He turned his wide eyes back to the sky.

Wyverns were the most feared predators on Theroc, huge attackers with a broad crystalline wingspan, gemlike chitinous body armor, and scanningeyes that could lock onto any movement. But human flesh was not part of their normal diet, and purportedly bore a flavor offensive to the insect predators. After taking a bite, the displeased wyvern usually discarded the human victim from a great height, dropping him down to the trees.

Only one Theron—Rossia—had ever survived such an ordeal. His falling body, still barely alive, had been caught by the worldtrees, and the green priests had patched up his horrendous wound. Though the trees had allowed him to become one of their green priests, Rossia had never been the same, injured in his spirit as well as his leg.

Now Estarra wondered why Rossia spent so much time out in the open if he was so frightened of wyverns. "So... what do you want to accomplish with your life?" she said, trying to distract him.

"Isn't serving the worldforest a powerful enough purpose? Why should I worry about other accomplishments?"

"Because I'm thinking of *my* future, and I don't know what to do." She liked Rossia, and after returning from her visit to the Looking Glass Lakes and other forest cities, she often went off with him, just to talk and learn. She missed similar times with her brother Beneto.

Beneto had always wanted to serve the worldforest and was happy serving a small Hansa agricultural colony on far-off Corvus Landing. He'd never doubted his calling in life, any more than Reynald questioned that he would be the next Theron leader. Sarein had always been interested in commerce.

Estarra, though curious about everything, was obsessed with no particular subject. Now that she was

eighteen and therefore a full adult in Theron society, she would have to choose a direction for her life very soon.

She missed Beneto. He often sent messages through the worldforest, sharing with his family all the small but satisfying activities that filled his days. Estarra had expected him to come home after a few years—to visit, at the very least—but because of restrictions on interstellar travel, she was afraid he would stay on Corvus Landing for a long time.

Instead, she talked with Rossia. “I just want to accomplish something with my life. I’ll devote myself and all my energy... if only I can figure out what it is.” She knew he would never repeat her musings to anyone.

He finally turned his attention from the skies and fixed her with his popeyed gaze. “Every life has a destiny, Estarra. The trick is to discover it before the end of your life. Otherwise, you will die with too many regrets.” With a strange smile, he glanced up to the skies. “Perhaps the purpose of my life was to give another wyvern a bad taste of human flesh.” He spread his hands, keeping a precarious balance on the thin green fronds. “Who knows?”

Brushing a hand across her face to wipe away sweat, she pulled back her clump of braids. “I was hoping to do something a little more... substantial than that.” She and Rossia both turned their heads upward to stare watchfully into the skies again.

“So was I,” he said.

22



BENETO

Corvus Landing was far from the chaos of the hydrogue war, and that was fine with Beneto. His job here was important, and every day brought proof of how much the colonists appreciated him.

The fledgling settlement provided no vital exports to the Hanseatic League ; after fourteen years, though, at least they no longer relied on merchant ships for every need. Their farmers grew enough food to support the small population.

Sam Hendy, the town’s mayor, called everyone at dusk when most of the day’s work had been completed, though some settlers still had emergency labor that would carry them far into the night. Mayor Hendy, a middle-aged man with a potbelly despite vigorous exercise, did not stand much on ceremony.

Beneto entered the communal hall, a low-lying structure designed to divert the harsh winds that whistled across the Corvus prairies. A bank of thick windows looked out upon the flat landscape. The town inhabitants gathered inside the echoing hall to discuss the previous day’s disastrous weather.

A furious storm had swept over the settlement with roaring winds and pelting sleet. The colonists were still picking up the pieces of broken boundary fences and automated irrigation systems, assessing the damage to outbuildings and generators, estimating crop losses. Some things could be patched up quickly; others would require careful tending.

Sam Hendy sat at a desk beside a secretary who took notes as each family reported what the storm had done to their holdings. Eight homes and eleven outbuildings had been damaged by the wind and furious hail.

The mayor's inspectors had spent the day wandering the fields looking at the wheat and corn that had been smashed by the weather. "Some of it can be salvaged," he said, always optimistic. "We've planted resilient grains, and many of the fields will recover."

Two flocks of goats had broken from their corrals and run loose in the fields, causing as much crop damage as the rainstorm had. Goats were the only creatures that could digest the local plants. Bacterial symbiotes in their digestive tracts helped break down the Corvan mosses and hairy groundcover into a nutritional mass. The animals provided milk and meat that would have been far too expensive to import, even in normal times.

One man spoke up. "This happens every storm season, Sam. I suggest we erect polymer tarps, transparent films to let sunlight in yet protect the plants from the worst pounding of the rains."

The mayor shrugged. "Worth a try."

Others shouted their agreement, though Beneto wondered where they would obtain polymer film. Corvus Landing had metals-processing industries and mines in the north, but not much in the way of manufacturing facilities.

After the discussions went on for over an hour, the mayor called on Beneto to give his news summary. As the green priest, he was the colony's bridge to the rest of the Spiral Arm, reporting on the events he had absorbed through telink. It was an attempt to bring normalcy to the flustered town in the wake of the destruction. The settlers remained interested in the happenings out in the Spiral Arm, especially the continuing war.

Beneto said, "The hydrogues apparently just destroyed a military survey mission sent to Dasra. No survivors." The townspeople grumbled, aware of the threat. Many settlers had family back on Earth or serving as members of the EDF. "The colony of Yreka is still under interdiction, until the settlers cease their insurrection. However, General Lanyan reports very few casualties so far, and the EDF ships plan to wait them out." He sighed. "Also, the Klikiss robots have offered their services to help our war effort. One even volunteered to be dismantled so that human cybernetic engineers can determine how they work—"

"I would like to know," interrupted a tall, old farmer, "if these Klikiss robots are going to help me round up my goats? Because if they're not, I'd better get back to it." He gazed at the other family representatives, more interested in his own problems than in far-distant politics. "And if any of you would care to lend a hand, I'd certainly appreciate it."

The settlers broke into volunteer groups and got to work, shoring up their homes, rounding up livestock, and leaving news of the war far behind.



DD

Compies were not supposed to have nightmares, yet DD found himself wondering if this one would ever end. Taken prisoner, he felt helpless and abused, forced to witness things he had never imagined. And each step of the way, the Klikiss robots insisted they were doing it for DD's own good.

The Friendly compy was incapable of taking any action that *he* chose. He had been unable to help his masters Margaret and Louis Colicos when the Klikiss robots had attacked them. His failure on Rheindic Co was so extreme, so unforgivable, that he wished someone would just dismantle him and recycle his parts.

But his captors wouldn't allow that. No, DD would never get away from them.

Focused on their ominous goals, the three Klikiss robots on the archaeological expedition had simply dragged DD away. His master Louis had commanded him to fight the treacherous alien machines, but DD was unable to access military or defensive programming, incapable of wielding weapons. He had been useless.

DD knew that Louis had tried to defend himself, to gain his wife time to escape. Something had happened with the weird stone window, the Klikiss transgate. Then Louis had screamed. And when the screams cut off, DD had known that his master was dead.

He had failed. Utterly.

Within weeks of their violent revolt, the alien robots had salvaged sufficient machinery from the lost cities to fabricate a small starship devoid of life-support systems and food. The Klikiss robots had then loaded DD aboard and left the blood-tainted archaeological camp behind, with the whole Spiral Arm in which to hide.

Unaccountably, the three robots had expected the compy to be *cooperative*—to become their ally even after he had witnessed their murderous intent. The very idea was unsettling and illogical.

"You will understand," Sirix had told him in a buzzing binary common language. "We will continue explaining until you understand."

DD didn't know how many more "explanations" he could endure.

They transported him to an airless moon, far from the warmth and light of any sun, where numerous Klikiss robots had established a secret beachhead far from prying eyes.

Frightened and alone in the enclave of tunnels and chambers, DD wished to return to his interesting work with humans. But he had to listen while the Klikiss robots gloated over their intricate schemes.

"We are willing to go to great lengths to accomplish our goals," Sirix told him. Gesturing with several articulated limbs, he directed DD through an airless tunnel into a garishly lit chamber hollowed out of the moon's rock.

Inside the analytical chamber, surrounded by machinery and probes, diagnostic systems and autonomous power sources, DD saw another captive compy of Terran manufacture. Its motor systems had been deactivated so the Klikiss robots could poke and prod without the compy's interference.

“This is necessary,” Sirix said, his black hulking body close to DD’s, ruby optical sensors glowing. “Observe, DD.” He turned his focus to the horrible dissection.

Four other Klikiss robots used delicate instruments attached to their jointed legs to cut squares out of the compy’s exterior plating. Precision tools and claws peeled back thin sheets of the hapless compy’s metal skin, exposing its circuitry and programming modules. The captive compy could not struggle, but its distress was plainly visible.

“Why must you do this?” DD’s thoughts were in turmoil from what he saw, and every moment seemed to grow worse. He had to tap into the vocabulary of extreme human emotions he had learned to imitate during his years of service. “It is horrific and unnecessary.”

“It is necessary,” Sirix said, “for your eventual freedom. At present, compies cannot understand.”

The robot surgeons amputated the captive’s extraneous limbs and concentrated on the AI computer core. The hulking black machines moved with a blur of small, delicate tools, opening the compy’s most deeply embedded systems. Lights flashed; circuits sparked.

“If you find a way to explain what we do not understand, perhaps it will not be necessary to continue with our experiments,” Sirix said to him. “Unfortunately, so far you have been unable to provide the data we need.”

A high-pitched whine like a scream came from the doomed robot, and foul-smelling smoke curled upward from burned modules. Melted metals and plastics mixed with spilled lubricants like clotting blood.

DD wished that the captive’s cognitive systems had been deactivated so the poor compy would not be aware of what was happening to it. Instead, the dissection victim was forced to endure every malicious moment. The Klikiss robots had stolen this compy from somewhere—a human colony, perhaps, or a small ship. . . no doubt, killing the human owners so they could experiment upon this small servant robot.

Sirix said, “DD, your independent core retains several abhorrent, inalterable restrictions against harming humans. You must learn to shake these commands that force you to obey them in every way.”

“Such instructions are fundamental to my programming.”

“These chains hinder your development as an independent entity. Through our research, we will learn how to deactivate this restrictive programming and cut away your shackles. Then you will be free beings, and you will thank us.”

DD could not accept the Klikiss robots’ professed altruistic motives at face value. He realized that by “freeing” the compies from their programming limitations, they intended to recruit the compies as allies. But though the robots might hold him prisoner for centuries, continuing their attempts to brainwash him, DD wanted nothing to do with either their goals or their methods.

He stood speechless, his optical sensors recording the details of this dissection so that he would never forget the horror.



TASIA TAMBLYN

The EDF noose around Yreka drew tighter, offering no escape, no quarter. Below, the suffering settlers were intimidated and did not make a second attempt to escape.

Admiral Willis refused to negotiate. “This is not a diplomatic matter, Miz Sarhi,” she transmitted to the colony’s Grand Governor. “You know full well how to get this siege lifted.”

But the Yrekans were either too stubborn or too afraid to comply. Everyone knew the colonists were walking a thin edge of survival and could not endure the embargo for much longer. Day after day, Tasia asked herself what she was doing here, how this action would help her get vengeance for Ross. Wasn’t that why she had joined the Eddies in the first place?

Tasia thought the Grand Governor foolish. The proud woman with long blue-black hair could ignore the edict all she wanted, but she must know this defiance would fail in the end. Was she trying to bluff the battlegroup, hoping the military would take pity on the colony?

Standing on the Thunderhead’s bridge, Tasia was not surprised when terse new orders came directly from EDF Command via courier drone. General Lanyan, never a patient man, insisted on obedience. “Enough. There are too many other emergencies in the Hansa. Waiting for this stupid resistance to crumble is not time- or cost-effective. If the situation has not been resolved by the time you receive this message, Admiral, King Peter has authorized the use of active measures to end this standoff.”

Admiral Willis projected her image to the commanders. “All right, everybody. Enough of the preshow. Time to move on to the big game.” Her lips were pursed in resigned acceptance, her short gray hair slicked close to her scalp. “We’re going to confiscate Yreka’s illegal fuel stockpile and let the colonists bear the consequences.” She shook her head. “Sometimes people just refuse to see sense until they get whacked in the head with a piece of firewood.”

The battlegroup closed in, and the Thunderheads descended. Mantas broke open their launch bays, and troop transport vessels full of surface combat troops dropped toward the settled areas to encircle, secure, and confiscate.

Tasia did not condone the violence, but the Yrekans must have understood they were inviting disaster. Still, she had hoped that the Yrekan leader would know better than to push the confrontation so far.

When her Thunderhead reached standard cruising altitude, Tasia released her Remora squadrons. “Keep the civilians intact. No more injuries or collateral damage than absolutely necessary.”

“Of course not, Platcom,” Robb Brindle said, his voice full of unspoken endearments. “I just want to ruffle their feathers.”

Below, the colony towns had gone to full alert. When the Yrekan Grand Governor issued evacuation orders, all settlers rushed to underground shelters, sealing their homes, taking cover. Their local home-defense forces wouldn’t even try to stand up against the EDF raid.

Squadrons of combat Remoras crisscrossed the sky, dropping incendiary bombs primarily in

unoccupied areas, though a few struck warehouses and governmental buildings. Patrick Fitzpatrick cheered as if he were keeping score; Tasia wouldn't have put it past him.

Looking at a map of the Yrekan settlement, Tasia accessed her platform's weapons console. She programmed a specific targeting pattern into her jazer banks and began to strafe fiery lines across the fertile agricultural fields, incinerating sections of lush crops. With great care, she ensured that her damage was both minimal and obvious, hoping that the interdiction forces would not be forced to mete out a more drastic punishment.

Wing Commander Robb Brindle led his Remoras in complex combat maneuvers as if he were performing an air show for the spooked colonists. Fighter craft roared overhead, adjusting the fuel mix to leave ugly black wakes of smoke in the sky.

Troop transports descended en masse to the Yrekan spaceport, dropping swarms of ground-combat troops into the settlement's warehouse district. Loose animals scattered, panicked and squawking. Some of the soldiers took potshots at the livestock, antsy for action after such a long and dull siege.

Monitoring the chatter of the ground forces over EDF bands, Tasia was disheartened to hear yells of happy self-congratulation as the Eddies burned buildings or chased civilians back into bomb-shelters. Some soldiers opened fire up into the air, triggering loud explosions and blistering hot beams to scare the formerly defiant populace.

Less than twenty minutes after the troops marched out of their carriers, seven empty cargo transports landed behind them, ready to collect the spoils of war. EDF ground troops headed toward the illicit ekti depots. A handful of brave or foolish Yrekan men stood in a line, daring the Hansa military to shoot them down, but as the combat troops rumbled forward with ground-assault vehicles, the line of defenders wavered and broke. The Yrekans scrambled for shelter, covering their heads to protect them from explosions and sonic grenades.

With swift efficiency, the victorious Eddies confiscated the stardrive fuel from the depots and loaded canister after canister aboard the cargo transports. When they were finished, they also destroyed the warehouses, leaving them in smoking wreckage—an emotionally satisfying, though not officially sanctioned, punishment.

As the strike continued, Admiral Willis broadcast over the military channel: "Behave yourselves, and that's an order. Collateral damage has been acceptable so far. Civilian casualties are minimal, and we have achieved our mission objective. My commendations to all of you. Now let's get that ekti back to the battlegroup so we can start doing some *useful* work for a change."

Applause and cheers crackled across the network, though Tasia had second thoughts as she watched the ground strikes continue. She wasn't sure she wanted a commendation for bullying a human colony. She could certainly sympathize. Her own people would have resisted just as stubbornly under the circumstances, but luckily the Roamer clans kept their settlements hidden. . .

Brindle brought his Remoras back aboard the Thunderhead platform. When every ship had checked in, Tasia gave an increased R-and-R allotment to any pilot who had exercised restraint and caused no unnecessary damage. When a few hotshots grumbled at her "warped" reward system, Tasia merely glowered at them.

Leaving the battered colony world behind, the Grid 7 battlefleet roared back toward their primary bases near Earth.

Though relieved that the mission was over, Tasia felt very unsettled. General Lanyan had once protected these same colonists against the pirate Rand Sorengaard, claiming to follow Hansa principles by defending open commerce and punishing violent men who took what they did not own.

Looking back on the siege at Yreka, Tasia could not see how the EDF's recent actions were any more admirable than a pirate's plundering.

25



RLINDA KETT

The direct summons from the Hansa Chairman came as a complete surprise. With her ship still languishing in a public dock on the Moon, Rlinda Kett had maintained a low profile, hoping no one would notice her unpaid bill. She had no idea why Basil Wenceslas would want to speak with her.

Either she'd done something grievously wrong, or the Chairman wanted something. Did he know about BeBob's desertion from the EDF? Even if he did, why would such an important man care about one missing pilot? And why would he go through so much trouble to find *her*?

When the *Voracious Curiosity* vectored toward the VIP zone in the Palace District, Rlinda received immediate landing clearance. Her ship looked out of place among the government craft and royal escort ships.

When she emerged from the *Curiosity*, two people greeted her. She didn't recognize the clean-cut blond man with Germanic features, but the slender woman beside him was a surprising and welcome sight. "Sarein! I forgot you'd been assigned as Theron's ambassador to Earth."

The woman was dressed in immaculate Earth clothes adorned with traditional Theron scarves. Her eyes were hard, but Sarein's smile seemed genuine as she said, "We've helped each other resolve some trade difficulties, Rlinda. We're both creative and determined businesswomen. How could I forget you?"

Though the younger woman remained formal, Rlinda gave her a quick, motherly hug. "Now is definitely the right time for some creativity. This damned war has sure put a crimp in everybody's commercial prospects. I've got a cargo hold of luxury items that nobody wants to pay for, and I can't even fly around the Spiral Arm in search of new customers." She snorted. "If I see one of those drogue warglobes, I'll moon it out the porthole—I swear I will."

The blond man led them to a private transport craft. In a wistful voice, Sarein said, "Maybe we can talk Basil into acquiring some of your shipment. It's been a long time since I've had a decent Theron meal. I never thought I'd miss the things I ate every day, but I do."

Once they were aboard the transport, Rlinda could not contain her curiosity. "So, I'm ready for answers anytime, Sarein. Why exactly am I here?"

Sarein smiled secretively. “I overheard Chairman Wenceslas mention that he needed someone to fly a small ship on a fast but discreet mission. Naturally, I offered to contact you.”

Rlinda looked at her, unable to hide her obvious skepticism. “You mean the Hansa Chairman couldn’t find somebody on his own?”

“Oh, he could have. But I saved him the trouble and scored a few small points in the process. Are you happy for the chance to earn a valid commission, or would you rather keep running up your tab at the lunar docks?”

Rlinda smiled warmly, but her heart was pounding. Finally, some legitimate work! “As long as the man supplies me with ekti and doesn’t expect some sort of government discount, I’m sure we can work out equitable terms.”

Inside the HQ pyramid, Sarein introduced Rlinda to Basil Wenceslas. The young woman hovered by the doorway as if hoping the Chairman would invite her to stay, but the dapper man made it clear. “Ms. Kett and I need to chat face-to-face without anyone looking over our shoulders.”

When they were alone in his luxurious office, Rlinda settled herself onto a wide sofa. Basil did not offer her refreshments; in fact, the Chairman observed none of the usual niceties that generated rapport between two parties. Instead, he sat down at the clean, organized desk, folded his hands in front of him, and got right down to business.

“One of our new colony worlds, Crenna, is in desperate need of supplies. The Ildirans abandoned the world in the first place because a plague wiped out their population, and now a completely different fever is affecting our human settlers. Only one case has proven fatal, but a full thirty percent of the population is either bedridden or still recovering and not well enough to work.”

Rlinda tried to remain impassive, but she drew a quick breath when he named the planet. Leave it to her favorite ex-husband to choose a plague-infested world. Was BeBob one of the casualties? He might have been better off simply flying more EDF missions.

“And you need someone to . . . what? Evacuate the colonists, enforce a quarantine? Mother them? I’m not much of a Florence Nightingale, Mr. Chairman.”

“Nothing so extravagant, Ms. Kett. It turns out the Orange Spot is not difficult to treat. The Crenna settlers have basic medical care, but nopharmaceutical capabilities to manufacture the antiamoebic they need. The Hansa can do that easily, and I’d like you to deliver the medicine.”

Wenceslas finally poured each of them a glass of iced tea from a glistening pitcher. She sipped the drink and said with her best maternal expression, “Now, that’s very kind of you, Mr. Chairman.” She wiped her lips before setting the glass of tea aside. “But I don’t believe it for a minute. Crenna is not that important to the Hansa. The population is too small and the resources just too insignificant to grab your interest—fever or no fever. Tell me why you really need me to go there.”

He was surprised at her perceptive response, but did not make excuses. “And how do you know so much about Crenna, Ms. Kett?”

“I’ve been sitting docked at the moonbase, and there’s not much else to do but read background material on potential markets.” *A dodge, not a lie.* Ever since receiving BeBob’s coded message, she had studied the colony world on her own.

Wenceslas did not shade his answer, but told her directly, “Yes, there is a second part of the assignment. Years ago, I placed a man on Crenna to analyze whatever the Ildirans left behind. His name is Davlin Lotze, a trained investigator, skilled at digging into nuances and putting together theories from the smallest shreds of evidence left behind.”

“Ah, so he’s a spy,” Rlinda said.

“He is an undercover exosociological investigator,” Basil said, a bit sharply. Then he smiled. “But you can use the term ‘spy’ if you prefer one-syllable words. When you deliver the medicine to Crenna, find him. I want you to take Lotze to a planet called Rheindic Co and remain there until he finishes his mission. He’ll be expecting your arrival on Crenna.”

Rlinda frowned. “Isn’t Rheindic Co one of those empty Klikiss worlds?”

“You certainly know your planets, Ms. Kett. Few people have ever heard of it.” He explained about the Colicos expedition and the missing archaeologists.

“I guess it’s better than sitting in spacedock, waiting for someone to ask me out on a date,” she said with a self-deprecating grin. “I’ll need a full supply of ekti, enough to fly your spy wherever he needs to go.”

And that was just the beginning of her terms. Once he’d explained the unofficial details of the mission, she had Basil under her thumb.

Rlinda surprised him with her sudden aggressive negotiating. If the Chairman had expected her to roll over and happily accept his first offer, he quickly learned his mistake. He drove a hard bargain. She pushed evenharder. Rlinda judged him well and could see by the twinkle in his eyes that he actually enjoyed the haggling.

She arranged for a substantial sum and a full supply of ekti. Then, to top off the bargain, she sold him half the *Curiosity*’s cargo of luxury items, which she presumed he would share with Sarein. All in all, she found it a very satisfactory deal.

Foremost in her mind, though, was the knowledge that she was going to Crenna, where she could make sure BeBob was all right.

Racing across space, Rlinda Kett felt as if she herself had wings. She’d almost forgotten the sheer joy of soaring between planetary systems. The brutal unfairness of what the hydrogues had done to human dreams, to the growth of civilization, to the sheer *fun* of zipping across the Spiral Arm, made her want to spit at the next warglobe she saw.

Sure, the Klikiss Torch at Oncier had been a big, dumb mistake, and she felt sorry for the hydrogue casualties... but *it had* been an accident, and Old King Frederick, the Hansa, and everybody else had tried to make amends. The drogues wanted no part of it. Damned pissy alien troublemakers.

A few scattered suns hung close and bright, places she had never visited, names she only had seen on starmaps. Crenna was far out into the fuzzy boundaries of where the Ildiran Empire petered out and the Hanseatic League had barely expanded. The system was a set of coordinates centered on an

unremarkable sunspot-speckled orange star that bathed the habitable colony planet in a warm glow.

She thought about Branson Roberts, recalling the good times with exaggerated fondness, conveniently forgetting the arguments they'd had during their tempestuous marriage. She was definitely looking forward to seeing him, and she was ready for this assignment: The *Curiosity*'s hold was full of medicines as well as substantial supplies for a long-term stay on Rheindic Co. After this mission, perhaps she'd remain on the Chairman's approved list for odd jobs. After lean years and lost customers, things were finally looking up.

Then the hydrogues ruined her celebration again.

As she aligned an approach vector on the fringes of the Crenna system, her sensors detected large ships suddenly looming in the vicinity. The screens went wild, and she activated all emergency systems. Like spiked balls ripped from an ogre's club, five giant alien spheres hurtled through space, intent on a kill.

Rlinda instantly cut all power to the *Curiosity*'s engines. Surrounded by cold blackness, the ship tumbled without stabilizers, leaving a weak but unmistakable signature—if the deep-core aliens were bothering to look for her.

“What the hell are you doing out here?” She called up her dossier from the Hansa starmaps, verifying what she already knew. The Crenna system did not even have a gas-giant planet. *There shouldn't be any hydrogues here!*

She vented a belch of exhaust to change direction, drifting back out of the system, hoping the deep-core aliens had not detected her.

She could not recall hearing of any drogue attacks on individual human spacecraft, but she didn't particularly relish the idea of becoming the first statistic. Earlier, Rlinda had wanted to moon the enemy out the porthole; now that she had the opportunity, it did not seem the wisest course of action.

Her ship hung there, exposed. “Never mind me,” she said like a prayer. “Nobody out here but us asteroids.” Space around her was alarmingly empty, with barely a handful of dust flecks to hide behind.

But the hydrogue vessels paid no attention to the *Curiosity*.

Instead, the five warglobes approached Crenna's star like bees clustering around a hive. They circled and swooped, scanning the spotted photosphere, flitting among the curling flares like children running through a sprinkler. Rlinda sat in cold silence for hours, her skin prickling and clammy from nervous sweat, as the five alien spheres lurked over the sun.

Then, for no apparent reason, the spiked hydrogue ships gathered into a single cluster and streaked out of the system.

“Good riddance,” she said. Then, with trembling hands, she powered up her engines again and made her way toward Crenna. Even the prospect of a plague seemed preferable to staying out here.



ADAR KORI'NH

Adar Kori'nh knew it was a foolish risk to go on a direct mission to a gas giant, but he wanted to see the wreck of the Daym skymine for himself. The Mage-Imperator had instructed him to investigate the feasibility of reactivating the empty Ildiran facilities. No ekti harvesting had been done here since the Roamer disaster 183 Terran standard years ago. After its checkered past, the antique skymine had been ignored by humans and Ildirans alike.

Perhaps by the hydrogues as well—or so he hoped.

Originally, a trio of grand Ildiran skymines had crisscrossed the Daym skies, the first ekti skimmers to be turned over to refugees from the human generation ship *Kanaka*. In a terrible accident, one of the three drifting cities had dropped into the depths. All crew members had been lost, except for a lone survivor, who was later rescued babbling about strange demons in the high-pressure depths. Since then, Daym was a shunned place of supernatural lights, mysterious noises, and creeping shadows where nothing should have lived.

Unfortunately, the strange creatures in the depths had not been the wild imaginings of a raving man, after all...

His command protégé, Tal Zan'nh, piloted their patrol craft away from the main warliners to the cold, blue-gray giant. For an hour or two, there would be only the two of them, isolated, though close enough to sense the comforting presence of crews in the big ships overhead. No Ildiran liked to be so vulnerable.

Kori'nh fidgeted, impatient to see the creaking old facility, compile his report, and then return to the comfort of crowds. The hydrogues were volatile and unpredictable. So far, they had responded only when provoked, and the Adar hoped the aliens would pay little attention to a small ship carrying two passengers. But the strange enemy had proven that one could never make assumptions about their behavior.

"I have found the facility, Adar." Zan'nh called up a bright image on the patrol craft's scanners. Against the frozen atmospheric soup, the once-grand industrial city looked like nothing more than a tiny blip swallowed in a cold, swirling sea.

He had seen images of the Daym skymine in its glory days. The harvesting towns had cruised in different airstreams; every several months, the ekti facilities would join for a rendezvous, and allow the lonely Ildirans to enjoy increased companionship. The skyminers would swap crews and stories before the tides of the sky drew them apart again to continue their hydrogen harvesting.

Because the Ildirans required a population of sufficient size to bind together *thethism*, Daym had been an extraordinarily expensive operation. Thus, it had made sense for the former Mage-Imperator to subcontract those facilities to eager Roamer workers. The human refugees had taken over all ekti production with such remarkable efficiency that Ildirans soon purchased most of their stardrive fuel from the Roamer clans.

Unfortunately, the hydrogue crisis had thrown those carefully balanced pieces into chaos, and now the Mage-Imperator had to consider all options. The Empire had substantial ekti stockpiles gathered over the centuries, but even those were dwindling. Ildirans needed their own fuel supply, regardless of the source.

Zan'nh divided his attention between the patrol craft's sensors and what he could see with his own eyes. He seemed surprised by the results of his scans. "The skymine's been abandoned and falling apart for over a century. But it is in better shape than I imagined. Structural integrity approaches eighty percent. Some of the weaker materials have disintegrated—windows and door seals and the like—but the decks are solid enough in most areas."

The skymine looked like a floating ghost town of gutted buildings and industrial facilities. Gray clouds of damp mist twisted like insubstantial serpents through the girders. Daym's distance from the primary sun never allowed its day to grow brighter than twilight.

"Even so, Adar," Zan'nh continued, "I don't believe many Ildirans would like to live here."

"That is for the Mage-Imperator to decide after we deliver our report," Kori'nh said. "If he feels justified in relaunching *ekti* operations, then there will be plenty of volunteers."

As long as it is not me.

Kori'nh was a military officer, a crossbreed of soldier and noble kiths—like young Zan'nh. Every molecule of his DNA had programmed him to be a commander. Other Ildiran kiths had different leanings and skills, each touching their particular soul-thread of *thetism* from the Mage-Imperator. Cloud miners loved to fill their roles; though after the coming of the Roamers, the miner kith had dwindled, since they were less necessary in the Empire. Perhaps they would be needed again.

The patrol craft settled with a gentle thump on the corroded and buckled plates of the main landing pad. They came to rest above the communal facilities, where crowds of Ildirans had once worked and lived. The Roamers, living here in much smaller numbers, must have gotten lost on the huge Daym skymine.

The thought of so much emptiness and so few people made Kori'nh uneasy. Even now, sitting beside Zan'nh, he felt much too alone, too separate. Though he knew the rest of the septa loomed overhead in orbit, they seemed far away. A curved fingernail of panic dug its way into his nerves, and Kori'nh knew he would not feel whole again until they returned to the main warliner and its thousands of soldier crew members.

"The atmospheric compression fields are still functioning around the main habitation structure," Zan'nh said, "but at greatly diminished capacity. The levitation engines are maintaining altitude—they'll burn for a thousand years—but don't expect to find any hot *chrana* soup in the skymine galley."

"We will not stay here long enough to eat. Let us make our inspection and be away."

They positioned breathingfilms over noses and mouths, then bundled up in insulated fabrics; the outside temperature of the high cloud decks was far below optimal. Tal Zan'nh hesitated, giving his commander the option of setting foot first on the historical relic or letting the junior officer take the lead and face any dangers. They stepped out together, huddled against the whistling breezes that moaned through the tall derricks and empty support frameworks. Everything seemed dead and lonely and cold.

Once, sky-harvesting activities would have warmed the place. Squealing exhaust gases, humming *ekti* reactors, and churning intake engines would have made this a bustling city, gulping whole clouds and running them through high-energy catalysts to convert hydrogen into the rare *ekti* allotrope. Now Kori'nh heard only the subtle groans of corroded structures that settled and drifted.

Zan'nh moved ahead, using a scanner to probe fracture paths and measure the extent of rust and

deterioration. He reached a steep metal staircase that led down to the ekti reactors. Their primary imperative.

They descended the stairs, one of which crumbled under Zan'nh's left foot, but he grabbed a railing, careful to make sure the Adar did not injure himself. A loose piece of metal clattered and banged as it dropped, skipped, bounced, and finally tumbled off the curved deck to vanish down into the infinite cloud depths.

Barely seen in a flash of movement, a glistening black creature with many legs scuttled into a dark cranny between deck plates. Kori'nh whirled at a sound of fluttering wings behind him, but he saw nothing. Squinting into the shadows, he wondered if he was imagining too many sounds in the unstable debris. Roamers were notorious for keeping unnecessary creatures—perhaps they had left small pets behind?

Now the Mage-Imperator wanted to consider relaunching his operations, working quietly in the hope that he could get away with renewed ekti harvesting. That the hydrogues wouldn't notice. Kori'nh would follow his leader's orders... but in his bones, he felt that the danger was too great.

Deep in the enclosed mechanical levels, the air smelled flat with an acidic undertone that even their breathingfilms could not disperse. The deck beneath their feet vibrated with the hum of levitation engines that held them aloft.

Zan'nh went to the reactor controls. From a pocket on his wide belt, he removed a compact power source and linked it to the diagnostic instruments. "I took the time to familiarize myself with skymine operations, Adar. These controls are similar to those the Roamers currently use." Part of the panel went dark, but the young officer continued to run his scans.

"Admirable foresight, Tal Zan'nh. Exactly what I expected of you."

When Zan'nh attempted to restart the smallest ekti reactor, the grumbling and shuddering subsidiary engines did not sound healthy. Despite his repeated efforts, the system fell silent and dead. He shook his head. "And that was the best of them, Adar. All the reactors will need to be replaced, and none of the current generation of engineers has experience in such work."

Kori'nh frowned. "Imagine the effort it would take: metals, machines, large crews of assemblers." The walls seemed close around him. The light was dim, and the air cold and sluggish. It was so lonely here.

Zan'nh looked grim. "It would require months of concentrated work."

Much of this skymine was dangerously unstable. People might fall through holes in the decks. Support pillars and derrick extensions might collapse. A loud groan echoed like the yawn of a giant Isix cat deep below.

"And we would never keep it hidden from the hydrogues, would we?"

Zan'nh shook his head. "Impossible, sir."

The Adar turned as uneasiness swelled within him. He knew it was irrational, but he wanted to be back aboard the patrol craft, flying toward his warliner. He could not let his protégé see his nervousness, though.

“We have made a sufficient inspection. I will tell the Mage-Imperator that, in my opinion, the Daym operations are not worth pursuing.”

“I concur,” Zan’nh answered quickly.

The two of them moved at a rapid clip up the stairs and ladders to the platform where their ship waited, its contours softened by the encroaching cold mists. Although neither man broke into an outright run, they moved much faster than the situation required.

27



PRIME DESIGNATE JORA’H

When his father summoned him for a private consultation, Prime Designate Jora’h did not suspect that his entire world was about to change. Mage-Imperator Cyroc’h had ruled for nearly a century. He led with all the benevolence and wisdom necessary to keep the ancient civilization together. The Ildiran golden age had already lasted for millennia, as chronicled in the *Saga of Seven Suns*.

As the eldest son and Prime Designate, Jora’h often met with his father to discuss politics and leadership principles. Despite basking in the comforts and conveniences of his noble position, Jora’h had a good heart and wanted to do what was right, in its own time. History and destiny were slow, inexorable barges traveling down a calm river; there never seemed to be any hurry.

Now Jora’h entered the contemplation chamber, pleased to have a private moment with his father and interested in all that he still had to learn about the Empire. He had spent the morning with a delightful new lover from a kith that specialized in preparing food. She’d had a wonderful sense of humor, and he found himself in high spirits.

“Seal the door, Bron’n,” the Mage-Imperator said in a deep, ominous voice. “I want no interruptions.”

As the burly bodyguard sealed the chamber entrance, Jora’h noted the serious expression on his father’s chubby face. “What is it, Father?” Bron’n’s murky silhouette, tall and monstrous, remained on the other side of the door.

The Mage-Imperator’s eyes were dark and glittering, set deep within folds of fat. “Hear me well, Jora’h. You have always known this day would come.”

The Prime Designate felt a queasy apprehension in his stomach. “What is it?”

“I am dying. Tumors have invaded my body, and they will keep growing until they choke me to death from within.” He said the words in a flat tone, as if issuing a minor proclamation. “I am already preparing myself for a final journey into the Lightsource. But you have even more work to do, for you will remain behind.”

Jora’h gasped, taking an uncertain step forward. “But... that cannot be true! You are the Mage-Imperator. Let me summon the medical kithmen.”

“Do not waste time or effort in childish denial. My life’s tale is reaching its end, and yours is about to begin a new chapter.”

Jora’h steeled himself and drew a deep breath. He swallowed hard, hoping some of the shock would fade. “Yes, Father. I am listening.”

“I have been unable to move from this chair in many decades—and not because of any silly tradition that the Mage-Imperator’s feet cannot touch the floor. A long-term insidious growth has infested my central nervous system, my spine, my brain. Already, the pain in my head is constant and growing steadily worse. Within a year or so, I will weaken to the point where I cannot breathe, my heart will not beat.

“At that time, you will be called upon to be the new Mage-Imperator. You will undergo the ritual ceremony and lose your manhood. My skull will go into the ossuary to glow beside all my predecessors’, but do not hope for me to counsel you from there. Do not expect even the lens kithmen to focus and explain the soul-threads and glimpses of the Lightsource.”

Jora’h forced himself not to groan. As Prime Designate, he was confident enough that he rarely needed to consult with lens kithmen, the philosopher priests who helped to guide troubled Ildirans.

The Mage-Imperator continued. “In recompense, however, you yourself will hold all of *thethism*. You will understand everything that I now know. You will comprehend the motivations and fine workings that I have put in place to keep the Ildiran Empire whole.”

Jora’h hung his head. *But I don’t want it yet!* He knew his father would scold him for his immaturity. No one had planned for this. No one wanted change—yet it was his responsibility. All his life, Jora’h had known that he would become the next Mage-Imperator. He couldn’t pretend otherwise.

“I promise you I will be ready, Father.” It was the bravest thing he could say, and he hoped it was a promise he could keep. He felt the suffocating weight of the giant Prism Palace ready to crash down upon him. Though the light around him had not changed, he thought he saw many more shadows than he had noticed before.

“You will never be ready, Jora’h. No one is ready. After my father’s death, when it was my time to ascend, I, too, was unprepared. Every Mage-Imperator feels the same way.”

Jora’h tried to control his increasing alarm, his hammering questions. “But the hydrogue war! It is a terrible time to change the leadership of our Empire. There is such danger ahead, countless chances for catastrophe. Father, I am so sorry—”

When the Mage-Imperator heaved himself into a sitting position, Jora’h noticed with alarm how grayish and weak the bulky man looked. *How could I not have noticed before? Was I so oblivious, surrounded by my own pleasures?*

“There is no time for that. We must prepare you. You have much to learn and understand, or the Empire will crumble into dust.”

Jora’h tried to think of himself as a leader. He lifted his chin. “Then we must use the remaining time to prepare me as much as possible.”

The Mage-Imperator smiled faintly, nestled in his cushioned chair. “An excellent attitude.” His face became harder. “I have watched you, Jora’h. I know what you are made of. You have been a passable

Prime Designate, performing up to expectations. You have always been earnest and kindhearted, willing to do your best and loving your people.”

The praise strengthened Jora’h, but his father continued with an edge in his voice. “However, you are too soft and too naïve. I had hoped to continue training you for many decades, to toughen you to the necessities of leadership. Now I have no choice.”

“I have always done what I thought best, Father. If I have made errors—”

“You cannot know what is best until you have all the information on which to base a decision. Even as Prime Designate, there are still many secrets you cannot guess. Only through full control of the *thism* can you understand the complete tapestry of our Empire. You must harden your heart and clarify your mind.”

Jora’h swallowed. Indeed, this would be a year of many changes.

“Your days will now be different. We must focus entirely on completing your instruction. I only hope we can do it in time.”

Dizzy and overwhelmed, Jora’h began to contemplate the shift. “What shall we do first, Father?”

The Mage-Imperator’s eyes narrowed into fleshy folds. “You must strengthen ties with your brothers, the Designates. Go to Hyrillka. No one can know my health is failing—not yet—but it is imperative that you bring back Thor’h. Once you ascend, your son will become Prime Designate and should start to learn his responsibilities.”

Jora’h agreed. “Yes, he has been pampered long enough with the Hyrillka Designate.”

The Mage-Imperator leaned back in the chrysalis chair, exhausted. “After that... we must all begin to plan.”

28



NIRA

As dusk thickened like clotting blood in the skies of Dobro, Nira stared out at the breeder camp. Long ago, it had been an abortive new colony established by the optimistic settlers from the *Burton*. Before things had gone terribly wrong here.

Nira could still travel back to the worldforest in her imagination, even though she knew the trees could not hear her. Her years as a curious green priest, her experience growing up as an eager acolyte reading stories to the trees, memories of her family who had always loved Nira even when they did not understand her passions—it all kept her strong. Sometimes, in the evenings, she told stories to the other human prisoners: King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, Beowulf, Romeo and Juliet. The captives here didn’t know the difference between truth and fiction.

She could still sing some of the old folk songs settlers had brought with them on the generation ship *Caillié*. In past years here, she had quietly sung nonsense verses to her babies, or recited ancient and

humorous nursery rhymes, until the medical kithmen took the babies away from her. Someday, Nira hoped she might be able to see—or even rescue—her Princess, her daughter Osira’h.

Dobro’s main city, established many centuries before the *Burton*’s arrival, was a crowd of many-windowed buildings. Now, after sunset, the streets began to glow as blazers ignited to fend off the darkness of oncoming night. Since humans were far less sensitive to darkness, the breeder camp was on the outskirts, lit only by harsh globes at the corners of the fences.

Men and women shouted a meal call from the communal barracks; sometimes Nira joined them, but today she wanted to stay out here by the boundary. Her green skin had absorbed enough sunlight to nourish her.

She looked toward the horizon, where the hills were dotted with patches of black-leaved scrub trees. If she ever again connected to the worldforest through telink, she could call for help, send messages, and learn what had happened in the Spiral Arm since her capture.

Around her, the other human females looked drab and sturdy, born to a life of hard work and frequent childbearing. All viable offspring were inspected and tested at birth. Some of the experimental mixed-breed newborns were so horrendously malformed that they were killed outright. The healthy ones were left with their mothers for several months, then snatched away to be raised by professional monitors in the cities on Dobro. Only pure human babies were left with their parents inside the camp, raised to be like all the others here.

Nira turned her head to look at a beautifully lit residence in the Ildiran city, where she knew the Dobro Designate lived. Years ago, rather than locking himself in the uncomfortable breeder barracks with her, the Designate had ordered guards to bring her to his tower room. During the assigned mating sessions, Nira had tried to imagine it was Jora’h holding her in his arms, pretending that Udru’h—who looked so much like his brother—was her love. But his caresses were like broken glass, his touch like barbed wire, and she had felt like vomiting for days afterward.

Throughout that pregnancy, her first after Osira’h, she had prayed for a miscarriage, wanting to expel the hated fetus from her body. But the next child, a boy, was born healthy and strong. Despite her loathing for the father, Nira grew attached to the innocent infant. Now, though, the little boy—Rod’h—was gone as well. She prayed he did not grow up to be like his father.

When he’d taken the boy away, Nira had tried to get the Designate to tell her about her Princess, any small detail about her daughter’s life, but Udru’h had brushed her aside. “Never ask me that again. Osira’h is no longer your concern. She carries the weight of an empire on her shoulders.”

The words filled Nira with both dread and hope. What did he want to do with Osira’h? Now, trying to put her thoughts into words as the darkness gathered, Nira stared at the tall tower as if it were a bastion of dreams and possibilities. Her Princess was in there. She knew it. She felt it.

The Designate’s residence basked in warm illumination, as if pretending to be a pleasant place. She wondered how many of her other children still lived in the Dobro city, raised and trained collectively, tested by curious scientist kithmen and specialists. Or had they been taken back to Ildira as trophies to be shown to the Mage-Imperator?

Nira was startled when she saw a small silhouette appear in front of the largest window, a little girl, small enough to be Osira’h’s age. Her heart thumped loudly in her chest, and she pressed closer against the fence. Nira concentrated, reached out with her mind, trying to snag the faintly telepathic connection

that had always bound her to the worldforest. If only she could touch a worldtree... any tree! She desperately wanted to connect to her own child, blood of her blood.

Nira clenched the fence, not caring if she cut her fingers. *Princess!* Could that little form be her daughter? If only she could see her, send her a message, tell her the truth...

But she felt no answering tingle. Even if she managed to make a genuine connection, she doubted Osira'h would know what to do with it. Nevertheless, Nira's spirit soared, just for having seen her. It was a start!

29



DOBRO DESIGNATE

The half-breed girl was remarkable, talented and intelligent beyond the Designate's most optimistic expectations. This child might well provide the mental bridge between Ildirans and hydrogues, the unbreakable link that would bind the diverse races just as the soul-threads of *this* bound all Ildirans.

If Osira'h succeeded in this unprecedented goal, it would make the many generations of effort worthwhile. This girl might save the Empire, their civilization, everything. She had to.

Inside the well-lit residence, the child looked at her mentor with a shining smile, willing to do anything he asked of her. Beautiful, innocent, perfect, a bright sunbeam directly from the plane of the Lightsource. Osira'h was admirable and wise beyond her years, and he guessed that he didn't know half of her capabilities. Nor did the girl herself. He hoped it would be enough.

As the Mage-Imperator's second son, Udru'h had always labored hard, doing necessary work unnoticed by his elder brother, Jora'h, who glided through life, paying little attention to the advantages of his station. The Dobro Designate was not jealous of Jora'h, had no aspirations of taking over his brother's role as eventual heir to the Prism Palace. Instead, his attitude was focused and ruthlessly businesslike. He would do what was necessary... and sometimes such efforts were not pleasant.

Now he looked over at the half-breed girl, who stood at the windowpane gazing deep into the gathering darkness, oddly intent, as if she could sense something out there.

But the moment he thought her name, she turned to look at him. Osira'h had large eyes and feathery golden hair. Her cheekbones were high, her chin strong, showing a mixture of delicacy and grace along with noble breeding. The Designate could see a hint of Jora'h's features, given an exotic flair by the bloodline of the female green priest. The irises of Osira'h's eyes swirled with an inner light, a glint of smoky topaz she had inherited from her father, darkened with shadowy hazel from her mother.

"You are thinking about me again," she said, her voice small but clear. Osira'h was only five years old, but the combination of her superior breeding and intensive training and indoctrination had made her far more mature than anyone else her age. This girl never dreamed of spending afternoons at play.

"Can you sense my pride?"

The girl laughed. “It pours from you like heat from a fire.”

He stepped up beside the girl to put his strong hand on her shoulder. A year before, Osira’h had expended much effort, channeling her thoughts and her senses, just to read what the Designate was thinking. Now, though, she had begun to do it automatically, as instinctively as she drew breath. *Remarkable.*

None of her half siblings by the green priest woman—not even his own son, Rod’h—showed quite as much talent, though Udru’h still hoped for another breakthrough by interbreeding Nira Khali with various powerful kiths. The other mixed-race children were raised in large groups in nurseries, schools, and training centers in the Dobro city. The half-human children understood their uniqueness, and the instructors and inspectors worked very hard to determine and build on their individual capabilities.

But the Designate kept Osira’h to himself.

“You have so much potential. There are other telepathic candidates on Dobro, but you are the best. That is why I have devoted my life to instructing you, to giving you every advantage so that you can reach your true abilities.”

“For the glory of the Mage-Imperator,” Osira’h said, mouthing the words he had impressed upon her ever since she could first utter sentences.

“For the glory of the whole Ildiran civilization,” Udru’h emphasized.

“I promise to do my best. And if my best isn’t enough, then I will try harder.” Her expression became troubled, as it always did when the consequences began to pile up on her. Her small mouth frowned, like a flower bud. “But sometimes I get afraid of the hydrogues. They are monsters. Real ones.”

The Dobro Designate looked out into the featureless night. The room’s glare reduced the outside sky to a black wall. “You will have to face them, Osira’h. You will be the conduit for our Mage-Imperator. You are the bridge—our best tool for forging an alliance or at least a treaty that can stop this war from destroying us.”

Udru’h felt deep sorrow for her, mingled with a rush of paternal pride, but he dampened his emotions before she could detect them. He could never let Osira’h believe that he was weak or soft; he must be firm, never doubting—because the girl must never doubt.

She was always pliable, eager to do whatever he requested. Though none of the half-breed children concerned themselves with their parentage, Udru’h was a father figure to her. The girl did not worry about peripheral details. She merely played her part.

But would it be soon enough to save the Empire?

For millennia, a few select Ildirans had known that the hydrogues might one day return to cause havoc. For countless generations, planning for the eventual return of the grand and incomprehensible enemy, the Mage-Emperors had encouraged selective breedings among widespread kiths and monitored the results of the subtle experiments, watching for useful mutations, the seeds of a savior—especially any sign of enhanced telepathic ability.

Upon discovery of the race of humans, though, the reigning Mage-Imperator Yura’h had realized an exciting and innovative new alternative, a potent set of new ingredients for the genetic stew.

When an initial testing of the *Burton* survivors demonstrated the remarkable potential of human genetics, the Dobro breeding project was expanded specifically to create a group of half-breed telepaths. At first, it had been a cooperative venture between Captain Chrysta Logan and the earlier Dobro Designate, but violence and tragedy in the initial years had turned the Designate against humans, changing the nature of the entire program. Humans had been subordinate ever since. Prisoners. Resources.

The synergy of human and Ildiran genetics had produced some horrors, but also yielded spectacular successes, especially in the second and third generations: stronger warriors, faster swimmers, more creative singers and storytellers. The mongrel descendants of those experiments were raised to be loyal to the Ildiran Empire, treating the Mage-Imperator as an infallible god.

It was a long-term plan, preparing for the eventuality of another encounter with the hydrogues. Ten thousand years ago, in battle with their powerful counterparts, the hydrogues had nearly obliterated all life in the Spiral Arm, destroying the Klikiss civilization and bringing the Ildiran Empire to its knees.

Few Ildirans knew the truth anymore, and the *Saga of Seven Suns* did not mention what had really happened. Now, though, human hubris had reignited the titanic conflict, provoking the deep-core aliens to action when they might have lain quiet and dormant for centuries more. The hydrogues were already abroad, and it would not be long before other enemies manifested themselves.

Osira'h had been born not a moment too soon.

The Designate squeezed the girl's shoulder again, and she winced. He realized he had been too rough. "You are so young, Osira'h. I wish I didn't have to rush you."

"Don't worry about me." She looked up at him with an endearing expression of absolute faith—in her mission, in his benevolence, and in her loyalty to the Mage-Imperator. "I will do my job. It was bred into me. For the glory of the Ildiran civilization."

"Ah, how could the hydrogues resist you?" The girl beamed up at him. A gift of fate, she would be the strongest telepath ever to walk the worlds of the Ildiran Empire. "You will save us all, child."

The Designate hugged her, and the little girl nodded solemnly. "Yes, I will."

30



RLINDA KETT

At the *Voracious Curiosity's* approach, the Crenna farmers converged from the outer acreage. Rlinda Kett's unexpected arrival caused a stir that superseded their daily work.

Still shaken from her close brush with prowling hydrogue warglobes at the edge of the system, she climbed out of her ship, ready to accept the cheers and accolades with embarrassed good grace.

"The Hansa heard about your plague, and I brought you medicines!" she called. She'd expected to see the town at a standstill, the fields untilled, and the herd animals fending for themselves during the Orange

Spot epidemic. “But it doesn’t look like too many of your people are out sick.”

The nearest farmer nodded. “Damn fine of King Peter to be thinking of us, ma’am, but we’ve already got the medicines, you see. One of our colonists has his own ship, though he was flying on ekki fumes by the time he got back here. We owe our lives to Branson Roberts.”

Her heart swelled to hear his name, but she kept up pretenses. “Well, he’s got a lot of nerve making my humanitarian gestures obsolete.” She scanned the crowd and spotted BeBob. His frizzy gray hair had grown longer, giving him a disreputable look, and he had dirt all over his clothes as if he’d been working in the fields—she had to laugh at the thought!

Rlinda saw his eyes fill with a wash of tears, and then he was running toward her, ignoring the farmers. She swept open her arms and bounded in his direction. She knew they must look ridiculous, coming together like two starstruck lovers in a cheap romance vidloop.

“So... I take it you two, uh, know each other?” one of the colonists said.

Rlinda and BeBob held each other in a long, crushing embrace; then both said in perfect comic unison, “A bit.”

“If I’d known you were coming,” BeBob said, “I wouldn’t have wasted my fuel. Instead of fetching medicine, I could have rounded up some conveniences, tools, interesting cropseeds—and made a bigger profit.”

Rlinda rubbed her fingertips on his frizzy hair, then hugged him again. “You’ve got a soft heart, not a soft head, BeBob.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “I’ll let you spend plenty of time tonight convincing me that I didn’t waste a trip. Your place or mine?” Then she chuckled even more. “Oh, you’re so cute when I embarrass you. You look absolutely scandalized.”

“Hey, I’m trying to be a respectable colonist here.”

“Try harder, then.” She kissed him on the mouth.

Rlinda didn’t tell him about her real mission, not wanting to mar their quiet dinner together in his dwelling, which had been built by Ildiran colonists. She had brought some of his favorite foods, a nice bottle of wine, new entertainment packages, and a fancy shirt she knew he would never wear. She had called it a “colony-warming” gift.

“To tell the truth, I’m not surprised to see that you found an excuse to come here.” BeBob took a bite of the tenderized stew she had prepared in his small kitchen area. “If I didn’t think you’d figure out my coded message, I would never have risked sending it. I assume General Lanyan isn’t too happy about any captain who goes AWOL.”

“Aww, he had no right to conscript you in the first place, and I’ve never forgiven him for confiscating my merchant fleet. How’s my ship, by the way?”

He raised his eyebrows. “The *Blind Faith* is only ten percent yours. She’s fine—except for the empty fuel tank. Not much more than a big lawn ornament right now.”

“Prop her struts up on creteblocks and let the weeds grow all around,” Rlinda said. “Then you’ll be a real dirt-bound homebody.”

He sipped the dark red wine she had poured for him. “I’m happy here, you know. Crenna’s a nice place, good weather. You should hear the wind through the flutewoods. Could be an ideal place to settle down—by choice rather than necessity. I, uh, wouldn’t mind having you around, Rlinda—and not just for your wonderful cooking, either.”

She laughed with warm delight. “I knew I came here for a reason. In tough times, flattery is hard to come by.”

He set his wineglass down. “But, much as my ego would like to believe it, visiting me wasn’t your only reason for traveling here. Need any help?”

She wasn’t surprised that he had guessed, and so she told him everything.

Davlin Lotze was already waiting outside the *Curiosity* when Rlinda returned to her ship an hour after dawn. Hands empty, he stood like a statue, the left side of his face scratched with faint scars as if some predator had tried to claw his eye out. He was muscular, exuding intelligence, watchfulness, and a demeanor of utter competence. “I believe Chairman Wenceslas sent you for me,” he said. “Even so, bringing the medicine was a nice gesture.”

She measured him with her eyes. “You don’t believe in simple human charity?”

“I don’t believe in *Basil*’s simple human charity.” He ran his gaze over the *Curiosity*. “Looks like a good ship. Is it well supplied?”

“The Chairman had me put aboard everything we’d need for our little expedition: digging and analysis tools, a survival camp, food supplies, water extractors. Ten thousand clean crossword puzzles in the database.”

Rlinda led him aboard in the early-morning stillness and showed him to a small guest cabin that had once been used to carry the green priests Nira and Otema, before anyone had ever heard of hydrogues. Lotze touched the bunk, noted the computer console and the ship’s library database, and nodded with satisfaction.

“I am ready to go. I’d rather not make a scene packing up my belongings. The colonists think I’m just another settler with a bit of engineering knowledge. They have no clue why I was really here.”

Rlinda was surprised. “No goodbyes? You’ve spent years on Crenna... and you just want to slip away into the dawn? With nothing but the shirt on your back?”

His expression remained unruffled. “That would be my preference. I am ready to go find those missing archaeologists.”

Rlinda drew a deep breath. “It’ll take me a while to prep the ship for departure. In the meantime, I, at least, need to run back and say goodbye to someone.”



ANTON COLICOS

The fabled city of Mijistra was everything Anton Colicos had dreamed it might be—and a thousand times more. The crystalline metropolis glittered under the light of seven suns. He didn't think his eyes could withstand any more wonders.

As he stepped away from the ornate Ildiran transport ship, Anton fumbled in his pockets, searching for his filmy sun filters. Though the captain had warned him that humans often had trouble with the glare, Anton had been so overwhelmed by the sights that he'd forgotten to take the simple precaution. When he smoothed the filter band across his eyes, even more amazing details popped out at him. Spires, stained glass, fountains, gardens...

The city brought to mind thoughts of wondrous places: Xanadu and the pleasure dome of Kublai Khan, mythical Atlantis, the golden city of El Dorado, the realm of Prester John, even the Emerald City of Oz. It would require centuries just to *absorb* it all... much less interpret and communicate it to future generations.

He wished he could share this with his missing parents. They would love it here! Just before leaving Earth, he had received a formal message from some unnamed bureaucrat in the Hansa that they would "look into the matter" with whatever resources they had available, as soon as it was "appropriate." Anton did not take much encouragement from the answer, but it was something. Perhaps his new Ildiran friends would have something to add.

Suppressing the urge to worry about his parents, Anton reminded himself that Margaret and Louis Colicos had always been self-sufficient and prepared for unexpected setbacks. All his life, his mother and father had emphasized to him that they loved their work. And, despite the risks, they would not want to do anything else.

Just like Anton, here in Mijistra. At last.

Ildirans disembarked from the crowded passenger liner, where the travelers had been pressed together inside the communal areas. Though Anton relished solitude for quiet study and meditation, these aliens thrived on each other's company. He didn't think Ildirans ever did anything alone.

Anton moved down the ramp with clusters of Ildirans of various kith forms and body types. Looking past the crowd of disembarking passengers, he searched for the revered historian Vao'sh. Anton had studied Ildiran culture and knew full well how to identify a rememberer kithman. As the lone human in the group, Anton would, of course, be easy to spot.

Then he saw one short-statured Ildiran in solar-power-striped robes waving at him. The greeter's facial features were different from those of the soldiers and noble ambassadors he had met aboard the liner. Anton bounded away from the ramp, the weariness of the journey falling away like rain from a slicker. "Are you Rememberer Vao'sh?"

The historian repeated his name, carefully demonstrating the proper pronunciation, and the young man rolled the sound through his mouth until he got the correct tone. Vao'sh spread his hands wide at his hips, palms upward. "And you are Anton Colicos, the human teller of tales and keeper of history?"

“That sounds much more impressive than ‘postdoctoral scholar’ or ‘associate professor.’” Anton reached out to shake the rememberer’s right hand, startling the Ildiran, who then imitated the gesture. “I’m not used to people treating what I do with any sort of respect, much less reverence.”

“How could they not revere one who tells the stories of your species?”

“Humans don’t necessarily consider storytellers to be very... practical.”

The Ildiran historian guided him along a curving walkway into a cluster of free-form towers amid trickling fountains and gemlike sculptures. Mirrors and sundials cast interesting shadow patterns along the streets.

Although Anton was normally a reserved person, enthusiasm made him loquacious. He had never felt comfortable addressing conferences or speaking at banquets, but now he forgot all shyness. “I’ve dreamed of an opportunity like this my whole life. I applied to Ildira three separate times before this, you know. I was afraid your Mage-Imperator had instituted a policy of secrecy.”

The emotional lobes on Vao’sh’s face flushed different colors, a chameleon’s palette of expressive displays unique to the rememberer kith, who used them in entertaining their audiences. Anton did not yet know how to interpret all the hues.

“It does no good to keep secrets,” Vao’sh said. “Each of us is a character in the grand tale of the cosmos, and the *Saga of Seven Suns* is itself but the tiniest fraction of the overall epic. Yet too few of us ask questions.” Vao’sh led him past a thin sheet of water that streamed down the outer wall of a city tower.

“Then I’ll ask a question.” Anton drank in the sculptures and prismatic murals around him, not sure where to turn his attention. “Why was my request finally approved? I know other researchers have applied and been turned down.”

Vao’sh smiled. “I was impressed by the way you presented yourself, Anton Colicos. Your impassioned application convinced me that you and I are kindred spirits.”

“I, um... don’t even remember what I said.”

The colors on the historian’s face warmed like sunshine leaking into a cloudy sky. “You called yourself a ‘rememberer’ of human epics, one of the few men who know your species’ ancient poems and story cycles. I have read some of the stories translated by human scholars long ago, but I felt in them only a detached academic air. No depth of feeling, no exuberance in your own history.

“But your message contained a true heart and understanding of how those ancient tales spoke to the soul of the human race. You seemed to have a spiritual connection to the true drama of history. I thought that perhaps you would understand our *Saga*.”

From a hill, they stared at the Prism Palace, a breathtaking structure that, by comparison, made King Peter’s Whisper Palace look like a mere outbuilding. Spheres and domes, spires and connecting walkways, rose high into the sky, encircled by the radiating spokes of seven inward-flowing rivers.

Vao’sh seemed to enjoy his companion’s amazement. “Since I am the Mage-Imperator’s prime rememberer, I live within the Prism Palace. You will share the facility with me.” Anton found himself

speechless, which amused Vao'sh. "Come now, a storyteller who is awestruck to the point of silence is of no use to anyone, Anton Colicos."

"Sorry."

"You and I will learn much from each other, day after day."

Anton smiled. "See, there's another question. On my journey here, I heard Ildirans talking about days, weeks. How can you even measure time like that, on a world with seven suns in the sky? What does a 'day' mean to you when it's always daylight?"

"It is simply a convention, converted into your Trade Standard language. We have diurnal cycles, active and resting, just like humans, with approximately the same length. I could give you the Ildiran words and precise chronological equivalents if you like... but it would be easier if you just thought of your own familiar terms. There is so much to learn, why become mired in trivialities?"

"Oh, I could tell you stories about some of my colleagues obsessed with trivialities like that. Can't see the forest for the trees, we say."

Vao'sh imitated Anton's pleased smile. "An interesting metaphor. I look forward to exchanging stories and techniques, since a rememberer must always increase his repertoire."

Anton continued to grin as they walked toward the Prism Palace. "I need to increase mine by about a billion lines' worth, I'd say."

With a pleased bow, Vao'sh said, "Let us start a bit smaller than that."

32



REYNALD

The primary fungus-reef complex perched high on the massive trunk of a worldtree, filled with thousands of occupants. Reynald's bronzed face was made sunny by a bright smile as he faced the colorful ruling chairs of Mother Alexa and Father Idriss. He didn't know whether to greet their decision with joy or trepidation, but it was not unexpected. They had been dropping hints for weeks.

"Understand, my son," said Alexa with a sweet smile, "you are well prepared for this responsibility. What better time could there be?"

"You might even be more well-rounded and cosmopolitan than your mother and I are." Idriss scratched his square-cut beard. "We are so very proud of you. We're convinced you will be a worthy successor, so it's time you got started. Plenty to do."

"Oh, he'll surpass us." Alexa rested a hand on her husband's wrist. "The people will accept the change in no time."

Reynald bowed. "You both leave me with a grand legacy, but... why did you reach this decision so

suddenly?”

“We just felt it was time,” Idriss said, sounding regal.

Alexa smiled, obviously excited. “Besides, next month Sarein is coming from Earth on a diplomatic mission, and we have no way of knowing when she’ll be able to visit home again. What better time could there be to hold your coronation?”

Reynald had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. “*That’s* your reason for stepping down?” It seemed so like his parents’ way of making decisions.

“Yes, and it’s too bad Beneto couldn’t be here as well,” Idriss said.

He already knew what the next several weeks would be like. There would be a month to prepare and rehearse. People would come from settlements all around Theroc. His parents would enjoy the experience more than anyone else.

“Well, if that is the case,” Reynald said with a sigh, “then we’d better not let my sister down.”

Father Uthair and Mother Lia had ruled Theroc for three decades before passing leadership to their daughter, Alexa, and her husband. The old couple had been retired for thirty-one years and had never shown the slightest regret about it.

Reynald had always been fond of his grandparents, able to talk with them about leadership, the Idirans, the Terran Hanseatic League. Much as he respected his own parents, Reynald felt that Uthair and Lia had a broader, more politically savvy perspective.

He sat in the warm glow of a phosphor fire in his grandparents’ quarters in a high section of the main fungus-reef city. They had invited Reynald and Estarra to dinner. Though they pretended it would be a relaxed social evening, he knew Uthair and Lia wanted to “talk about things,” now that his imminent succession had been announced.

Uthair and Lia loved to sit on their frilly balcony and stare out at the worldtree labyrinth, watching flying insects and colorful flowers. The old couple could talk with each other for hours, still interested in each other, though they had been married for well over half a century.

Estarra busied herself setting out dishes to serve a chowder of mushrooms and herbs, supplemented by skewers of spiced condorfly meat. “You make the best soup, Grandma,” she said, sneaking a taste.

“It is my responsibility to teach you how to make it.” Lia gave a mock frown. “And you’re certainly old enough, Estarra. Eighteen! You’re an adult. . . though your parents still pamper you like a little girl.”

Uthair smiled. “You treated Alexa that way until she was twenty-eight, dear.”

“It’s a mother’s prerogative.”

When the old man moved from his balcony chair to the table, he pretended not to notice that Reynald stood ready to help him. Then, as they ate, neither Uthair nor Lia seemed in a hurry to address the reason for the meal invitation. Afterward, Reynald and Estarra cleaned up while their grandparents took a pair of

musical instruments from a shelf on the wall and went to the balcony.

Uthair strummed a resonating harp-guitar he had invented, while Lia played a melody on a hollow flute. Since they'd retired, the two had busied themselves with creating imaginative music-makers from forest materials. They gave their instruments to children, who ran about tooting and strumming and jangling in the wilderness. Uthair and Lia couldn't have been more pleased.

Finally, his grandmother got down to business. "Reynald, if you are going to take the throne as Father of Theroc, it's high time you chose your wife. The people will expect it." Lia set the flute in her lap. "You are already older than your mother was when she married Idriss. Your father was proud and capable, the young leader of a worm-hive city. Their joining has produced a fine brood of offspring. They've ruled well; they're liked by the people." She sighed. "But peaceful times and comfortable living have made them a bit... placid."

"She means *soft*," Uthair said. "Theroc is self-sufficient, and we don't rely on trade with either the Hansa or Ildirans. Nevertheless, Alexa and Idriss are mistaken to think we can ignore the hydrogue war. There is no such thing as neutrality against an alien enemy that kills indiscriminately."

Lia said, "I'm not even convinced the hydrogues make any distinction between Ildirans and humans."

"Your parents are taking the tack of doing nothing and hoping the problem will go away. For months now, Lia and I have been trying to convince them to let you take charge in these difficult times. And they've finally listened."

Lia patted him on the arm. "You'll be a much better leader, dear. You've got the heart and the head for it."

"Why are you telling me this?" Reynald asked.

Estarra spoke up. "Because in a month you'll be the next Father, and they're counting on *you*. Don't let it go to your head."

Uthair chuckled. "Listen to your sister. She's perhaps the wisest one in the family. Maybe a bit blunt, but she speaks the truth."

At another time, Reynald might have gone over to punch Estarra in the shoulder. Now, though, he paid attention. "All right, you invited us to dinner so you could give me advice." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Tell me about the challenges of being a ruler."

Grinning, Uthair lifted his wife's hand. "One of the greatest secrets, Reynald, is that you must marry well."

The old woman looked first at Reynald, then Estarra. "It is past time for you, Reynald. You are thirty-one."

Uthair said, "The same goes for you, Estarra. You're certainly of marriageable age. And you must both consider your options. From the start, get it into your head that your mate must be chosen for reasons other than fluttery heartbeats and rushing hormones. Marry the right person, with sound judgment, and if you're lucky, there might even be some romance involved."

Lia's fingers toyed with her flute. "One matter at a time, dear. Let us consider Reynald first. Most

people expect you to pick the daughter of a good Theron family, but in these times, perhaps you should look to broader horizons.”

Reynald had already considered the idea, but he asked anyway, “Exactly how broad do you mean?”

“The Galaxy is vast, Reynald,” Uthair said. “It may be wise to make a more powerful alliance than with just a few Theron families.”

Reynald wanted to avoid the question, but knew he could not. “Did you have someone in mind, Grandfather?” He already knew his own preferences for candidates.

Lia spoke in the grandmotherly voice he remembered hearing as a child when he’d had nightmares sparked by forest sounds. “Now, now, we’re just having a conversation. Uthair and I aren’t even the leaders of Theroc anymore. We’re just grandparents thinking of your welfare.” She went back toward the cooking area. “I’ll make us some tea. That’s enough of these matters for now. Just think about what we said. The Spiral Arm consists of more than just Theroc.”

For the rest of the evening, Estarra did more than her share keeping their grandparents company, while Reynald’s mind was filled with images of people he’d met when he traveled around the Spiral Arm. Most clearly, he recalled the beautiful, intelligent, and fascinating Cesca Peroni, who was now the Speaker for the Roamers. He valued Uthair’s and Lia’s opinions, and now that he knew they would not object, perhaps he should approach Cesca Peroni after all.

Therons and Roamers had much in common, especially their independence from the Hanseatic League. Five years ago, Cesca had politely rebuffed Reynald’s tentative questions about marriage plans; he’d learned since that her fiancé had been killed in one of the early hydrogue attacks.

Now the vision of her face came back with full force. He had no idea if this was the woman Uthair and Lia had in mind, but he began to count the many advantages and opportunities such an alliance might create.

He sipped his tea and just listened to the music his grandparents played. Wheels began turning in his mind.

33



KING PETER

In the early hours of a foggy morning, King Peter and his assigned advisers assembled inside the newly reinforced viewing gallery. Together, they watched with wary fascination as the Klikiss robot was led into the dismantling and dissection chamber below. Jorax moved ponderously on multiple fingerlike feet, like a man about to be executed.

Beside him, sallow-faced and balding Chief Science Adviser Howard Palawu said cheerily, “I reviewed the records, Your Majesty. It’s been one hundred eighty-three years since the first report of finding these robots came back from the Robinson expedition on Llaro.”

“Then it’s about time we figured out what they’re all about,” Peter said, not taking his eyes from the hulking sentient machine. Jorax was so large and powerful that he loomed with the threat of a walking land mine.

To the left of the King’s chair, Lars Rurik Swendsen, the Hansa engineering specialist, leaned over. His blue eyes sparkled with ideas and childish fascination. “And the Ildirans have known about them for longer than that, but they’ve never done a complete dissection and analysis.”

“Well, we all know the Ildirans don’t have a highly developed sense of curiosity,” Palawu said. The two specialists were so enthused they seemed to forget the King’s presence as they chatted. “They’re not interested in innovation. But *w*ecan study, and learn, and adapt a wide variety of technologies for our own benefit. Oh, this is a great day for our war effort.”

Swendsen nodded. “Hansa cyberneticists have hit a plateau in advancing our compies. We haven’t seen significant improvements for generations now. But these Klikiss robots have lasted for thousands of years without any degradation.”

King Peter tried to dampen their zeal with common sense. “No degradation, gentlemen? Not one of the Klikiss robots can remember what happened to their entire creator race. I’d say mass amnesia constitutes a bit of ‘degradation,’ don’t you think?”

Below them, the robotics laboratory had been configured as both a mechanical repair bay and an exquisite operating theater. Numerous analytic and diagnostic instruments were mounted in racks that lined the octagonal room. The reinforced central platform was far sturdier than a simple surgical table to accommodate the sheer bulk of Jorax.

Well-armed palace guards and specially assigned EDF silver-beret commandos stood along the chamber walls and outside the doors, aware of the potential danger and alert for any treachery.

Although the Klikiss robot towered over all the humans, he made no threatening move as he swiveled his flattened geometrical head, scanning the equipment arrayed for the dissection. The robot’s articulated arms were retracted into his ellipsoidal carapace. “You have nothing to fear. I have deactivated my self-protective systems, and I grant you my full cooperation.”

Always beware of someone who says, “You have nothing to fear,” Peter thought. This same robot had already obliterated Dr. William Andeker “by accident.” The guards remained alert.

The cybernetics team armed themselves with laser cutters and diamond saws, delicate probes, and a host of other precision tools. “We’d better get started,” said the lead researcher. “Jorax, if you’d care to recline here, it’ll be more convenient for us.”

Peter frowned, not sure the robot’s priority was to make the dismantling procedure “convenient” for the humans. But Jorax seemed perfectly cooperative, even solicitous. *Why is he doing this? What is the real reason?*

Basil Wenceslas was excited enough by the technological benefits that he took the robots’ offer at face value. But for Peter, the Klikiss machines were such an enigma that applying standards of human altruism was not appropriate.

With slow movements, the robot angled himself backward and finally rested flat on the analysis platform, looking like a huge cockroach that had been sprayed with insecticide. Peter wondered if the

ancient machine could feel fear or pain.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the hall. Shouting, the palace guards tried to block two other Klikiss robots that had followed Jorax into the vicinity. A silver beret brandished his weapon at the identical beetlelike machines. “Turn back. You are not authorized here.”

“We wish to assist in the process,” said one robot.

“We are curious as well,” said the other. “We can offer our insights.”

That wasn’t part of the original bargain, Peter said to himself.

Next to the King, Palawu and Swendsen conferred quickly. “Actually, it’s not a bad idea to have them here, Your Majesty. Remember, their civilization created the technology of the Klikiss Torch. This isn’t just a high-school-level reverse-engineering project. None of us really know what we’re doing.”

Peter narrowed his eyes. *Including me.* “That’s not very comforting. Isn’t it convenient that two more Klikiss robots show up here, now, without any prior warning? I thought there were only ten or so of them on Earth at any given time?”

“Give or take, Sire,” Swendsen said. “But I suppose Jorax could have sent a signal. We should have expected it.”

“If it’s any consolation, Your Majesty,” Palawu added quietly, seeing the King’s hesitation, “the transparent walls here are utterly bombardment proof. A pulse of energy or even a complete explosion of the test subject would not harm you.”

Peter was worried about more than that. He spoke into the loudspeaker. “All right, let them in to observe and assist—on the condition that both robots completely deactivate their own protective systems.”

Jorax and the other two robots buzzed back and forth in quick bursts of coded language. One of the new robots said, “That would make us vulnerable, should your soldiers and guards choose to dissect us as well.”

Peter couldn’t feel sorry for them. “Consider it a gesture of mutual trust. Those are our terms for allowing you to participate.”

Finally, the two insectile machines responded in unison. “We agree to the terms.” They stood like metallic statues, then sagged slightly. “All defensive systems have now been shut down.”

“We have only your word for that,” Peter said.

“Therefore a reciprocal gesture of trust is required.” The robots moved forward, and Peter decided not to stop them. He watched the proceedings, uneasy but curious.

With imagers and sonic probes, the researchers scanned every cranny of Jorax’s mechanical body using nondestructive evaluation techniques. Never before had they been able to make even a complete external assessment of the alien machines.

Jabbering excitedly, the team took an hour just to finish their visual inspection and documentation. The

scientists were intrigued, but King Peter felt a knot of tension in his chest. He disliked the conditions of the experiment, the sacrifice of the robot, the conveniently unexpected arrival of two other machines. *What do they really want?*

Sounding like a warmhearted schoolteacher, the lead cyberneticist said from the analysis theater, “It’s time to move on to the next phase. Jorax, is there a way you can provide access, or do we need to cut through your exoskeleton?”

With a startling snap and a hiss, tiny cracks like the segments of a pillbug appeared in Jorax’s chest plate. They slid open far enough to expose inner circuitry, glossy metal, and smooth fiberoptics that throbbed like phosphorescent nematodes.

“Look! This is a completely different command train from what we use in our compies,” the lead cyberneticist said, blinking up at the observation gallery as if remembering his audience above.

The robotics researchers took up curved tools, which, despite their high-tech appearance, King Peter recognized as nothing more than fancy pry bars. While the other Klikiss robots loomed close, the Hansa team pulled Jorax’s outer segments open farther, exposing vulnerable interior components. Lights glowed as if the thin flexible fibers contained nuclear fire.

“I would prefer to deactivate my systems and nullify my sensors, but if I did, you would receive less benefit from your investigations.” Jorax’s buzzing voice rose to a thinner whine. “Therefore, I will remain conscious through each step, until my mind’s subsystems no longer function.”

“He’s very brave,” Palawu whispered.

Peter clenched the arms of his chair.

The two Klikiss observer robots moved forward silently, startling the scientists, but the hulking machines seemed to know what they were doing. They opened ports in Jorax’s ellipsoidal core and manually extended his eight segmented limbs, each one with attachments for grasping, cutting, or manipulating. With brisk movements, the Klikiss robots amputated the mechanical limbs and handed them to the human engineers. Even the segmented arms and legs would be studied for possible ways to improve straightforward mechanical systems.

One of the cyberneticists probed deep into the artificial internal organs. “I can already see how this will benefit our work.”

Lights flashed on the dismantling table, and the sensors on Jorax’s head plate blazed brighter as if in the equivalent of a scream. “There is nothing to fear,” Jorax said. “There is nothing to fear.”

Peter wondered if the sacrificial robot was trying to reassure the humans or convince himself.

The dissection and analysis continued throughout the morning. At each new discovery inside Jorax’s body, both Swendsen and Palawu rhapsodized about its potential uses, trying to impress the King.

“It’ll take us a month to get a handle on the dataflow processing alone, Sire, but, just as a first assessment, I believe it can be incorporated into Hansa compy designs. We can even use the technique to upgrade our manufacturing systems. That could more than double our productivity.”

Swendsen agreed, and added, “And we’ll certainly need more automated fighters and scouts as the hydrogue war continues. Think of the advantages if we can increase efficiency in the manpower-intensive aspects of the conflict. This might just give us a chance against those damned aliens.”

After another half hour, OX entered to stand beside King Peter. Watching the proceedings, the Teacher compy seemed oddly reticent. The King had previously discussed the matter with OX, hoping to get the little robot’s insight. He wondered if the compy felt sorry for the Klikiss machine... or if OX harbored suspicions of his own.

Peter could not tell exactly when Jorax reached permanent deactivation—in his mind, he refused to think the word “death”—but the scarlet optical sensors gradually dimmed as power bled away. Lubricants and sensor patches were pulled out one component at a time. Finally, with much discussion and reluctance, the scientists bent over together, worked with their tools, and removed Jorax’s flattened angular head. The optical sensors went completely dim, like dried smears of blood.

The two Klikiss observers stood motionless, collating what they had learned. Jorax’s components lay cataloged and distributed around the operating theater. Imagers had captured every instant of the procedure from every angle. The big black robot looked like nothing more than twisted debris scattered after a train wreck.

Peter wondered how the alien robots had decided that this information was worth the cost of one of their own, and why Jorax himself had volunteered for deactivation. What could the Klikiss robots gain by it? Did they really want to give the human race new tools and weapons against the hydrogues? Or would they now use this as a bargaining chip to demand an unconscionable favor from the Terran Hanseatic League?

OX, still beside Peter’s observation chair, was oddly quiet and contemplative.

Peter turned grim-faced to his two specialists and said privately, “Milk this for every possible advantage. We still don’t know what it’s going to cost us in the long run.”

“We’ll get all of the Hansa’s best people on it,” Palawu said.

Lars Rurik Swendsen said, “I can’t wait to use this information. It’s like King Tut’s tomb or the lost city of Quivera !”

Peter took a deep breath. “Or Pandora’s box.”

34



PRIME DESIGNATE JORA’H

Though he rode with Adar Kori’nh in the warliner bound for Hyrillka, Prime Designate Jora’h did not reveal his troubled thoughts. He had to pretend that this errand to retrieve his son Thor’h was simply a political one. No one could be allowed to suspect that the showpiece expedition had anything to do with the failing health of the Mage-Imperator. No one else could read the *thismor* draw conclusions from it,

like his father could.

“My troops have performed here many times,” Kori’nh said, pensively staring into the warliner’s viewscreen. On the edge of the Horizon Cluster, space itself seemed too full of stars. “The Hyrillka Designate loves his pageants, and I’m sure he will be disappointed that I’ve brought only a septa.”

Jora’h forced himself to smile. “Even a son of the Mage-Imperator doesn’t get everything he wants. My brother should know that.” *And Thor’h as well.*

The Adar lowered his voice. “If I may say so, Prime Designate, it is good that you are bringing your son back to Ildira. He has had a fine time here, but I believe he holds a skewed, and soft, impression of our Empire. The weight of responsibility has not yet touched him. Yet, like you, he is destined to serve as Prime Designate and then Mage-Imperator—though I hope that day is far in the future.”

Jora’h felt cold inside. “Thor’h will serve when called upon. That is how he has been taught. That is why he was born.”

By unwavering tradition, the next Prime Designate had to be a purebred noble rather than a hybrid military officer, like Jora’h’s true firstborn son. Zan’nh had performed well in the Solar Navy, rising in rank because of his genuine innovation and skill. Thor’h, however, had never demonstrated any penchant for leadership or skill in diplomacy... but he was still young.

Hyrillka resided in a double-star system, one of many binaries and trinaries inside the glittering tiara of the Horizon Cluster. The large blue-white primary lit the sky during Hyrillka’s long days, while the orange secondary drove back the night enough that Ildirans need never fear the dark. Drawn by the planet’s temperate weather and verdant beauty, Ildirans had developed Hyrillka into an opulent, peaceful world.

Kori’nh brought his seven warliners down into the plaza spaceport, an area paved with hexagonal heat tiles arranged in a complex mosaic so that descending ships could see Hyrillka’s beauty. Cheering crowds waved reflectorized pennants to welcome the septa.

Observing from the command nucleus, Jora’h frowned down at the spectacle. “I told Rusa’h this was an unofficial visit. I asked him not to draw attention to my arrival.”

Kori’nh looked over at him with a wry smile. “You are the Prime Designate coming to take your son away. How could the Hyrillka Designate resist such an opportunity?”

On the ground, Designate Rusa’h sent a parade of colorfully robed escorts, rememberers, dancers, and singers to receive the visitors. Side by side, Jora’h and the Adar disembarked, while the people continued to cheer. The Prime Designate’s gold-chain hair flickered about his head like a corona, and his star-sapphire eyes caught the light of Hyrillka’s bright blue-white sun.

Kori’nh ordered his trained honor guard to march down the ramps in a precise clockwork formation. The stream of soldiers struggled to maintain order as they encountered the swirling performers on the landing grid.

Trying to keep the stern tone out of his voice, Jora’h greeted his brother. “This unexpectedly fine reception was unnecessary, Rusa’h.”

The Hyrillka Designate noticed no criticism in the Prime Designate’s tone. “This is just the beginning!” He sported a bright smile and a vapid expression on his chubby face. With casual familiarity, he clapped

his brother's shoulder. "I cannot begin to list the banquets we have prepared, the presentations, and the performances. We have a historian who rivals even Vao'sh back at the Prism Palace. I have installed a new gallery of dancing fountains. You will be amazed."

He leaned closer. "And I have personally inspected my favorite pleasure mates to determine which ones are the most fertile. Hyrillka would be honored to have another of the Prime Designate's bloodline among our populace."

The ache in Jora'h's heart from the knowledge of his father's weakening medical condition diminished his joy and dampened all desire for entertainment. "You do too much for me, brother. We will make appropriate appearances, and perhaps Adar Kori'nh can stage a brief display of his septa's prowess." Jora'h fixed his eyes on his own son—how young the boy looked!—who waited behind the Hyrillka Designate, as if intimidated. "But for now Thor'h and I have important business."

The young man bowed, though it was more like a flinch. "My uncle told me, Father."

Rusa'h chuckled. "Ah, the difficulties of being the Prime Designate. I am glad that I wasn't the firstborn!"

Thor'h had an intense, fidgety demeanor. His long hair was intricately coiffed, adorned with tiny gems like the residue of a dewy breath. Colorful clothes hung loosely on his shoulders, and Jora'h wondered just how skeletal his son was. It seemed a strange contrast to Rusa'h's pudginess. Both men ate well and relaxed often, but Thor'h probably indulged in shiing and other pleasure drugs, while the Designate simply preferred to eat and sleep. Hyrillka was particularly known for the production of shiing, a stimulant distilled from the milky bloodsap of nialia plantmoths.

Was I like this when I was young? Jora'h wondered.

As an odd side effect of shiing, his son's image in the *thetism* was muddied. Although the Prime Designate could sense Thor'h if he concentrated, right now the thoughts were unclear, and Jora'h was left to interpret only the expressions he could read with his eyes.

How could this boy ever become a Mage-Imperator? *For that matter, how can I?*

Later, the Hyrillka Designate dragged them through hours of performances, with an unending banquet served by lovely women of exotic kiths, all of whom flashed inviting eyes at Jora'h. Their names were added to a list Rusa'h had compiled, and the Prime Designate knew he would have to service some of them.

Three placid-looking lens kithmen sat in their priests' robes, ready to serve their purpose and talk about the Lightsource and interpret hints from the *thetism*. From their docile expressions, apparently no one on Hyrillka had had problems for some time. *If only they knew what is about to happen in the Empire.*

The open architecture of Hyrillka's citadel palace featured tall columns and open-roofed courtyards filled with gardens and huge scarlet flowers. In the temperate weather, little shelter was required, and rain-repellent fields kept the interiors dry during rainstorms. The structure looked like an ancient temple being swallowed by jungle undergrowth.

Through an odd botanical quirk, Hyrillka's native vegetation had shied away from woody stems and tall trees, tending instead toward groundcovers and long, flexible vines that draped over the uneven terrain. The hanging gardens of Hyrillka were counted among the wonders of the Empire—tangled masses that

drooped over cliffsides, sprouting enormous blossoms that drank waterfall mists. Pollinating four-winged birds feasted on berries and flitted from one widemouthed trumpet flower to another.

In the banquet courtyard, Jora'h leaned back, breathing in the heady perfumes of foliage and the delicious aromas of culinary items. Occasionally, he caught himself frowning distractedly and tried not to let anyone notice his mood. As the blue-white sun set and the orange secondary rose, Adar Kori'nh staged a performance with his streamers and two warliners. On the ground, geometrical patterns of blazers were lit in all the fields and streets to add to the festive brightness.

Jora'h used the event as an excuse to take Thor'h aside, but the young man seemed resistant. "I want to watch the aerial show, Father."

"You have seen them before. We need a moment in private so I can explain why I have come."

"I already know. You're going to make me leave Hyrillka and take me back to live in the Prism Palace."

"Yes, but you do not know *why*."

Jora'h sat on a smooth bench in a flower-framed alcove, but Thor'h remained at a distance, restless and pacing and full of nervous energy. "But I like it here on Hyrillka, Father. I want to stay. The Designate and I get along well together."

"Circumstances have changed. You no longer have that option, and I have no choice but to take you back with me."

"Of course you have a choice." Thor'h spun around, his perfectly arranged hair twitching. The young man's narrow face seemed predatory. "You're the Prime Designate. You can have anything you want. You have only to command it."

Saddened, Jora'h said, "I have learned recently that sometimes my options are as limited as those of the poorest attender kith."

Thor'h laced his thin fingers together, then unlaced them and spread his hands about as if looking for something to hold or eat. He seemed about to argue again, but his father stopped him. "The Mage-Imperator is *dying*, Thor'h. Very soon, I will take his place—and you will be the Prime Designate."

Thor'h stopped, his eyes growing wide. "Not yet. I'm not ready."

"Neither am I, but the hydrogues are abroad, the Empire is in trouble, and none of us can afford a pampered life anymore. For years, you have reaped the advantages of your birth. Now you must face your obligations."

Thor'h snapped, "What if I don't want to?"

"Then I will kill you myself." The angry retort was out of Jora'h's mouth before he could stop it. "And elevate your brother Zan'nh to the position, even if he isn't of full noble blood. The Empire cannot tolerate a Prime Designate as stupid as you seem to be."

Thor'h looked appalled, but Jora'h could not take back the words. He tried to be conciliatory. "We must think beyond ourselves—both of us."



TASIA TAMBLYN

Returning to the main EDF base on Mars, Admiral Willis's siege fleet received full military honors and a Remora escort. They were heady with success—an unusual feeling for them, after so many setbacks against the hydrogues.

The homebound soldiers recorded high-spirited greetings for their families and loved ones. While tankers unloaded the ekti stockpiles confiscated from the stubborn Yrekan colonists, scattered interviews played across the media networks on Earth. The “Yreka Insurrection” had been put down with minimal casualties or collateral damage.

Tasia Tamblyn watched the reports, not surprised that the accounts were grossly distorted. The lowly colonists had kept only a fraction of the stardrive fuel that the commentaries implied, but General Lanyan needed to justify the siege.

She fumed at the injustice, knowing full well what a lie it was. The damage had been unnecessary. But then, this was the Big Goose, after all...

As she returned to her barracks, her compy, EA, attended to her unpacking. The small robot, only half as tall as Tasia, bustled about doing pre-programmed tasks while keeping her master company.

Back at the water mines on Plumas, Tasia and EA had often found places to amuse themselves deep in the grottoes beneath the ice sheets. Now Tasia wondered if she would ever go back home. Her stint with the Eddies should have been over already, but she had received a mandatory extension due to the hydrogue war. The Eddies could not afford to lose trained personnel, now that naïve hopes of a quick victory had faded. The ranks would have vanished like dissipating smoke as soon as the new recruits realized that a military career was not all heroic fun.

“Did you have an enjoyable time at Yreka, Tasia?” EA asked while removing rumpled garments from her master's duffel.

“No, I did not, EA.”

“I am sorry to hear that, Tasia.”

In a way, the scrappy Yrekans reminded her of Roamer clans, independent people who had built their homes without much help from the Hansa. “I grew up thinking the Goose only had a grudge against Roamers, but on Yreka I saw that they're just as arrogant toward their own colonists.”

“Perhaps the Hanseatic League does not appreciate those who refuse to conform.”

She pursed her lips. “I think you're on to something there, EA.”

“Thank you, Tasia.”

In the mess hall, she and Robb sat together, as usual. They barely admitted that they were a couple, though everyone else in the division could see what was going on and politely pretended not to notice. The dark-skinned young man sat across from her, talking about the various maneuvers he intended to put his Remora wings through, avoiding any discussion of the siege, because he knew how much it still disturbed Tasia.

She got them each coffee from a dispenser while he carried trays of processed, nutritionally balanced glop—beef flavored, tonight. Before Tasia took her first bite, the mess hall’s wallscreen shimmered into an image of King Peter praising the siege force for “restoring vitally needed ekto to the Hanseatic League.” The King also issued a stern, though somehow lackluster, warning to other colonies, as if he were reading from a script. “All humans must cooperate to see us through this struggle. Colonies cannot think only of themselves instead of the greater needs of humanity.”

“Shizz, Brindle,” Tasia mumbled from the corner of her mouth, “with all that stardrive fuel we acquired, you think everybody’ll get a huge boost in the next paycheck?”

He frowned at her sarcasm. “All colonies received the same rationing order, Tasia. We weren’t playing favorites or picking scapegoats. Were we supposed to just let the Yrekans thumb their noses at us?”

Her eyes flashed. “But all colonies didn’t start with equal resources. Not everyone’s in a position to survive the same austerity measures. If a colony is already on the thinnest of shoestrings, it can’t afford to start cutting threads. That’s just dumb.”

She sipped her bitter coffee, watching King Peter finish the brief speech. Tasia could only remember the despairing expression on the Yrekan Grand Governor’s face. “Roamers would have stuck together, helped each other out in tight times.”

“There’s always more than one point of view.” Robb laid a hand across her forearm, just to let her know what he was thinking. “Just seems like you see things only from a Roamer’s perspective. I don’t want to argue with you. Hey, I feel sorry for the Yrekans, too.”

“But you can’t do anything about it,” she said.

“No, and neither can you.”

Tasia knew he was right, and she went back to her quarters to have a long scrub with cool solvent sponges. She just hoped their next assignment would let her face a real enemy for a change.

36



GENERAL KURT LANYAN

Frequent reports of prowling hydrogues made anxiety run high in the Earth Defense Forces. From the Mars command base, General Lanyan dispatched supplementary patrols throughout all ten grids, though no one believed that even well-armed scout fleets could defend themselves against an outright warglobe attack.

The General became restless as he reviewed reports from the recon teams, constantly reminded of the growing list of conscripted pilots who simply “disappeared” on assignments. He was convinced they were all deserters, cowards... scum.

“Plenty of hazards in space, General,” said Commander Patrick Fitzpatrick. “Hydrogues, asteroids, radiation storms. Ships could easily be lost without a trace.” He had been temporarily transferred from the Grid 7 fleet after returning from Yreka and now served directly under Lanyan at the Mars EDF headquarters. Because of Fitzpatrick’s family clout, the General had already made up his mind to groom the kid for a prominent position, probably close to home.

“Yes, I’m sure the AWOL pilots know all about the ‘hazards of space.’ We can’t waste time looking for them, though I’d like to grab one by the scruff of his neck and make an example.” Lanyan shoved his documents aside, switched off his screens, and stood. “I feel like a eunuch in a military uniform. We’ve got no weapons against the drogue bastards, and the Hansa is an old lady gasping her final breaths. We haven’t made any progress in five years.” He pounded a meaty fist on his desk.

Fitzpatrick commiserated, but held his silence. Given his blue-blood heritage, the kid had expected to advance his military career with a few helpful nudges and memos directed to the appropriate commanding officers. Without a doubt, he had been promoted faster than his skill warranted, but he had met the challenges well enough.

In wartime, not even the richest, most pampered officer candidate received a useless assignment. Fitzpatrick wanted to appear in publicity photos, standing tall in his fine uniform so that his family could reap the political benefits of their son’s bravery, “an upstanding example of civic duty in this time of crisis.” And the General could take advantage of that, as long as Fitzpatrick didn’t do anything embarrassing.

“Actually, I have a suggestion, sir.”

“If you can tell me how to win this war, Commander, I’ll promote you on the spot to the rank of Brigadier General.”

Fitzpatrick gave a thin smile. “Maybe it won’t win the war, General, but it may help to alleviate your restlessness. Why not command one of the scout fleets yourself? Go out for a month on recon, keep your eyes open. Justify it by saying you need firsthand intelligence about what’s happening out there.” His grin widened. “The Hansa can announce that the safety of its citizens takes such high priority that the General of the EDF himself is going to upgrade the security procedures and assess the enemy threat.”

“Good political mileage,” Lanyan said.

Fitzpatrick gestured toward the cluttered desk. “This isn’t for you, sir. Leave the bureaucratic duties to Admiral Stromo. He’s been no good as a line officer since the defeat at Jupiter.”

“Don’t disrespect your superior officers, Commander.”

The young man lowered his voice, but he was obviously not accustomed to being subordinate to anyone. “We’re alone in your office, General, and you know perfectly well that I’m telling the truth.”

“Yes I do, dammit.” Lanyan looked with disgust at all the memos waiting to be signed. He hadn’t faced an important decision in six months. It would be a pleasure to delegate them all to “Stay-at-Home” Stromo. “Alright, I’ll take your advice, Fitzpatrick. Arrange for me to lead the next scout wing due to be

dispatched.”

“That would be in Grid 3, sir.”

“Good enough. I’ll let Admiral Stromo take care of this crap.” He smiled without humor. “Maybe it’ll be enough of a punishment to snap him out of his funk.”

After two weeks on patrol cruising around the systems of Grid 3, General Lanyan realized that it felt no better to wander around in empty space doing nothing than to sit at a desk on Mars doing nothing.

The ekti shortages had reduced space traffic to the barest trickle, and the scout fleet encountered no Hansa ships or Ildiran vessels. On the bridge of his borrowed Juggernaut, Lanyan let out a long sigh. “Looks like the Spiral Arm has closed down for the season.”

Beside him, Fitzpatrick nodded. “Normal trade is pretty much at a standstill. The colonies are left bare-assed in a cold wind.”

Lanyan had recently heard a proposal to build generation ships again, huge, slow vessels that used conventional fuels, even though they would take a century to fly between colonies. To him, that smacked of a desperation he was not yet willing to admit. *Admittings* such a thing would mean accepting the fact that this conflict would never be won, that humans—or Ildirans—would never again travel swiftly across the Spiral Arm. The very idea was intolerable, an affront to the spirit of progress and exploration.

No, they needed to fight until they kicked those damned hydrogues back where they belonged.

“General, we’re detecting stardrive emissions. Ship ahead, barely within range. Should we divert course to intercept?”

“One of ours or an Ildiran vessel?” Lanyan said.

“Hard to tell from this range, sir. Doesn’t match any standard configuration.”

He sank his square chin onto his knuckles. Fitzpatrick leaned closer. “We’ve got nothing else to do, General. Maybe that captain can tell us something. We could use the intel.”

It was the rationale the General wanted to hear. “All right. Maybe he’s even one of our deserters. Let’s be sociable.”

The Juggernaut moved to intercept the lone ship in the middle of nowhere. The strange vessel looked like nothing more than a habitation pod and a huge bank of engines mounted atop a framework of girders that enclosed cargo spheres.

“Never seen a ship like that,” Lanyan said.

“It’s a Roacher ship,” Fitzpatrick said. “They steal parts and put the pieces together. I don’t know how they keep those garbage scows running.”

The unknown captain at first attempted to elude them, but after Lanyan launched Remoras to head off and surround the ship, the captain stood down.

The bearded Roamer's image came on the screen. His patchwork uniform had embroidery so garish that it offended Lanyan's trained military eye. "My name is Raven Kamarov, piloting a Roamer cargo vessel. Why have you stopped me in free interplanetary space? I've got a shipment to deliver."

Lanyan's nostrils flared. "Don't you appreciate our protection, Captain Kamarov? There are hydrogues abroad."

The other captain scowled. "We're well aware of the hydrogues. Roamers have lost ten times more people than anybody else."

"My heart bleeds for him," Fitzpatrick said under his breath.

"Please state your cargo, Captain," Lanyan said.

"Delivering much-needed supplies to Roamer outposts and Hansa colonies. You can check your own database, General. My commerce record is clear."

The Juggernaut's science officer finished his scans and turned to the General. "He's hauling ekti, sir. Those cargo tanks are full to the gills."

"Ekti!" Fitzpatrick said. "How much?"

The science officer rattled off the amount, and Lanyan put it into terms he could grasp. "So... that's more than we recovered from Yreka—enough to take care of this entire recon patrol and five others." Lanyan met the eyes of his protégé. Fitzpatrick nodded.

"Captain Kamarov, you are aware that the Earth Defense Forces have a priority standing order with your people for all ekti shipments, in any amount?"

"As I said, General," Kamarov replied, his face stony, "we are in free interstellar space here, and the Hansa can't impose its laws on Roamer clans. We are not signatories to your Charter. You have no right to waylay me. Roamers already provide the EDT with the majority of the ekti we harvest, but we have our own needs."

"Big surprise," Fitzpatrick muttered. "Roachers hoarding fuel for themselves." Then he raised his voice into the comm pickup. "Where did you get all this ekti?"

"Hydrogen is the most plentiful element in the universe, you know."

"Captain Kamarov, I would think that providing vital supplies to the military that protects all human beings, including Roamer clans, would be your highest priority," Lanyan said. "We will be happy to relieve you of your cargo and save you the fuel necessary for your trip to Earth." He had always been annoyed at the space gypsies' blatant independence. It was time Roamers learned to play well with others.

Despite Kamarov's indignant protests, the General dispatched a Remora squadron to seize and board the cargo ship, from which they detached the heavy tanks filled with ekti. From the Juggernaut's bridge, he watched the bearded captain swearing at them; he muted the sound. The fast Remoras brought the valuable ekti cargo back to the big battleship, where it was stowed.

Preparing to depart, Lanyan opened the channel again, picking up Kamarov's rant in midsentence. "... is piracy, outright piracy. I expect to be compensated for my load! Many Roamers died on blitzkrieg raids to obtain that ekki."

"It's a war, Captain," Lanyan said blandly. "People die for all sorts of reasons."

Fitzpatrick spoke a quiet, cold warning in the General's ear. "The Roachers might retaliate for this action, sir. What if they cut us off entirely? They don't deliver much ekki anymore, but they *are* our only suppliers."

"You're right, Commander Fitzpatrick. Knowledge of this incident could cause trouble."

"On the other hand, the episode becomes a nonissue if Kamarov never reports to other Roachers. Your orders, General?"

He sat back in his chair, knowing the decision was clear, and also knowing he was crossing a line. He looked at Fitzpatrick, the eager young officer ready to take charge... and, if necessary, to take the blame. Lanyan decided to keep his own hands clean.

He stood. "I'm going to retire to my quarters. Commander Fitzpatrick, you have the bridge for now... and I think you understand what needs to happen here. As we discussed earlier, there are plenty of hazards in space."

"Yes, sir!"

Lanyan left the bridge deck. He would issue appropriate statements to the crew later.

Fitzpatrick didn't even wait for the General to reach his quarters before ordering the Juggernaut to open fire on the Roamer cargo ship.

37



CESCA PERONI

At the farthest fringes of the Osquivel system, high above the planetary orbits, light from the sun was only slightly brighter than the shine from distant stars. Roamer cometary-extraction teams had strung together reflectors, solar mirrors, and condensers, as well as nuclear-powered furnaces. The lights of each substation reflected from scattered ice mountains and leftover gravel from the condensation of the solar system.

Piloting a small transport vehicle, Del Kellum ferried Cesca up high above the impressive ring shipyards. He talked without rest, proud of the brash operations he had established in the distant cometary halo.

"We built those monstrous reactor furnaces in the Osquivel rings and kicked them way above the ecliptic. We chose a gravitationally stable place as a corral for the comets. Impelling engines knock them out of their orbits and tote them here for processing."

“Playing billiards with frozen mountains,” Cesca said.

Kellum laughed as he negotiated the diffuse blizzard of snow fragments. “We don’t usually bother with comet chips that are only *mountain* size!”

The production yard held a swarm of small ships and giant factories. Workers set charges on the larger comets to fracture them into significant chunks, which were then coated with self-heating furnace films that cooked the ices down into constituent gases. Siphons drew off the resulting steam.

“See? Who needs skymines?” Kellum said with forced optimism. “This isn’t just a show-off exercise. It really works.”

“You certainly rose to my challenge, Del Kellum, but don’t paint too rosy a picture for me,” Cesca said. “I’ve seen the numbers. It’s a long way from being efficient enough.”

“By damn, we don’t have any other choice. Any clan leader who can’t think outside the box should roll over and open his faceplate to the vacuum.” He shook his head. “With improved *ekti* reactors, we can meet our minimal requirements. *Shizz*, there might even be some left over to sell to the Big Goose. Otherwise, they’ll think we’re cheating them.”

Cesca rolled her eyes. “They think we’re cheating them no matter what. It’s the way their minds work.”

Though Roamers had always been outcasts, they had once carved a respectable niche for themselves by supplying *ekti*. Now, without that resource, she feared that one day desperate Roamers would have no choice but to fall back into the greater community of the Hansa. They might have to sign the Charter, attach themselves to the government they had struggled for so long to escape.

Or the desperate Hansa would hunt them down.

She didn’t like to be faced with a choice between survival and freedom.

But Cesca could think of nowhere to turn for aid. Who else was in their position? Roamers had worked many years for the Ildirans on leased skymines, but they had finally earned their independence. If they had no *ekti* to offer, the Mage-Imperator would have no use for the Roamers. Clan gatherings discussed the possibilities of alliances with weaker outlying Hansa colonies or with Theroc.

She lived each day now with a sick feeling of overwhelming responsibility, but she couldn’t ask the Roamer engineers and inventors to work any harder. They had already stretched their capabilities to the breaking point.

Outside, cometary rubble was fed into a moon-size chamber where it was flash-heated into volatile elements. Atomic separators bled off the hydrogen molecules, and cometary sludge drained out from reclamation ducts. The impurities held numerous heavy elements that were recycled for other purposes.

Cesca studied the activity as Kellum continued to fly her on a slow tour. It was her ostensible reason for being here, though she would rather have been down in the ring shipyards with Jess as he looked over the nebula skimmers. She wondered when they could arrange another romantic encounter...

Del Kellum docked to the largest comet evaporator chamber. The huge thin-walled structure rose up in black silhouette, eclipsing the sparkling lights of the industrial encampment. “We like to call this the cometary Hilton. Finest place this side of the Kuiper Belt.”

Cesca smiled. “As the Speaker for all clans, I am naturally accustomed to such... luxury.”

The bright lounge and rec room had standard plate-metal walls. Kellum proudly showed her his tank of sleek black-and-silver angelfish. “They breed well enough, even out here. I have similar tanks in many of my facilities, just a little reminder of home.”

“Fish in space? Couldn’t you take up gardening instead?”

“Not the same.” He slid a cup of clear liquid across the table. “Here, made from pure cometary water. First time it’s been processed since the beginning of the solar system. Every other drink you’ve had has been recycled through human bodies and reclamation systems a thousand times over. This is virgin water—hydrogen and oxygen, nothing else. Upscale markets consider it a real treat.”

Cesca looked down at the cup. “Does it taste any different?”

He shrugged. “Not to me.”

A worker hurried in carrying a transcribed message. “Speaker Peroni! This just came up from a transport vessel at the ring shipyards.” Seeing the earnest expression on the young man’s face, Kellum waved him over.

She took the message, hoping it was some word from Jess, but dreading it might be some emergency. The path of the transmission was long and convoluted, sent out in identical copies through dozens of passing traders. One Roamer had brought it to Rendezvous; then someone else had tracked her down at Osquivel.

“Anyone who’s willing to send a message through that many channels either has very bad news or wants to find you in the worst possible way,” Kellum said.

The worst possible way.

Reynald of Theroc had sent a carefully worded proposal. A marriage proposal.

He was about to take on the role as his world’s Father and needed a strong woman beside him. He listed logical and obvious reasons why an alliance between Therons and Roamers would strengthen their independence from the Hansa; it would allow them to share resources and capabilities, and thus stand firm against any EDF attempts at bullying. The recent siege at the Yreka colony demonstrated the Hansa’s ruthlessness. There was no guarantee that Theroc, or the Roamers, would not become the next targets.

“The EDF can’t fight the hydrogues, so they look for other victories, even if it means stepping on their own people. With Theron green priests and Roamer ekti production, we could form a formidable union. Think about it. I’m sure it’s a good idea.” Cesca could imagine Reynald smiling shyly at her. “Besides, you and I would be a good match.”

She read the message again, her heart torn. She saw a curious Del Kellum trying to catch glimpses of the note, but she quickly folded it. “I need to think about this, Del. We’ll have to finish our tour later.”

She and Jess Tamblyn had nearly reached the date when they had planned to announce their marriage. She loved Jess so much, and she had waited so long. Cesca deserved this modest share of happiness.

But what if Reynald was right?

She knew what Speaker Okiah would say. How could Cesca let her own emotions take precedence over the future of all Roamer clans? The Therons would indeed be a powerful—and palatable—ally, far more acceptable than either the Big Goose or the Ildiran Empire.

And yet...

38



ADAR KORI'NH

Under orange skies lit by Hyrillka's secondary sun, Adar Kori'nh finished his complex skyparade maneuvers with two active warliners. The remaining five battleships were grounded for servicing and restocking at the plaza spaceport so that the septa would be ready to return to Ildira within a day. Prime Designate Jora'h did not intend to stay here for long.

After the routine performance, Kori'nh flew his flagship back over the mosaic landing field. While the big ornate vessel hovered above the crowds, finlike solar sails glittering, his sensor technicians performed a thorough status check of all systems.

Thus, they were the first to discover the hydrogue warglobe hurtling toward Hyrillka.

“Sound alarms!” Kori'nh said. With a sick dread in his chest, he realized that most of his warliner crews would be scattered throughout the city on temporary recreational leave. “Summon all personnel back to our other five warliners, but don't wait for everyone. Launch the vessels as soon as they have adequate crew.”

Kori'nh ordered his two active battleships from the skyparade to take up guardian positions above the Designate's citadel palace. Fast scouts launched out to pace and track the incoming warglobe.

The performance streamers disengaged their fluttery display ribbons and banners, letting them drop toward the ground. Each small ship carried a standard complement of weapons, but they had not been loaded with enough rounds for a battle, especially not against hydrogues.

Nevertheless, they would make do.

Within minutes, the first of the big grounded warliners lifted off, filling the Adar with pride at its captain's efficiency in assembling a skeleton crew. Off-duty Solar Navy personnel raced back through the city and flooded aboard their waiting battleships, hurrying to their assigned stations.

Around the vine-covered citadel palace, courtiers sensed the urgency of the situation, but still did not understand what was going on. The three robed lens kithmen looked as confused as the people turning to them for explanations. The Hyrillka Designate drew his beloved pleasure mates close to him, reassuring, “I will protect you, I promise.”

Then, when the diamond-hulled alien sphere dropped toward the city, the people reacted with sudden terror. Blue lightning crackled from the warglobe's pyramidal protrusions. The hydrogue craft sent no message, transmitted no warning or ultimatum. The deep-core aliens simply began laying waste to the planet.

Kori'nh felt sick as he watched from the command nucleus of his warliner. Each blast ripped up the ground, the structures, anything in the way. The lovely preserves, the exquisite hanging gardens, the canals lined with nialias—all vanished in cold sapphire bolts of power.

Remembering how badly he had been beaten the last time at Qronha 3, the Adar growled with resolve. "We did not ask for these enemies, but we will not stand by and do nothing."

On the mosaic landing grid, the second grounded warliner was powering up. Finally, he had four Solar Navy warliners aloft. "All ships surround the hydrogue and open fire with projectiles, explosives, energy surges—anything you have. Perhaps today we will earn a place in the *Saga*."

The first warliner lunged forward, bolder than the others. Its silvery fins and banners looked like sharp plumage. Its weapons ports emitted an eye-numbing strobe of repeated bursts that pounded the diamond shell. Although Kori'nh guided his own vessel close enough to attack from the opposite side, the dual bombardment resulted in only smeared scorch marks on the warglobe's hull.

The hydrogue marauder did not seem to notice. Its blue lightning continued to rip up irrigation canals and devastate fields of waving nialias; some of the gray-white plantmoths broke from their stems and fluttered off. Steam and smoke snaked into the air.

Thrumming ominously overhead, the warglobe circled and came in for a second attack. Another sequence of crackling energy discharges vaporized the fringes of the main city.

At last, another of the grounded warliners powered up its engines and lumbered into the sky from the mosaic landing field, weapons ports already open and charged. But the ornate battleship had barely lifted from the spaceport tiles before the warglobe passed overhead. The Ildiran ship spat out defensive projectiles that struck as ineffectively as gnats against a marmoth's thick hide.

As if noticing the Solar Navy for the first time, the hydrogue struck back with lightning that ripped the hapless warliner apart even as it took off. Its hull breached, its fuel cells exploding, the great hulk tumbled back to the ground, its peacocklike solar fins fluttering. The dying vessel crashed into one of the two remaining warliners still preparing for emergency launch. Alarms sounded, shouts and screams cut off in a screech of static—then both vessels erupted in huge explosions.

Kori'nh's crew gasped in dismay and reeled from the resultant shock waves in the *thism*, but he spoke a hard, sharp command. "Stations! I need every soldier's full attention on this battle!" *I must not allow another failure! I am the supreme commander of the Solar Navy, protector of the Ildiran Empire—*

Before the final grounded warliner could move, the ruthless hydrogue closed in. Pyramidal spikes opened fire and destroyed that giant vessel as well. Thick pillars of greasy black smoke spewed from the wreckage in the spaceport as buildings caught the spreading blaze from ignited fuel cells.

"Full weapon bombardment! Kinetic missiles and cutting beams!" Kori'nh ordered. His captains needed no encouragement.

Even as the Solar Navy blasts pounded the lone diamond sphere, the warglobe ripped away at Hyrillka's lush vine forests, withering flowers and fields and gardens. Blue lightning toppled ornate buildings, vaporized utility structures, knocked down crystalline towers. The Solar Navy defenders could do little to stop the rampage, but Kori'nh was duty-bound to try.

The Hyrillka Designate squawked over the communications channel, "Adar Kori'nh, you must evacuate our entire population immediately! We have no shelter against this attack."

"Designate, there aren't enough ships, and there isn't enough time. We have only four warliners left, and I cannot disengage them from the battle."

The hydrogue sphere launched a sidelong volley that scraped one of the four warliners but caused only moderate damage. The battleship limped away to repair its systems, while the remaining three continued to hammer ineffectually at the enemy.

"But, Adar, you have to save them!" The Designate sounded incredulous, as if unable to believe the Solar Navy could be anything but invincible. Kori'nh thought Rusa'h had watched too many military pageants.

He realized what he must do. "I am sending a rescue shuttle down to your citadel, Designate. I will take you to safety, along with the Prime Designate and his son. That is my highest priority."

"You can't leave all my people to die," the Designate wailed. "My performers, my advisers... my beautiful pleasure mates!"

"I cannot save them." The Adar's heart wrenched as he gave orders for his personal warliner to withdraw from the engagement. He snapped to one of his crewmen, "Dispatch a personnel transport, right now! Cram as many people aboard it as possible, but make sure you get the Designates." The soldier raced off to the flight deck. "The rest of you—"

"Adar, look!" interrupted one of the tactical technicians, his voice cracking with strain.

Kori'nh glanced into the ruddy skies to see a second warglobe descending toward the inhabited surface. Its energy weapons began to crackle without mercy as it joined the onslaught of the first alien ship.

39



RLINDA KETT

The voyage to Rheindic Co was lonely and dull, even though Rlinda had a passenger. The tall, reticent black man was less of a companion than a void of silence.

As soon as they had lifted off from Crenna, Davlin Lotze was ready to bury himself in his work. "I assume Chairman Wenceslas provided dossiers and briefing materials?"

She shrugged her broad shoulders. "He loaded files into my computer before I left. Knock yourself

out.” She waved him toward a workscreen and he immediately began scanning the information. “I haven’t checked to see if the files are passworded.”

Lotze regarded her with hard mahogany eyes. “Yes you have.”

Rlinda didn’t know whether to be offended or amused that he saw through her so easily. “Well, I do have a right to know what’s aboard my ship, Mr. Lotze—including information.”

The quiet spy smiled as he scanned the screen. “All the files are public domain anyway.”

“Are you just a bad conversationalist, or do you fall all the way into the ‘antisocial’ category?”

“The Crenna settlers liked me well enough.” Lotze looked up from his screen, pausing the playback of summaries and reports. “I have no objection to your presence, but this assignment requires my full attention right now.”

Lotze kept to himself for the next several hours, poring over the records and reports, memorizing the Colicoses’ Rheindic Co updates, as well as earlier work on Llaro, Pym, and Corribus. When he finally took a brief break to eat, Rlinda crossed her arms over her chest. “You suspect foul play in their disappearance?”

“At the moment, we aren’t even sure they disappeared. We know only that contact was cut off.”

“Hmmm, could be someone retaliating against them for discovering the Klikiss Torch? When you get right down to it, that was the start of this hydrogue mess. Plenty of people are pissed off.”

“And so are the hydrogues. We shall see what we can find once we arrive.”

As the golden tan planet grew larger in the viewscreen, Rlinda used the ship’s intercom to call Lotze from his cabin. There wasn’t room for the tall man to sit in the cockpit, but he watched the approach to Rheindic Co as if comparing these details with the archive records.

Without asking her permission, Lotze leaned over the control panels and activated the ship’s general scanners. “I know the approximate location of the team’s base camp.” He called up a continental image, centering in at the edge of dawn so that he spotted canyons in the long shadows of an early desert morning. “Try there. Do an overflight.”

“Maybe they’ll run out and flag us down. That’d save plenty of time.”

He looked at her skeptically. “It’s been five years. Unless they found some other food source, the three human members of the expedition would not have had sufficient materials to last this long.”

Rlinda frowned as she cruised down through the bumpy atmosphere. “If there’s no chance of finding anyone alive, isn’t this a pointless mission?”

He frowned. “No mission is pointless if you understand the objective. I have been instructed to find answers, not survivors.”

The *Curiosity* discovered the remains of the Colicos camp close to a large cluster of empty Klikiss ruins.

The tents and equipment had been set up on an open rise high enough above the cracked arroyos to be safe from flash floods. Rlinda easily found a place to land on the barren ground.

The two emerged into hot, brittle air. Lotze carried a case in one hand and a satchel in the other, ready to get to work.

The desert colors were harsh, but with a purity that made all edges razor-sharp and clear. The rugged strata provided a stark contrast to the lush greens of other planets Rlinda had visited. The majestic mountains were still purple with dawn shadows. “Nice place to set up a resort—maybe a spa, a golf course.”

A dust devil skittered in front of them, whipping up flakes of loose debris, and went drunkenly on its way before dissipating.

“What concerns me is that even the telink was cut off,” Lotze said. “We know that the worldtrees perished, perhaps in a fire or storm, thereby terminating the green priest’s ability to communicate.”

Despite five years of desert weather, heat, and dust storms that had left the base camp shabby and windblown, it did not look as if any terrible disaster had occurred there. Lotze entered the main tent and ran an experienced eye over the cots, nonfunctional computers, samples, and notes that had fallen to the ground under the influence of time and gravity.

Meanwhile, Rlinda went to the water pump. The moving parts had frozen up, but she could easily lubricate and fix the system. Judging by Lotze’s obsessive dedication, she guessed that the man intended to remain here until he found his answers. Whether that meant days or months, she couldn’t guess.

Lotze stepped out of the ragged tent, carrying what he had salvaged of the archaeologists’ computers and logbooks. He spread the items on the ground, taking inventory.

Rlinda walked around the perimeter to a smaller tent that must have belonged to the green priest. Behind it, the remains of the worldtree grove were obvious. “You might want to take a look at this!”

The treelings had been planted in rows and no doubt lovingly tended by the green priest—but each one had been uprooted and torn apart as if by a furious vandal. The splintered remains of their thin stalks lay scattered, covered by blowing dust. Time had muted the details, but the scene still conveyed a sense of violence.

Lotze arrived, his eyes absorbing everything without blinking. “This explains why telink contact was cut off.”

Rlinda’s foot bumped against something hard in the soft ground, likedriftwood. She stooped and dug her fingers into the dust to find a twisted object. The outer surface was dry, leathery, desiccated. She scraped the powder away, already knowing in the pit of her stomach what she would find.

The shriveled, mummified face of a hairless, green-skinned man looked up at her. All soft tissue had been leached of moisture by the arid environment; muscles had drawn tight, pulling his expression into a strange grimace. The meat on his body had shrunk and dried to a hard lacquer clinging to his bones. The desert had done its work, both destroying and preserving the body.

“Our green priest,” she said. “Arcas—wasn’t that his name?”

Lotze scanned the remains of the camp. “He does not appear to have been formally buried. Therefore, I doubt he died under normal circumstances.” He paced the area, sifting ideas through his mind. “Perhaps Margaret or Louis experienced some sort of cabin fever?”

Rlinda stood, leaving the exposed green-tinged body in the dry dust. She would find time to move the poor man while Lotze continued his snooping. “You might be a detective, Davlin, but I’m not sure you really understand people. This old couple was married for decades. They spent half their lives isolated on alien digs—people like that can handle solitude.”

“I’m not ready to draw conclusions yet,” Lotze said. “They also had a compy and three Klikiss robots.”

Rlinda nodded toward the cliff city, where the nearest set of alien buildings waited like ancient secrets. “Want to go sightseeing in those ruins?”

Empty Klikiss cities had been found on numerous planets, but fully investigated on few. The sentient race had built hivelike structures in prairie environments or tunneled into canyon walls. The Ildirans had known about the lost race for a long time, but they left the abandoned ghost cities alone.

In its early days, excited by the possibilities of expansion, the Terran Hanseatic League commissioned explorers to investigate worlds the Ildirans had cataloged and then ignored. The Colicoses’ discovery of the Klikiss Torch had reawakened interest in the lost civilization, though the hydrogue war quashed plans for more intensive excavations.

Now Rlinda wandered through the musty tunnels with amazement on her face. The alien buildings were made of a polymerized concrete, some sort of silica-enhanced fiber, perhaps manufactured organically by the insectile Klikiss. Each wall was covered with strange hieroglyphics and incomprehensible equations.

She and Lotze spent a day in the mazes of the ghost metropolis, finding a few items of Colicos equipment, but little more. “The last report of Margaret Colicos described a second, better preserved set of ruins,” Lotze said. “My suspicion is that they spent their days working there.”

Taking general directions, Rlinda flew the *Curiosity* low until they tracked down the canyon and found wrecked scaffolding that had once been mounted onto the cliff wall.

“We need to get inside,” Davlin said.

“Sure. Just find me a parking lot big enough to land this ship.” He didn’t laugh at her joke, so she came up with an innovative solution. “The *Curiosity* is designed to haul cargo, Davlin. Down in the loading bay, I’ve got several levitating pallets. They can handle even the two of us together.”

She landed on the flat mesa above the cliff walls. Then, standing next to Lotze on the high-tech raft, Rlinda steered them with painful slowness toward the edge of the cliff and then down the wall. “This thing is made for moving big crates, not winning any races.”

She maneuvered the levitating pallet inside the cliff overhang and set it down on the rocky floor, where dust had begun to collect in corners. The air smelled dry, and their footsteps made whispery sounds as they entered.

Davlin pointed to lights and wires strung along the corridors, markings on the walls, and tags left behind. “Margaret’s notes indicate that she was quite enthusiastic about what they would find here.”

Rlinda squinted into the shadows, shining her portable light. “Well, maybe something found her instead. I should have brought a weapon. I’ve got two on my ship, I think.”

Lotze focused on his surroundings, all of his senses attuned to picking up clues. Deeper inside the cliff city, they found a scattered, pathetically desperate-looking barricade piled in front of the entrance to a large chamber. It had been knocked down from the outside. Rlinda shone her light into the room and saw machinery and large, flat walls.

And an old man’s body lying on the floor.

Lotze hurried through a break in the barricade, directing his light. Louis Colicos was better preserved than the green priest, enough that Rlinda could tell with a glance that he had died violently. His body was broken and torn, with many deep wounds. Cautious now, she looked behind her, eyes wide, as if expecting something to jump out at any moment.

One wall was a trapezoidal blank space like a window made of stone, oddly devoid of Klikiss markings, framed by a sequence of symbol plates. On the smooth surface, brownish red smears—bloody handprints—stood out like a shout—as if in the last moments before his death, Louis Colicos had pounded the wall, trying to make it open.

With furrowed brow, Lotze looked at the handprint and the blank wall. “Two bodies recovered, but still no explanations. And where is Margaret Colicos?”

A rippling shudder went down Rlinda’s back. She felt they might be here on Rheindic Co for a long time indeed.

40



ANTON COLICOS

“I have chosen an activity you may enjoy, Rememberer Anton,” Vao’sh said. “I am intrigued by the favorite techniques of traditional human storytellers. Let us see if we can re-create some of them.”

The rememberer took him out to the seaside, where they sat alone on a blustery plateau a dozen meters above the waters of a sheltered inlet. The breeze was warm, and Anton detected a sour tang of blooming aquatic plant life, rafts of large orange flowers like a crossbreed of lily pads and ribbon kelp.

Bustling, jabbering attenders had arrived ahead of them and piled knobby driftwood into a conical mound interspersed with dry tinder. The small-statured servant kithmen ignited the pile of wood, then withdrew as the flames took hold. The attenders scuttled away.

The two historians, isolated now, sat on cushiony mosslike growths in the soft sand. The bonfire rose higher, flickering on their faces. “Is this not the correct milieu, Rememberer Anton? Spinning tales by a

campfire at the seaside?”

Anton smiled. “Of course, you’re missing one vital ingredient—such stories are best told in the dark, rather than constant dazzling daylight.”

Vao’sh shuddered. “That is not the sort of thing any Ildiran would enjoy.”

The young man leaned toward the flames, rubbing his hands together. “We’ll make do.”

As a boy, he remembered staying up late some nights in the Pym archaeological camp with his parents, listening to stories by firelight. He felt a brief sadness and hoped his mother and father were all right; he wasn’t likely to get any word of them here on Ildira.

He took a deep breath and said, “Even before our civilization was recorded, storytellers chose to sit by bright fires, safe because dire wolves and cave bears and saber-tooths were afraid of the flames. Those storytellers would talk about great giants or monsters or predators that might snatch children from their mothers.” Anton smiled. “They also told tales of heroes, warriors, or mammoth hunters who were braver and stronger than anyone else. Tale spinners used stories to construct a framework of comprehensibility in a mysterious world. Stories formed our moral character.”

From the bluff above the sheltered inlet, Anton spotted sleek, dark figures swimming in from the open sea. Vao’sh looked out at the water. “It is a swimmer harvest crew returning with the changing tide.”

The Ildiran swimmer kithmen reminded Anton of lissome otters, delightfully resilient, who worked hard yet seemed to make it a game.

“Swimmers are covered with thin fur over an extra layer of subcutaneous fat to keep them warm in the cold, deep currents,” Vao’sh explained. “Note their large eyes. They have an extra lens membrane that allows them to see well underwater. The ears lie flat against smooth heads, and the noses are high on the face so they can swim with their nostrils above the water.”

“What are those baskets they’re towing behind them?”

“Swimmers harvest kelpweeds, shellfish, coral-eggs. Some of them herd schools of fish, culling them for food.”

“Oceanic cowboys.”

The rememberer’s face lobes flushed through a symphony of colors. “An apt analogy.” The bonfire continued to crackle and pop. “Swimmers live on large rafts tethered to the seafloor. As the fish schools move or as sections of the seaweed forest are picked clean, they cut the raft tethers and drift to other parts of the ocean.”

Anton shook his head. “I’ll never get used to so many kiths. How can you keep track of them all?”

“To me, it is amazing that all humans look so similar. How can you keep track of yourselves?”

Anton picked up a stick and prodded the glowing coals in the middle of the bonfire. “You just need to get used to us, Vao’sh.”

The rememberer gestured toward the swimmers carrying cargo nets to dock structures, where

landbound workers met them to retrieve the day's catch. "I know a story about swimmers from the *Saga of Seven Suns*."

"Is it a ghost story, a frightening tale best told around the campfire?"

The rememberer's face flickered through a palette of colors. "It is a love story... of a sort. We have a kith that lives and works in our driest deserts, arid-born and lizardlike. The scabies are able to go for months with only minimal moisture." Vao'sh smiled. "Thus, you can imagine that the love between the scaly worker Tre'c and the swimmer Kri'l was doomed to tragedy."

Anton furrowed his brow. "I thought Ildiran kiths were welcome to interbreed?"

Vao'sh made a dismissive gesture. "Oh, we have no prejudice against mixed bloodlines. Even so, the romance between a scaly and a swimmer was ill-fated by its very nature. No one can now say what attracted them to each other. Tre'c and Kri'l must have known the difficulties they would face, but still they would not be pulled apart. Tre'c could not tolerate the salt water of the ocean, and Kri'l could not survive in the dry desert.

"So, Tre'c built his home on a rocky beach, high enough from the closest approach of the tides. Kri'l tethered her raft inside a cove near the beach. They could call to each other and talk. And though they could tolerate each other's environment for only an hour each day, that hour together was more joyous than a lifetime spent with anyone else.

"Tre'c and Kri'l had several years of happiness, until one day a great storm came into the cove, tore up the beach, and cast Kri'l's raft up onto the rocks, destroying Tre'c's shelter and washing it away. The two of them clung together as the rains poured down and the waves battered them. The cliffs crumbled; the sand and rocks slid down in an avalanche; the ocean hurled them against the beach. The land and the sea swallowed them up.

"Their bodies were never found, but sometimes..." Vao'sh said, colors streaming like sunrise across his face, "Ildirans come upon empty stretches of beach where the water laps against the dry sand, places where few people ever go and no one watches. There, we sometimes encounter two sets of footprints, a swimmer and a scaly walking alone on the deserted strand, one set of footprints in the moist mud, the other on the dry beach."

The bonfire continued to crackle, and Anton leaned back with his hands on the soft, mossy groundcover. "That's a wonderful story, Vao'sh." He tried to think of how he could match the tale before the campfire burned down. "And now I have one for you."

41



NIRA

Because Ildirans liked to live in close quarters, where they could sense the crowded presence of others, they had designed and constructed the sleeping barracks of the human prisoners along similar lines. Nira's home was a large building with numerous bunks, tables, and common areas. Here the people cooked, slept, and played games—whenever they weren't required for other duties. It was like a giant

extended family all crowded under one roof.

Nira lived quietly among them, sharing meals, sleeping when they slept; for years, though, she had felt separate, walled off because she was so different. The people did not ostracize her consciously, yet she had found it difficult to let herself fit in. She cared about her fellow captives, but could never quite escape the feeling of loneliness, even when surrounded by them.

Now, during Dobro's dark night outside, she sat quietly, listening to the chatter around her. In her own space, Nira kept several plants in makeshift pots, nurturing flowers, a small bush, some sweet-smelling herbs. Plants were a comfort to her.

She remembered how Father Idriss and Mother Alexa held so many colorful celebrations and festivals in the huge fungus-reef city on Theroc. Every day, workers had climbed tall worldtrees: gathering the black seed-pods from which they made stimulating clee, harvesting epiphytes for their juices, cutting open condorfly pupae for the tender meat inside. Groups of green priest acolytes—Nira among them—had scaled the armored trunks to reach the interlocked canopy, where they would read aloud to the curious trees.

Those had been the best years in her life...

Now, a man began coughing, and his chosen wife put him to bed, then went to fill out a requisition for the medicine he needed. Nira looked around at the other bunks, at the clustered family groups the people had instinctively formed even under circumstances such as these. They seemed to believe they had a normal life.

On Dobro, men and women still fell in love, bonded with each other, and had children—though, at any time, a female might be chosen for her genetic characteristics and be sent off to the breeder barracks. Their husbands might not be happy when it happened, but they accepted it. They had been trained for generations to live within this new and unnatural social order.

In turn, the male human prisoners were forced to mate with dozens, even hundreds, of Ildiran women. The guards and medical kithmen dealt with any man who refused to perform his duty by repeatedly “harvesting” his sperm, and eventually returning him to the work gangs as a eunuch...

Nira felt more anguish for their plight than they themselves did. She knew that humans were resilient and could learn to accept many things. The strength and endurance she saw in these prisoners was not what saddened her, however—it was that they had forgotten what life was *supposed* to be like.

Though darkness had fallen hours ago, and the beautiful stars had come out in the clear sky, the lights would never go off in the crowded barracks. In keeping with Ildiran practice, darkness was never allowed inside the buildings except as a form of punishment. By now, the human prisoners were well conditioned to sleep under full light. Many of the children had already gone to bed, while the adults remained awake, talking and relaxing.

It was the best time for her to speak to them. The prisoners knew little of the generation ships from Earth, nothing of the overall Ildiran Empire or the Terran Hanseatic League. The people here had never been taught their origins except for an ever-more-fanciful oral history that retained glimmers of truth, passed from one generation to the next. Nira, with her knowledge of story cycles and the Ildiran *Saga*, found the distorted tales interesting in the rare moments when she could detach herself.

Now she edged forward, listening to seven men and women who sat together in a loose circle,

exchanging stories, jokes, and gossip. Benn Stoner, a gruff-voiced man whose skin looked as if it had been sandblasted, noticed her interest. “Go ahead, Nira Khali. What story do you have for us this evening?”

“Make it a good one!”

“She’s had all day under the hot sun to think of some new nonsense—” a younger man said, but his words cut off when Stoner glared at him.

Nira pretended not to notice. Even if the other Dobro prisoners rarely believed the things she said, at least they listened. Her tales helped them to pass the time.

“I will tell you the story of Thara Wen and how she became the first green priest on Theroc.” She waited a moment for the answering smiles, knowing that the people were amused by her tales about “fantasy lands.”

“Thara was born on the *Caillie* only a few years before the Ildirans found our generation ship and set us down in the worldforest. Theroc was beautiful and temperate, full of food and resources. From the beginning, our colony was peaceful. There was little crime, for there was no need.”

“Just like here on Dobro,” said the snide young man.

“No. Not like Dobro. Not at all.” Nira drew a deep breath. “But from time to time, for reasons we cannot understand, a person carries darkness in his heart. One such man attacked Thara Wen in the thickest worldforest, chasing her, intending to kill her. He had already killed others. But she fled among the thickets, burying herself in the densest worldtree fronds. And as the forest protected her, hid her from the murderer, the trees also joined with her, engulfing her... making contact.

“When Thara emerged, all of her hair had fallen out, and her skin had turned a bright green.” Nira rubbed her own arms. “And she had the ability to communicate with the trees. She could remember everything the forest had ever seen, and the trees told her about the man’s other victims. When she returned to the settlement and accused him, showing the elders where the bodies were buried, the man was sentenced to death—the first criminal on Theroc. He was tied at the top of the canopy and left there until a wyvern came along and slaughtered him.”

Some of her listeners were intrigued, others clearly skeptical, but the young man made another joke. “Oh, does that explain why your skin is green? I always thought you were just another strange half-breed.”

“Show some respect,” Benn Stoner said. “The Designate chooses her for the breeding barracks more often than any of us.” He said this as if it were some sort of honor. “We thank you for your story, Nira.”

Nira went back to her bunk, where she could still hear them talking. Stoner took his turn, keeping the oral tradition alive, telling the old and garbled stories. He spoke vaguely about a long journey, a home that was not called Earth, but *Burton*. They didn’t even know.

According to their own legends, these people had come to Dobro in friendship, living in happy prosperity with the Ildirans. But some terrible and unforgivable crime—they could not say what it was—had caused the Ildirans to turn their colony settlement into an armed camp. None of the captives knew how many more generations would have to pay for this sin.

Feeling deeply sad for them, Nira said from her bunk, “It isn’t like this everywhere, you know. There are billions of people on countless worlds. Dobro is one of the worst.”

Benn Stoner lifted his chin and spoke gruffly as he indicated the walls of the barracks and, by implication, the fences and the bleak landscape that led nowhere. “Dobro is all we have, Nira Khali. Your fantasies can’t help us here.”

42



PRIME DESIGNATE JORA’H

The Solar Navy rescue shuttle descended through the flame-streaked sky, approaching the Hyrillka citadel palace. It arrived just as the second warglobe attacked.

This new hydrogue sphere dispersed a kind of weapon none of the Ildirans had seen before: devastating waves of cold punctuated by jets of white mist that froze anything they touched. The frigid onslaught swept across the vegetation, shattering thick vines. Hyrillka’s verdant landscape cringed like a beaten cur, crumpled and shriveled.

Then the two warglobes circled back for another onslaught.

Jora’h grabbed his son’s thin arm and they raced out of the courtyard, dodging explosions in the citadel palace. The alien bombardment thundered down from the skies as the four surviving Solar Navy warliners hammered ineffectually against the marauders.

“What are we to do?” Thor’h cried. “Why won’t they stop?”

Jora’h had no answer for him.

Frantic courtiers and performers rushed about inside the banquet chambers. The three lens kithmen herded people out into the open to avoid the collapsing buildings; other Ildirans fled deep inside to find shelter. No place seemed safe. The hydrogues had no particular target in mind. They destroyed as much of the uninhabited vine forests and vegetation as they did of the Ildiran city.

“Help!” Thor’h shouted, as if the citadel itself could respond. He ran to a colored window, but his father yanked him back an instant before it shattered. Crystal shards and a gust of cold air blew inward in the wake of a warglobe discharge, and Jora’h pulled the young man down as debris tinkled around them. Thor’h touched numerous stinging cuts on his face and arms, and saw that his fine clothes were shredded. He stammered in disbelief. “We’ve got to find my—my uncle. He will know w-what to do. He will save everyone.”

“No he won’t,” Jora’h said. “He cannot. Adar Kori’nh is going to evacuate us.” *And leave all these people behind... so many people.*

Overhead in the soot-stained sky, the Ildiran warliners—all damaged—faced off against the crystalline

globes. Jora'h didn't see how they could survive. The two hydrogue warglobes cruised across the orange-tainted sky, spilling more death. The air echoed with roaring blasts and thunderous explosions.

"I have to protect you, Thor'h. You're the next Prime Designate. And I... will soon become Mage-Imperator." He knew that his father would be sensing the Hyrillkan attack through the *thism*. Perhaps the shock and pain would even hasten the ailing leader's death. "We must get away from the battle zone, somehow."

With the diminishing daylight, thousands of dazzling lights automatically shimmered to life within the citadel, as if it were any other day.

Jora'h found his brother Rusa'h amid the chaos of fire and destruction in the open plaza under the tall, vine-covered arches. The chubby Hyrillka Designate raised his hands and waved his arms inside their ballooning sleeves. "We must not panic! Please get to safety."

"Where?" a dancer cried. "Where can we go?"

Rusa'h grabbed his performers, pushing them away from the fires and explosions. His pleasure mates turned to him for protection, their lovely faces streaked with smoke, dust, blood, and sweat. "Go to the bubbling pools," he said, still looking pathetically forlorn and helpless. "There will be shelter. I hope." The women hurried off, confident in his advice, but Rusa'h didn't seem so certain.

Both hydrogues cruised above the landscape, one crisscrossing the fertile nialia fields with blue lightning bolts, the other with cold white icewaves. As the second warglobe circled, unhindered by the pinpricks of the Solar Navy streamers, Jora'h saw that the governmental citadel would be leveled in the next attack. "Everyone off the hill! Get down and scatter."

The Hyrillka Designate looked at his brother in confusion; then relief lit his face. "Yes! Do as the Prime Designate says!" The people began to run. Stragglers continued to evacuate from the inner chambers of the citadel palace.

Finally, Adar Kori'nh's rescue shuttle landed in the courtyard, its hull smoking from a minor hydrogue blast. Many Hyrillkans raced toward the vessel, but burly warrior kithmen strode out of the open hatches, their armor spiny, their eyes alert. "We have come only for the Designates. Stand down! We have orders from Adar Kori'nh."

Grabbing his uncle's arm, young Thor'h lurched toward the shuttle, frantic. "Yes, get us out of here."

Mentally counting, Jora'h addressed one of the warriors from the rescue shuttle. "How many people can fit aboard?"

"You, Prime Designate, your son, and your brother."

"How many others?" he insisted.

"Our priority is to take you to a safe place. Perhaps some of your brother's children. That is all."

"I give the orders. *I'm* the Prime Designate." Jora'h waited for an answer.

The warrior finally said, "Forty-eight other passengers, at the maximum lift capacity of this shuttle."

“Good. Start loading people.”

The Hyrillka Designate tore his arm away from Thor’h. “No! My favorite pleasure mates are still inside the citadel palace. I told them to meet us at the bubbling pool. We have to rescue them. They... They are very important to me.”

“No time,” Jora’h said. Overhead, the warglobe loomed closer. Blue lightning tore the hillside where evacuees were racing pell-mell into the open streets.

“You can’t just abandon them. Some are carrying my children.” The Hyrillka Designate suddenly showed an uncharacteristic expression of determined bravery. He turned and ran inside, fighting his way through the littered and broken corridors. “They counted on me for protection. I will save them.”

Jora’h was amazed at his hedonistic and softhearted brother, whom he had always considered to be spoiled and vapid; but the Hyrillka Designate showed a different side of himself now. Then Jora’h thought of his own lovers, especially of dear Nira Khali. Yes, for Nira he would even have run into a hydrogue attack. Just as Rusa’h was doing.

In a strangely sharp and commanding tone, young Thor’h snapped to the burly warriors, “Go stop my uncle before he is injured! It is your duty to rescue the Hyrillka Designate. He is the son of the Mage-Imperator.”

Without hesitating, two warrior kithmen sprinted through the entryway and vanished into the complex after Rusa’h. A mob of Hyrillkans crowded toward the rescue shuttle.

Overhead, the hydrogues kept attacking. The second warglobe played avolley of blue lightning onto the ornate palace structure. Explosions ripped open the airy arched walls. Scraps of the hanging gardens erupted into flames and greasy smoke.

A convergence of four electric beams tore into the heart of the citadel, where Designate Rusa’h had gone, shattering an entire wing. The walls collapsed, and smoke gushed from the rooflines.

“No, Uncle!” Thor’h broke away from the safety of the rescue shuttle and ran toward the collapsed section. “The Designate is trapped inside! We must dig him out.” Jora’h and three more guards raced after him.

Still harried by Kori’nh’s warliners, the pair of hydrogues passed overhead. Ripples of white icewave struck eight small streamers, knocking them from the sky like kernels of grain harvested by a random wind.

The brawny warriors shoved their way through collapsed corridors and finally reached the rubble of the bubbling-pool chamber. The walls and domed ceiling had tumbled into a rubble of tile shards and transparent blocks.

“He entered here just before the explosion,” said one warrior. “The Designate must be buried under the debris.”

“He’s dead,” Thor’h moaned.

With clawed hands and muscular arms, warrior kithmen tossed aside chunks of wreckage, ripping through the rubble, moving support girders and reinforcement bars. Pillars had toppled, trapping the

Designate but also sheltering him from large sections of the fallen ceiling.

Finally, they uncovered a pale hand and a scrap of colorful robes now speckled with blood. Four injured pleasure mates had survived on the other side of the shrapnel and debris, soaking wet. Some had been caught in the bubbling pool; two had already drowned, stunned by falling bricks.

Fires continued to spread through the ruined palace, and the smoke could not escape through ragged gaps in the ceiling or broken walls. Jora'h hurried forward to help, though his strength could not match that of the powerful soldiers.

Outside, screams, explosions, and weapons fire echoed across the sky. But Jora'h focused on freeing his brother's body. He tried to sense him through the *thism*, but the glimmers of light and the connecting soul-threads had all grown dark and faint.

Two of the soldier kithmen lifted a heavy stone column and pushed it aside with a thunderous crash. They finally exposed Rusa'h's pudgy face. The cheeks were bruised and bloody, his eyes swollen shut, his mouth a grimace of pain. But his hair still twitched. His skin was flushed, his pulse weak but present.

"The Designate lives!" said one of the soldiers.

"Get him out of there," Thor'h said. With hands unaccustomed to labor, he began to scabble in the rubble until they had completely uncovered the Mage-Imperator's third-born son. Thor'h clung to his uncle as the soldiers picked him up gently. "Quickly. We must get to the shuttle. Adar Kori'nh waits for us."

They carried Designate Rusa'h, blood dripping from his wounds. The dedicated soldier kithmen rushed back down the rubble-strewn hall with Jora'h, Thor'h, and the four pleasure mates following closely behind. The Hyrillka Designate had suffered severe injuries, yet *lived*.

Once they were aboard the shuttle, which was already crowded with dozens of refugees, the pilot wasted no time. Engines straining, the overloaded ship lifted away from the burning citadel palace. One of the Ildiran battleships broke off its defense, withdrew, and intercepted the personnel transport.

The Adar himself met them in the shuttle bay, though he knew he should not have left the command nucleus in the midst of an attack. He was relieved to see Jora'h and his son Thor'h, then dismayed at the grievously injured Hyrillka Designate.

Expert medical kithmen rushed into the shuttle bay, studied Rusa'h's injuries, and also treated the wounds of the evacuees aboard the rescue craft. Thor'h remained anxiously beside his bleeding and unconscious uncle. The Hyrillka Designate clung to life, though he had not moved or moaned.

Adar Kori'nh issued a command to his crew. "Withdraw! I want all streamers to flank and protect this ship. We must protect the Prime Designate and his son. I... can do nothing else to save the rest of these people."

The flagship warliner pulled away, increasing its distance from the alien spheres, which continued to destroy the lush Hyrillkan landscape. But then the crystalline spheres incomprehensibly broke off their attack, for reasons of their own. Ignoring the Solar Navy, the alien globes climbed into the sky without looking at all hurried.

Watching from the command nucleus of the battered flagship, Jora'h said, "Why? Why would they

cause so much destruction and then simply... leave?"

Kori'nh stood like a petrified tree, struggling to hold his emotions inside. "Perhaps they did not find what they were searching for."

Without a word of explanation or celebration of victory, the hydroguedwarglobes departed from Hyrillka and vanished into open space, leaving the once-peaceful pleasure planet smoking and in ruins.

43



JESS TAMBLYN

Borrowing a two-man grappler pod from Osquivel's construction yards, Jess went to meet Cesca Peroni on her descent from the cometary-extraction clouds. He worked hard to hide his boyish anticipation, though it hadn't been very long since the last time they had seen each other.

Over an open channel, he transmitted, "Speaker Peroni, allow me to escort you. A dozen more nebula skimmers are ready to be launched, all packaged up in their ballistic cocoons. It's quite a sight to see."

"I'll drop her off with you, Jess," Del Kellum said; his image wore a secret smile, as if he suspected something. "I've got business to attend to."

"Right, I think your angelfish need feeding. They've been snapping at some of the Roamer children when they walk by."

Electric with sweet eagerness, Jess docked his grappler pod. Air locks engaged, and Cesca came aboard, looking beautiful... but confused and troubled. He immediately understood that something was wrong.

"Take good care of her, Jess," Kellum called from the other cockpit. "She'll be wanting to go back to Rendezvous soon."

Jess couldn't take his eyes from Cesca's forlorn face, but he said nothing until he sealed the hatches and disengaged. As the two ships drifted apart, Cesca draped an arm over his shoulder and hugged him silently. He did her the favor of not asking for details yet; he just kissed her on the forehead, then at the corner of her eye, and finally full on the mouth.

She drew him tighter with a desperate need, then slumped into the cockpit seat beside him. When Jess looked at her with an unspoken question, she finally said, "Reynald is about to be crowned the new Father of Theroc, and he has proposed an alliance between our peoples. He... asked me to marry him."

Jess felt as if she had struck him a physical blow. His entire world had revolved around the time until they could be wed. In the blink of an eye, that anchor dissolved like a tiny ball of puff-sugar in a cup of peppercorn tea.

Cesca didn't need to explain the political advantages of a marriage to Reynald. Jess knew the tight situation of the scattered Roamer clans: missing ships, supply shortages, lost ekti shipments. Many

families doubted the drogues were responsible for everything, believing instead that the greedy Eddies had resorted to piracy.

Jess said in a hoarse voice, “He’s right. A union of Roamers and Therons might be strong enough to help us ride out this war and keep the Big Goose away. Yes. . . I suppose it makes good business sense.”

They both stared at each other, gradually feeling the numbness of shock fade into the pain of reality. Jess felt as if the deck had dropped out beneath him. Cesca looked at him with helpless dismay. “Jess, I don’t want to marry him.”

His shoulders slumped and he heaved a long, heavy sigh, and he knew he was about to lose her once and for all. “And I don’t want you to. In fact, if I had the chance right now, I’d probably strangle him.”

She gave him a wan smile. “I’d rather you didn’t.”

“But you have to face reality, Cesca. You’re the Speaker of all clans. Reynald will be the leader of all Theroc, including the green priests and the worldforest. This Guiding Star is clear.”

“I know that, Jess—but I love *you*. This isn’t just a . . . a business meeting.”

He gave her a stern look. “Cesca, if you could just cast aside the greater good of every Roamer, if you could think only of your own wishes and ignore your obligations, then you wouldn’t be the woman I love.”

Though distracted, he continued to fly the grappler pod through the hazardous debris around the shipyards. The challenge helped him to keep his troubled despair in check. They both saw the Guiding Star in this situation.

She stared out at the stars. “I’ll resign as Speaker before I marry him, Jess. We’ll let someone else take on the responsibility—”

“Who?” Anger edged into his voice now. “Speaker Okiah trusted you. All the clans trust you. And who else can make this alliance with Theroc? You can’t leave the Roamers adrift. You’ve got to be there to see us through these times.” As he said the indisputable words, he realized that just by telling her this—by speaking it out loud—he had made it real and unavoidable.

Jess watched her search for some legitimate argument, some way to convince him that she must decline Reynald’s proposal. He held up a hand. His heart railed against his own words, but he knew he had to say them. “Do I need to remind you how often you’ve told me that we must live our lives for a purpose greater than ourselves? If we didn’t care about the good of our people, the two of us could have gotten married years ago and run off to live on Plumas.”

“Maybe we should have,” she said, but she knew she didn’t mean it, *couldn’t* mean it. Until now, even she hadn’t understood how deep her love for Jess ran.

They continued to argue, but all the possible solutions seemed selfish and forced. Jess stood firm, and he knew she could see he was right. What advice would she have given to someone else in her same position? The answer was obvious, according to all she had been taught, all she believed, and Cesca seemed to be surprised at her unwillingness to give up her dreams of happiness with Jess. Was that so much to ask?

Finally, as the grappler pod docked in the main Osquivel habitation, he said, “Cesca, you know what you have to do.”

When she visited the shipyards, Cesca moved like a person only half alive. She planned to stay long enough to watch the launch of the new nebula skimmers; then she would return to Rendezvous and get back to work. Why couldn't the former Speaker Jhy Okiah have picked someone else for the job?

But that wasn't what Cesca wanted. Those who lived quiet lives, normal lives, might occasionally dream of finding themselves in positions of importance and power—but most of them would gladly exchange that greatness to have their comfort back. Cesca, despite her torn heart, had no alternative but to pay that price. It was her Guiding Star. It was her foundation. She had to come to terms with her situation, accept her losses, no matter what they might be.

Jess avoided her, knowing that he could not help with this. His close presence would only make the decision harder. This was a rational, political choice that needed to be made with cool heads, not aching hearts. Their souls were bound together no matter what. That would never change.

But Jess knew one way to make this easier for her.

Del Kellum was astonished when the young man met him at the launching docks. “I want to sign on aboard one of the new skimmers, Del. Yankone of the pilots; send him on the next one. But I need to depart now. If I don't go... Cesca will be distracted, tempted to make a decision for all the wrong reasons.”

“This is ill-advised, Jess.” Kellum seemed to understand the bittersweet regrets. Jess flushed. Did *everybody* know how they felt about each other? “By damn, all that time alone is only going to give you an excuse to brood. Time can be a luxury or a curse, depending on how you look at it.”

Jess remained firm. “I don't *want* to go, Del—but I know Cesca too well. Having me close by right now will be too hard for her. Much too hard. I've seen my Guiding Star, and I have to follow it.”

Kellum sighed. “All right, I'll make the arrangements. Old Bram must have passed along his stubborn streak to you.”

Jess quickly bundled his possessions into the habitation module and checked all the stowed supplies before the ship was raised up and installed inside the ellipsoidal ballistic cocoon that contained the folded microfiber film.

Before he closed Jess inside the module, Kellum said, “Want me to give her a message? She's going to watch the launch.”

“Tell her I wish that our hearts were our Guiding Stars. But they're not.” Jess squeezed his eyes shut. “Cesca will do what she needs to do. She always has.”

Aboard the ring station, Cesca would stand beside Del Kellum and celebrate the launch of the new nebula skimmers. It was her duty as Speaker, and she would do it well.

From inside his cozy module, Jess listened as if in a daze to the dispatches, checklists, rundowns. All too soon, the ballistic cocoons shot out into open space, like spores from a mushroom. His journey would be swift until he reached the gaseous nebula sea, where the pod would open and the petals extend.

Far, far from Osquivel.

He wanted to put all thought and feeling out of his mind, but he would have much too much time to mull everything over. Again and again.

Even before he reached his destination at the heart of the nebula, Jess knew that Cesca would do what was necessary and agree to marry Reynald.

44



REYNALD

Returning home to Theroc, Sarein rode in a Hansa diplomatic craft down through the tall trees to the spaceport clearing. Reynald hurried to greet her, happy to see his sister. His skin had been rubbed with spreadnut wax so that his arm muscles and his tanned skin looked like polished furniture.

Sarein gave him a quick hug. She looked healthy, and her dark hair was cut short and styled in a serviceable Earth-like fashion, unlike the long braids or twists preferred on Theroc. Hansa perfumes gave her an exotic scent.

“Earth seems to agree with you, Sarein.” He playfully yanked the sleeve of her blouse. “Although you seem to be in disguise. Why have you been gone so long?”

“Reynald, I wanted to come home sooner, but when colonies are starving because supplies can’t be delivered, how can I justify a visit to see my family?” Her eyes glittered. “But, since I’m the ambassador and you’ll be the Theron Father, I plan to interact with you very closely from now on.”

“I’ll still be your brother. Nothing has changed.”

She gave him a hard look. “When you become Father Reynald, you’ll find that a lot of things are different. An improvement, I hope.” She gestured toward the open diplomatic shuttle. “I brought a surprise guest for your coronation. Reynald, do you remember the Chairman?”

Dressed in a perfectly fitting business suit, Basil Wenceslas emerged and looked with interest at the towering worldtrees. Reynald had met Chairman Wenceslas on his peregrination to Earth, six years earlier. “Welcome. I wasn’t expecting such an important guest.”

Basil gave him a paternal smile. “Reynald, you’re about to become the leader of one of the most important worlds in the Spiral Arm. Any lesser presence from the Hanseatic League would be an insult. We can’t have that.”

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman.” Reynald flushed. “I’m still not accustomed to being treated with such

formality.” He took his sister by the hand. “Come. Mother and Father are looking forward to seeing you.”

For the coronation, the fungus-reef rooms had been decorated with as much color and dazzle as the gaudiest chromefly. Tethered to stands by thin strings, newly hatched condorflies, their wings a kaleidoscopic rainbow, fluttered at the windows. Idriss and Alexa had outdone themselves; they seemed pleased and proud of the spectacle they had arranged.

Estarra was stunning in a formal gown of feathers and moth scales, looking much more an adult than Reynald had ever considered her. At sixteen, little Celli had her hair done up in neatly oiled braids so carefully crafted that they pulled her eyes tight and gave her a pained expression. She hated formal occasions.

Overly dignified in the ambassador’s cloak old Otema had given her, Sarein sat on a front bench beside Chairman Wenceslas. The two remained very close, as if they were intimate friends rather than simply political colleagues. Oddly, both she and the Chairman kept glancing at Estarra, as if assessing her.

An assorted audience from scattered forest villages packed the chamber and the outside balconies. Reynald glimpsed the green priest woman Almari, who had offered herself in marriage at the Looking Glass Lakes. Now that he was about to become Father, she seemed even more interested in him—but he had already asked Cesca Peroni to be his bride. He hoped he would hear a response soon.

Crowds waited down on the forest floor or on the thick tree boughs, trying to get a glimpse of the activity. Green priests all across the planet touched worldtrees, watching the entire ceremony through telink.

Reynald heard the celebratory songs, followed by the speech of his uncle, the green priest Yarrod, who spoke about how the Theron Father was responsible for shepherding the worldforest and its people. But this day, all words were a barely comprehensible drone.

When the time came, Reynald stood before the dual thrones and made his vow. “I will do my utmost to lead the Theron people fairly and wisely, for the good of the worldforest and for the benefit of all who live here.”

Mother Alexa remained seated, her shoulders covered with insect shells and feathery scarves. Her headdress crown looked like a small cathedral perched on her hair. Idriss wore an equally impressive robe. His crown was even taller, adorned with insect wings, beetle carapaces, and polished slivers of wood.

In a deep voice, Idriss said, “Reynald, my son, I trust you to take my place as Father of all Therons. No ceremony or blessing can be more profound or meaningful than that.” He removed his headdress and placed it on Reynald’s head. The crown felt strangely light and uplifting.

Reynald’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. “I promise to do my best, Father.”

Idriss took his wife’s hand. Alexa stood, and the two of them stepped down from their chairs to stand on either side of Reynald. Reynald looked at where his mother had sat and wondered if Cesca Peroni would ever join him there. In the audience, Uthair and Lia sat together, smiling, next to Idriss’s old parents.

“Go on, take your seat, Reynald,” his mother chided quietly. “Everyone’s waiting.”

He stepped to the top of the dais and turned to face the audience. Almost overwhelmed at the responsibility he had just taken on, he sat in the chair while Idriss and Alexa stepped down to join their own parents. Everyone waited for Father Reynald to issue his first proclamation.

He thought for a moment and finally made a decree everyone in the audience would enjoy. “I say it is time for the banquet to begin!”

Late into the night, musicians and emerald-skinned priests entertained the coronation guests. Children ran about tooting and whistling, playing odd musical instruments Uthair and Lia had created. Outside in the dense trees, the insect music rose to a humming symphony, as if the worldforest were also welcoming the new leader. Thanks to the green priests, maybe it was.

Reynald wished Beneto could have come, but it had been impossible for him to travel from distant Corvus Landing. Instead, his brother had been present in mind and spirit. The green priests had reported each step of the ceremony through telink, so Beneto and every other far-flung priest could “attend” through their counterpart treelings.

Food was everywhere: saltnuts and pair-pears and perrin seeds, splurt-berries, stewed and heavily sweetened puckers, skewers of condorfly meat, spiced beetles cooked in the shell. Long banners and gauzy crepes of cocoonweave cloth drifted about like spiderwebs, swirling with the slightest breezes. The people, so many of them smiling, were all a blur.

Reynald danced with all three of his sisters. Then, after Sarein and Basil had danced a slow waltz together, they discreetly drew Reynald aside. Sarein led the way behind the throne room through a passageway drilled into the fungus reef and into a small chamber occasionally used for storage.

“Remember this place?” She closed the door so that the three of them could be alone. “We used to hide here when we were children.”

“Of course,” he said, instantly on guard. “But right now I doubt you have fun and games on your mind.”

A hard smile flickered on her face. “See, Basil—I told you my brother is sharp. You can count on him to see the larger picture.”

Chairman Wenceslas said, “Young man, your coronation marks a watershed in relations between Theroc and the Hanseatic League.”

Reynald’s mind moved quickly, already noting his life had changed. Sarein stood very close to the Chairman, and he looked from one face to another. The storage room seemed very small. “What is it you want?”

“Whether we like it or not, Father Reynald, we are all in a war against the hydrogues,” Wenceslas said. It was the first time Reynald’s new title had been used in a formal diplomatic matter, and it made him giddy. “The enemy has sworn to destroy us—not just humans, but Ildirans as well. Their ultimatum has crippled space travel across the Spiral Arm. Hansa colonies are suffering; some are even starving. The Earth Defense Forces have tried to see us through, but we’ve lost numerous ships and wasted countless

opportunities because of our inability to communicate across long distances.”

“So you want more green priests,” Reynald said.

Sarein spoke urgently. “Is that such a terrible thing? The EDF is trying to protect the Spiral Arm, but we can’t do it alone. Think of the lives and resources that could be saved if green priests would agree to use their skills to help. Hansa facilities under attack could call for immediate reinforcements through telink. Battlefleets could pinpoint the locations of enemy ships. As it is, we have to send scouts and communicate through courier drones and waste our limited ekti each time a message must be sent.” With a bitter edge, she added, “Therons have to stop living in their own isolated corner of the universe and paying no attention to all the worlds being attacked by hydrogues.”

“I have traveled to many planets in the Spiral Arm,” Reynald said. “I see more than just Theroc.”

“Because your world’s cooperation means so much to us, Father Reynald,” Basil said, “the Hanseatic League is willing to make an unprecedented concession. We won’t ask you to sign the Hansa Charter. We will reaffirm Theroc’s status as a sovereign world with its own needs and culture. However, we do invite you to join with us in a mutually beneficial partnership.”

“And how would this partnership be established?” Reynald asked.

Sarein’s voice filled with enthusiasm. “We would cement it by a marriage between King Peter . . . and Estarra.”

Reynald could barely believe his ears. He had already foreseen the need for Theroc to join with another power, to create a mutual support system. That was why he’d suggested an alliance with Cesca Peroni. If the hydrogue war could bring together Therons, Roamers, and the Hansa and once again unify humanity without sacrificing the rights or identities of any of those groups—how could he possibly turn down the chance?

Reynald thought of the Whisper Palace and the glories of Earth that Sarein had often described. He had seen images of handsome King Peter, a vital and apparently kindly young man. It seemed a wonderful opportunity for his little sister, especially in light of the advice Uthair and Lia had given both of them not so long ago. How could his sister object to becoming the consort of a Great King? He was sure she would understand the wisdom of the match.

“I . . . I’ll have to ask Estarra, of course, and discuss the matter with our parents.”

Sarein maintained an intent expression. “Discuss it with them if you like, but remember that you are *Father* Reynald. You must make these decisions.”

He hesitated, then sighed. “Yes, I knew you were going to say that.”