

Horizon Storms

The Saga of Seven Suns - Book 03

Kevin J. Anderson

## BOOKS BY KEVIN J. ANDERSON

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The Saga of Seven Suns

Hidden Empire

A Forest of Stars

Horizon Storms

Book 4 coming in July 2005

To DEAN KOONTZ,

who has offered his advice, ideas, and encouragement since the very beginning of my career. A long time ago, he told me to “think big” with my stories; now, with *The Saga of Seven Suns* already longer than Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, I hope this is what he meant!

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THE STORY SO FAR

For the first test of the Klikiss Torch—a device discovered in the ruins of the ancient alien Klikiss civilization—the Terran Hanseatic League (the Hansa) ignited a gas-giant planet, creating a small sun. The Hansa's suave CHAIRMAN BASIL WENCESLAS intended to terraform the gas giant's frozen moons into new colonies. Humanity had spread across many available worlds under the benevolent but reticent watch of the alien Ildiran Empire and its godlike leader, the MAGE-IMPERATOR. The Ildirans,

represented by their Solar Navy commander, ADAR KORI'NH, were skeptical about the Torch project, but came to observe.

When the gas planet was ignited, instant reports were transmitted around the galaxy by BENETO, a “green priest” from the forested planet Theroc who had a symbiosis with semisentient “worldtrees.” Like living telegraph stations, green priests provide the only form of instant communication across vast distances through the forest network. Back on Earth, OLD KING FREDERICK, a glamorous figurehead ruler, led a celebration of the successful test.

Unknown to anyone, though, this and many gas planets were inhabited by a powerful alien species, the hydrogues. The Hansa had just destroyed one of their populous worlds and unwittingly declared war on an entire hidden empire.

On Ildira, the Mage-Imperator's firstborn son, PRIME DESIGNATE JORA'H, welcomed the human REYNALD, Beneto's brother and heir to the throne of Theroc. As a token of friendship, Jora'h invited Reynald to send two green priests to study the grand Ildiran epic, the *Saga of Seven Suns*. On his way home, Reynald met in space with the Roamers, fiercely independent space gypsies led by old SPEAKER JHY OKIAH and her beautiful protégée CESCA PERONI. Since both the Roamers and Theroc were technically independent of the Terran Hanseatic League, Reynald discussed a possible alliance, even suggesting marriage with Cesca, but she was already betrothed to a skyminer, ROSS TAMBLYN (while secretly in love with his brother JESS).

The merchant woman RLINDA KETT came to Theroc in the *Voracious Curiosity*, hoping to open trade between Theroc and the Hansa. She was supported by ambitious SAREIN, sister to Reynald and Beneto, but MOTHER ALEXA and FATHER IDRIS were happy with their isolation on Theroc. Rlinda agreed to deliver two green priests—old OTEMA and bright-eyed young NIRA—to Ildira at the invitation of Prime Designate Jora'h.

On Earth, Chairman Wenceslas secretly began searching for a replacement for King Frederick. Basil's henchmen kidnapped a scamp, RAYMOND AGUERRA, then staged a terrible fire in his dwelling, killing his mother and three brothers, leaving no evidence. The Hansa then altered the young man's appearance, told him he was now “Prince Peter,” and began brainwashing him, using the Teacher “compy” (a companion robot) OX to instruct him in his new role.

After the success of the Klikiss Torch, the archaeologists who had discovered the technology, MARGARET and LOUIS COLICOS, began a new excavation on the desert planet of Rheindic Co, where ancient Klikiss cities remained untouched. The only functional remnants of the alien civilization, their hulking beetlelike robots, explained that their memories had been erased long ago. To learn more about their own past, three of these antique robots accompanied the Colicoses to the excavation site. The archaeology team also included a compy, DD, and a green priest. While Louis studied the ruins, Margaret worked to decipher Klikiss hieroglyphics in hopes of finding answers.

Meanwhile, angered by their near genocide, the hydrogues began to attack human facilities around gas giants. One of their first targets was a skymine—a huge cloudtop facility that skimmed gas giants for ekti, vital stardrive fuel—owned by Cesca's fiancé, Ross Tamblyn. Roamers and their skymines are the main suppliers of ekti to the Hansa and the Ildiran Empire. The hydrogues also destroyed the space station left to observe the new sun at the Klikiss Torch site—never demanding terms, never showing mercy. These unexpected attacks stunned both the Hansa and the Roamers. Chairman Wenceslas met with the commander of the Earth Defense Forces (EDF), gruff GENERAL KURT LANYAN, to discuss the threat. Old King Frederick worked to rally the populace, recruiting new volunteers for the EDF.



Vowing revenge for her brother Ross, spunky Roamer TASIA TAMBLYN heard the call and ran off to join the military, taking her compy EA and leaving her brother Jess in charge of the family water mines. Although Ross's death left Jess Tamblyn and Cesca Peroni free to profess their love, they couldn't bring themselves to take advantage of the tragic situation for personal gain.

Meanwhile, Raymond Aguerra continued training to become the next King, watched over by OX. At first he enjoyed the change from the rough streets to the opulent Palace, but soon he began to resent the rigid control imposed upon him. To his horror, he discovered that the Hansa had arranged the deaths of his family.

On Ildira, the green priest Nira spent a great deal of time with Prime Designate Jora'h, who was destined to become the next Ildiran leader. Though he had many assigned mates, he genuinely fell in love with Nira. Another son of the Mage-Imperator, the grim and intense DOBRO DESIGNATE UDRU'H, interrogated Nira about her telepathic potential as a green priest, then reported to the Mage-Imperator about secret Ildiran breeding experiments on the planet Dobro. Udru'h suggested that Nira might have the DNA potential they needed for the breeding project.

Digging through supposedly perfect and indisputable records of their past, an Ildiran historian uncovered documents proving that the hydrogues had appeared long ago in a previous war, but that all mention of the conflict had been censored from the *Saga of Seven Suns*. Before he could reveal his shocking discovery, the Mage-Imperator killed him, saying, "I wanted it kept secret."

Solar Navy commander Adar Kori'nh promoted ZAN'NH, the firstborn son of Prime Designate Jora'h, and took the fleet to the gas giant Qronha 3, the site of an old Ildiran skymining facility. When hydrogue warglobes rose from the clouds to destroy the ekti facility, the Solar Navy engaged in a furious battle. Although hydrogue weaponry proved far superior, one Ildiran subcommander crashed his battleship into the nearest sphere, destroying it and giving 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.

On Earth, the EDF built new ships and commandeered civilian spacecraft to mount a defense against further hydrogue attacks. Rlinda Kett was forced to surrender all of her merchant ships to the war effort, except for the *Voracious Curiosity*. Newly enlisted Tasia Tamblyn excelled in military training, besting spoiled-brat Earth recruits. Her particular bane was PATRICK FITZPATRICK III; her closest friend was fellow trainee ROBB BRINDLE.

In an uproar after the repeated hydrogue attacks, many Roamers ceased all skymining, but Jess Tamblyn decided to strike the enemy aliens himself. He gathered loyal workers and went to where the hydrogues had destroyed his brother Ross's skymine. They sent giant comets plummeting down to batter the gas planet with the force of atomic warheads.

Upon learning that the Ildirans had also been attacked by hydrogues, Chairman Wenceslas went to meet with the Mage-Imperator to propose an alliance. The hydrogues had neither acknowledged nor responded to requests for negotiation. While Basil was away on Ildira, however, a giant warglobe appeared at Earth and a hydrogue emissary demanded to speak with flustered and incompetent King Frederick. Contained within a pressure vessel, the alien emissary informed the King that the Klikiss Torch had annihilated a hydrogue planet, slaughtering millions of their people. Frederick apologized for the inadvertent genocide, but the hydrogue demanded that all skymining cease. This would mean no ekti fuel for the Ildiran stardrive, the only viable method of space travel. As Frederick pleaded with him, the hydrogue emissary detonated his containment tank, killing the King and all observers in the Throne Hall.

Basil rushed back to Earth and told royal trainee Raymond that “King Peter” must take the throne immediately. Peter gave a carefully scripted speech, defying the hydrogue ultimatum and declaring that humans would take the fuel necessary for their survival. He dispatched a battle group, including Tasia Tamblын and Robb Brindle, along with commercial ekti harvesters to Jupiter. For several days all was quiet, but then warglobes engaged the EDF in a terrible battle. Tasia and Robb survived, although the battered human ships limped away, beaten...

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

On Ildira, Nira discovered that she was pregnant with Jora’h’s child, but before she could tell him, the Mage-Imperator dispatched Jora’h on a diplomatic mission. Then, in the stillness of a sleep period, brutal Ildiran guards captured Nira and stabbed to death her mentor Otema, who was too old for the breeding pens. Nira was turned over to the evil Dobro Designate for genetic experimentation...

At the Roamer capital of Rendezvous, Speaker Okiah challenged the resourceful clans to find alternatives to skymining, then abdicated her position in favor of Cesca. Jess watched the woman he loved take her place as a strong leader, realizing she was farther away from him now than ever before.

On distant Rheindic Co, the Colicos team discovered an arcane transportation system, a dimensional doorway controlled by complex machinery. Though the Klikiss robots insisted they remembered nothing, Margaret was able to translate archaic records. Apparently the robots themselves had been responsible for the disappearance of their parent race and were also involved in an ancient war with the hydrogues! Surprised by this news, Margaret and Louis rushed back to their camp, only to find that their green priest had been murdered and all communication cut off.

Working with their faithful compy DD, Margaret and Louis barricaded themselves in the cliff city, but the sinister Klikiss robots broke through. Although DD attempted to defend his masters, the robots captured him, taking care not to hurt a fellow intelligent machine. At the last moment, Louis got the “transportal” functioning, opening a doorway to an unknown alien world. He urged Margaret through. Then, before he could join her, the gate closed—and the robots were upon him.

For five years, the hydrogue war continued; the human race and the Ildiran Empire struggled to cope with the loss of stardrive fuel. King Peter announced strict rationing schemes, taking public blame for the act while Basil Wenceslas made all the real decisions. Roamer daredevils led by Jess Tamblын and DEL KELLUM—a clan head who ran shipbuilding operations in the rings of the gas planet Osquivel—made hit-and-run sweeps on gas giants, grabbing ekti before the hydrogues could strike them; many missions ended in tragedy.

Prime Designate Jora’h was told that his beloved Nira had been killed in a fire; the Mage-Imperator kept the Dobro breeding scheme secret from him, along with the fact that Nira was alive and well, being used as a test subject. After bearing OSIRA’H, Jora’h’s own daughter, Nira gave birth to several more half-breed children. She had no choice but to perform the slave labor imposed on her and other human captives taken generations ago from a lost colony ship, the *Burton*. To ensure that no one from the Hansa discovered the breeding camp, the Dobro Designate ordered the destruction of the derelict *Burton*. Adar Kori’nh reluctantly followed his orders, but was disturbed to get rid of such a historic relic. The breeding program had to remain secret.

On Nira’s home planet of Theroc, Reynald searched for a suitable wife, accompanied by his younger sister ESTARRA, since he would soon replace his parents as the leader of his people. Their grandparents

urged them both to choose a good match, since Reynald and Estarra had plenty of responsibility on their shoulders.

Cut off from the traditional business of skymining, the Roamers developed new schemes for obtaining fuel—from breaking down cometary ice to flying huge nebula sails. Eccentric engineer KOTTO OKIAH established a risky metals-processing colony on the extremely hot planet of Isperos. At the shipyards in the rings of Osquivel, Del Kellum showed Jess all he had done; his daughter ZHETT was clearly interested in Jess, but he was still in love with Cesca.

Jess's sister Tasia was sent with a group of battleships to the rebellious Hansa colony of Yreka, where settlers were hoarding ekti. The EDF cracked down hard, first isolating and then raiding Yreka, confiscating all stardrive fuel for military uses; Tasia was uneasy that the EDF chose to turn their might against their own struggling colonies, instead of the real hydrogue enemy.

Chairman Wenceslas, who had been hoping that Margaret and Louis Colicos might unearth another weapon as useful as the Klikiss Torch, discovered that the archaeologists had vanished without a trace. Although their scholar son, ANTON COLICOS, had sent repeated inquiries about his missing parents, his letters vanished into the Hansa bureaucracy. Before Anton could learn anything, he received a surprise invitation from an Ildiran historian, REMEMBERER VAO'SH, to study the *Saga of Seven Suns* on Ildira. He eagerly accepted.

Chairman Wenceslas sent the merchant woman Rlinda Kett to Crenna to pick up an undercover spy, DAVLIN LOTZE, and take him to Rheindic Co in order to discover what had happened to the Colicos team. While on Crenna, Rlinda also met with her favorite ex-husband, BRANSON "BEBOB" ROBERTS, who had been drafted to fly EDF recon missions against the hydrogues but chose to go AWOL instead. Leaving BeBob behind, Rlinda took Davlin to Rheindic Co, where they found the bodies of Louis Colicos and the green priest, but no sign at all of Margaret or their compy DD.

Hapless kidnapped DD watched the evil Klikiss robots perform horrific tests on captured compies to "free" them from the programming that forced them to obey humans. DD also discovered that thousands of Klikiss robots, buried in a sort of hibernation, were being reawakened as part of their insidious schemes. The robots took little DD to the bizarre high-pressure cities of the hydrogues on a gas giant. There, DD learned that the Klikiss robots were forming a deadly alliance with the hydrogues against humans, but the little compy was helpless to stop their plans.

On Earth, King Peter and Basil Wenceslas were surprised when a Klikiss robot, JORAX, unexpectedly volunteered to let himself be dismantled for science. Jorax claimed that the Klikiss robots wanted to assist humans in the hydrogue war, and that the robotic technology could be used to create highly proficient Soldier compies. Peter was suspicious of the offer, but Basil saw too many possible benefits to turn it down. The robot was dissected, and many of the Klikiss robot programming modules were immediately copied, adapted, and put into production.

While sleeping with Sarein, Basil complained that the aloof green priests would be extremely valuable as communication tools in the war, but they refused to help. Sarein suggested a plan to strengthen ties between Theroc and the Hansa: Her sister Estarra should marry King Peter. When they attended Reynald's coronation ceremony on the forested world, Basil and Sarein offered this plan to the new leader of Theroc, and he accepted. When Estarra learned the news, she was at first surprised and alarmed—she had never met Peter—but her friend, the eccentric green priest ROSSIA, encouraged her to give the alliance a chance. Estarra communicated with her brother Beneto, serving as green priest on Corvus Landing, and he wished her well. Sarein then spoke to the gathered green priests and convinced nineteen of them, including her uncle YARROD, to volunteer to help the EDF.

After his little sister's engagement to the King, Reynald sent a marriage proposal to Cesca Peroni. Though she was in love with Jess and continued to meet him for secret assignations, they had never formalized their plans. Now, for the good of her people, she considered the proposed alliance with the Therons. Jess urged Cesca to accept the offer, regardless of her feelings for him. To make the choice easier for her, he signed up for a long and lonely voyage to collect ekti in one of Del Kellum's nebula skimmers; he launched from the Osquivel shipyards and flew off alone into space, leaving Cesca to do what she must.

On Ildira, the Mage-Imperator revealed to Prime Designate Jora'h that he was dying and that Jora'h would soon have to take the throne. Adar Kori'nh escorted Jora'h to the pleasure planet of Hyrillka to retrieve his eldest noble-born son, THOR'H, who was destined to replace him as the next Prime Designate. Thor'h resented his change of status from his soft life and pouted when his father told him he must prepare for his new duties. The Adar's warliners put on a spectacular performance for hedonistic DESIGNATE RUSA'H.

Before they could depart, a group of hydrogue warglobes swept in to destroy Hyrillka. Designate Rusa'h was seriously injured as the citadel palace collapsed around him. Although Adar Kori'nh and his warliners were resoundingly trounced, he managed to escape with Jora'h, Thor'h, and the unconscious Rusa'h.

When they returned to Ildira, the dying Mage-Imperator instructed Kori'nh to abandon weaker colonies in the Ildiran Empire to consolidate their strength. Kori'nh saw this as a devastating blow: For the first time in millennia, the Empire was shrinking—and under his watch! While Rusa'h remained in a coma, the Mage-Imperator revealed to Jora'h details of an ancient hidden war, in which the hydrogues had been allied with fiery beings known as faeros against watery entities called wentals and a forest mind called the verdani. Jora'h realized that the sentient worldtrees on Theroc must be the verdani, and he began to suspect that his beloved Nira might not have died in the convenient way his father described.

In the Ildiran breeding barracks on Dobro, Nira told the prisoners stories about what life was like for free humanity. Unfortunately, they had been experimental subjects for so many generations that they could not imagine freedom. Designate Udru'h trained Nira's daughter Osira'h to enhance her mental powers. Udru'h brainwashed the little girl to believe that she was the savior of the Ildiran race in the struggle against the hydrogues. When Nira and other prisoners were put to work fighting a brush fire in the hills, Nira tried to escape, rushing to scrub trees and attempting to use her green priest abilities to call for help. But the trees were silent, and she was captured, beaten, and dragged back to the camps.

General Lanyan went on a survey cruise with Tasia Tamblyn's old nemesis, Patrick Fitzpatrick III. They encountered a lone Roamer cargo ship; after confiscating its load of ekti, Fitzpatrick quietly destroyed the ship and its captain, careful to leave no witnesses. Later, the EDF battle group responded to a distress call from a planet under attack by hydrogue warglobes. Aided by an innovative idea from Tasia, they rescued many of the colonists, but they could not fight the hydrogues. Tasia's lover Robb Brindle chased after the departing enemy, tracking them to the ringed gas planet Osquivel, the site of Del Kellum's secret Roamer shipyards. When Robb reported his find of the debris to the EDF commanders, General Lanyan decided to make an all-out attack on Osquivel. Knowing that the hidden Roamer facility would surely be found, Tasia sent her loyal compy EA off to warn Speaker Peroni. Meeting with the EDF commanders, Robb proposed a risky scheme to go down in an encounter vessel in a last attempt to communicate with the hydrogues before the EDF attacked; it was almost certainly a suicide mission.

When EA delivered her warning, the Roamers at Osquivel scrambled to hide their shipyard before the EDF could arrive. By the time Tasia and her fleet came to the ringed planet, the Roamers had completed

their work. Robb descended in his diving bell, offering a last chance for negotiation, but his transmissions cut off abruptly. When hydrogue warglobes opened fire, Robb was presumed dead, and General Lanyan ordered a full-scale attack, using the new Soldier compies. The battle was a massacre of human ships. Zhett Kellum and her father watched the disaster from their hiding places in the planet's rings. Ship after ship was destroyed, and the scattered EDF finally declared a retreat, leaving fallen comrades behind. Tasia barely managed to drag her cruiser away; Patrick Fitzpatrick's ship was destroyed. Utterly defeated, the remnants of the fleet limped home...

Cesca traveled with celebratory Roamer ships to formally accept Reynald's offer of marriage. Jess was far away, alone, on his nebula skimmer, collecting hydrogen, other gases, and water molecules. Gradually sensing that he was no longer alone, Jess realized that the water was somehow alive, and he began to communicate with it. He had gathered one of the supernatural beings, a wental, which told him about the ancient war against the hydrogues. Jess now had a new mission: If he dispersed this wental to other water planets and helped it grow strong again, humanity could have a powerful ally against the hydrogues. He took the wental to an empty ocean world, where the entity miraculously spread; then Jess departed to find another candidate planet.

On Rheindic Co, searching for information about Margaret Colicos, the spy Davlin Lotze accidentally discovered how to activate the Klikiss transportals and was whisked to another planet, while Rlinda Kett could only watch helplessly. Through experimentation, Davlin activated the transportation system again and spent days hopping from planet to planet, until he finally found his way back to Rlinda, who had nearly given up on him. Though exhausted and near starvation, Davlin was also exhilarated—he had discovered a new means of interplanetary travel that did not require the embargoed stardrive fuel ekti!

Still without word of his missing parents, Anton Colicos traveled to meet with the historian Vao'sh at the Prism Palace, where he learned about Ildiran tales and culture. After spending time on the main world, he and Vao'sh were assigned to the resort planet of Maratha, which was in constant sunlight for half the year and full darkness the other half. Klikiss robots were constructing a second city on the opposite side of the world, but the buildings were not finished. Eager to show the dark-fearing Ildirans the thrill of a "haunted house," Anton convinced a group to visit the dark-side construction site, where the black robots diligently worked. Later, as the day season ended, all tourists left Maratha, and only a small skeleton crew remained behind during the long night. Anton and Vao'sh also stayed, waiting as the darkness fell...

At the Roamer base on the near-molten world of Isperos, Kotto Okiah's systems began to break down. Though he struggled to hold the base together, too many components failed, and he knew they were doomed. Kotto sent an urgent call to the Roamers, who responded with rescue ships. But the solar flares increased and the hellish environment was so harsh that the ships began to overload as they tried to take the refugees to safety. Before the rescuers fell to the punishing storm, however, fiery ellipsoidal ships emerged from the sun itself. At first the panicked Roamers feared they were under attack, but the fireballs—the faeros—actually protected them until they could get away...

Back at the space battlefield at Osquivel, Roamers inspected the EDF wrecks to see what they could salvage. Zhett found a drifting lifetube that contained a weak Patrick Fitzpatrick. Although she nursed him to health, she could never let him return to his former life, because he knew too many Roamer secrets.

Destined to be the next Queen, Estarra arrived on Earth. When she finally met Peter, she felt a connection with him, but Basil kept them carefully apart. As the wedding preparations proceeded swiftly after the EDF defeat at Osquivel, she had little chance to get to know the man who would become her husband, but her sister Sarein arranged for them to have time together. During the spectacular wedding, Peter pointedly snubbed the Chairman, making Basil very angry. On their wedding night, the King and

Queen felt they could be much stronger together, and perhaps even learn to fall in love with each other...

Prime Designate Jora'h sent resentful Thor'h back to Hyrillka to supervise the reconstruction activities after the hydrogue attack. Jora'h followed his suspicions, eventually discovering that Nira was indeed alive and held hostage on Dobro—and that her daughter by him, Osira'h, was being trained as a new Ildiran weapon. Feeling betrayed, Jora'h confronted his father and the Dobro Designate, neither of whom denied the accusations, insisting only that Jora'h must accept the truth for the good of the Empire. For days, Jora'h tried to commandeer a ship to Dobro so that he could see Nira again. When the ailing Mage-Imperator realized that the Prime Designate would never understand, he took his only course of action: A Mage-Imperator knows everything in the Ildiran racial mind through his connection with the telepathic force of *thism*. Jora'h would know his place once he became the next godlike leader. Therefore the Mage-Imperator poisoned himself, leaving his son no choice but to do his duty.

The death of the Mage-Imperator severed the telepathic bond holding the Ildiran race together, sending a mental shockwave across the galaxy. Jora'h collapsed, then dragged himself to his father's deathbed. All around the Empire, Ildiran men cut off their hair and nearly went insane.

On patrol with the Solar Navy, Adar Kori'nh had felt helpless and resentful, his hands tied by clear orders that he must never engage the hydrogues. After the shocking death of the Mage-Imperator, though, he realized that, for once, he could act entirely on his own, without the leader observing his every action. He called forty-nine of his battleships and went to Qronha 3, the site of the first major Ildiran defeat by the hydrogues. Kori'nh remembered how one of his officers had destroyed an enemy warglobe by crashing his ship headlong into it. Now, when the hydrogues rose up to meet them, Kori'nh gave his orders—and all forty-nine of his battleships slammed into enemy vessels, reaping a great but costly victory, and earning himself a place forever in the *Saga of Seven Suns*.

Prowling hydrogues encountered Jess Tamblyn on his journey to disperse the wentals, ancient enemies of the deep-core aliens. The water entities told Jess that he had to survive. On their rash instructions, he drank a vial of the energized wentals just as the hydrogues destroyed his ship over a cloudy and uncharted planet. Jess later woke up, floating in an alien sea—charged with superhuman powers, but marooned and completely cut off from everything he knew, including his beloved Cesca...

The hydrogues next attacked Corvus Landing, where Estarra's brother Beneto made his home. The aliens sent a small ship to Beneto's worldtree grove, demanding to know the location of the main worldforest. The trees came alive and destroyed the emissary, but the larger warglobes obliterated the colony and all the worldtrees. Beneto remained connected through the forest, reporting what was happening up until the last minute...

Friction continued between King Peter and the Chairman, especially after Basil made Peter issue an abortion decree to reduce the populations of struggling colonies. The King wanted to think and rule for himself—which did not sit well with Basil, especially since Peter did not agree with all of Basil's actions and decisions. The Hansa even announced the existence of "Prince Daniel," a replacement-in-training for Peter, should he continue to be intractable. Peter christened and dispatched a survey group of EDF battleships, crewed primarily by Soldier compies, with only a few token humans aboard; the ships went to observe a hydrogue planet... and vanished without a trace.

While studying the Soldier compies, the Teacher compy OX discovered enough troubling details to make the King's suspicions stronger. Peter issued a royal order to shut down the compy factories until the copied Klikiss technology was better understood. Basil angrily countermanded the order, since the Hansa desperately needed Soldier compies for the war. This was the last straw for him; the Chairman put into motion an assassination plot that would remove King Peter and Queen Estarra, while implicating the

annoyingly independent Roamers in the crime. With the help of OX and Estarra, Peter foiled the plot, but now the King and the Chairman knew they had to watch each other every moment.

Finally learning the location of the worldforest, a massive fleet of hydrogue warglobes arrived and immediately began to destroy Theroc. Led by Reynald, the Therons tried to fight back against the hydrogues. Mother Alexa and Father Idriss evacuated the people to the lower levels, but even that was no use. The towering trees retaliated, crushing some of the enemy warglobes, but they quickly faltered. Unexpectedly, faero fireballs arrived, joining the forest in its fight against the hydrogues. The titanic battle obliterated many hydrogues and faeros, and the collateral destruction lit great portions of the worldforest on fire. Reynald's youngest sister CELLI was caught high in a burning tree, only to be rescued by a young green priest. Reynald himself died in the treetops when a dueling fireball and warglobe crashed into the canopy. Eventually, the faeros drove off the hydrogues. The enemies departed, leaving the worldforest in burning ruins.

When Tasia's compy EA returned from secretly warning the Roamers about the Osquivel offensive, Basil intercepted the compy and tried to interrogate her. But EA's automated systems wiped her memory core, shutting her down. Suspicious, Basil ordered scientists to study EA; as far as Tasia knew, her compy had never arrived back from her mission. Meanwhile, Tasia went to inspect the site of the original Klikiss Torch test, where she was surprised to discover the hydrogues and faeros engaged in a giant struggle in the burning star itself. Eventually the hydrogues extinguished the sun, killing the faeros...

Receiving good news at last, Basil listened as Davlin and Rlinda described the new Klikiss transportal system they had discovered on Rheindic Co. The dimensional gateways required no rare ekti. Basil seized the opportunity and announced a new colonization scheme to send people to abandoned Klikiss worlds through the transportals—essentially establishing a new network that would bypass the fuel shortages.

On Ildira, Jora'h ascended to become the new Mage-Imperator and endured a castration ceremony that gave him access to *allthis* and the entire truth. He suddenly understood the terrible plots his predecessors had arranged; he didn't know how he could endure it, but he had to continue the distasteful work. On Dobro, while Designate Udru'h was away attending Jora'h's ascension, Nira escaped from the breeding barracks long enough to meet with her daughter Osira'h, to whom she was mentally linked. While they were joined together for just a moment, Nira telepathically revealed her past and everything she knew about the awful things that were being done on Dobro. As Osira'h reeled from the knowledge she had been given, Nira was dragged off by Udru'h's guards and clubbed. No longer able to sense her mother, Osira'h began to turn her thoughts against Designate Udru'h and his schemes...

King Peter and Queen Estarra, still fearful for their lives because of Basil's machinations, looked into the sky at the stars, knowing that out there the war between hydrogues and faeros continued, and that sun after sun was winking out...

1



CELLI

Though blackened by flames, the surviving worldtrees on Theroc remained defiant in the aftermath of the nightmare that had befallen them. Skeletal branches twisted upward, frozen in agony, as if warding off an unexpected blow from the skies. Damaged bark had sloughed away like leprous scabs. Many of the trees had been mortally wounded. The forest itself was a morass of dead branches and half-fallen trees.

Celli, the youngest child of Mother Alexa and Father Idriss, could not look at the painful ruins without blinking back tears that came too readily to her large brown eyes. At eighteen, she was skinny, tomboyish, with a dusting of light freckles on her mocha skin. She had a shag of short, corkscrewy auburn hair that she cut only when it got in her way. Soot and ash scuffed her cropped, fitted top that left her midriff bare and her short flutter skirt that added a splash of color. Normally she had a bright smile beneath her upturned nose, but of late there had been few occasions to smile.

After the hydrogues had been driven back, it had taken all the remaining energy of the worldforest, a herculean effort from the Therons, and the assistance of a delayed rescue fleet from the Earth Defense Forces to bring the wildfires mostly under control.

Even so, whole continents lay wasted. Some patches still burned, and smoke rose into the blue sky like stains drawn by bloody fingers. Green priests and Theron laborers regularly gathered at central meeting places to face the endless task of recovery.

Each day, Celli joined them. With every breath as she ran along, the sour stench of burned pulpy foliage caught in her throat, and she knew that she would find the smell of roasting meat and burning wood nauseating for the rest of her life.

When she had first arrived at what remained of the fungus-reef city, an enormous shelf mushroom that had coalesced over the centuries, she gazed up at it with a fresh sense of shock. The host tree had been badly burned and the fungus reef half-destroyed, the carved-out pocket rooms unsuitable for habitation.

In a trampled clearing beneath the damaged fungus reef, her parents—though overwhelmed by the enormity of the task—did their best to organize the weary, red-eyed workers. Idriss and Alexa had officially retired from their leadership role and made Celli's oldest brother, Reynald, their king. But he had been killed in the hydrogue attack. She remembered her last vision of him, standing defiantly atop the worldforest canopy as the hydrogues and faeros battled overhead...

Today, though, as on every other day since the hydrogue attack, no one would stop to mourn or dwell on thoughts of all those who had died. To pause right now in their labors, even out of pure grief, would have been too self-indulgent. There were countless trees and people that could yet be saved, if only there were hands enough to do the necessary work. That was why all Therons who were not too severely injured returned without complaint to the tasks that must be done. Celli, like every other Theron, grieved while on the move.

Her brother was lost along with so many others, including three of Celli's close friends. Including her other brother, Beneto, a green priest killed when the hydrogues attacked Corvus Landing. Every day, moment by moment, Celli worked to the point of exhaustion, trying to avoid the worst of the pain. She didn't dare think too long about Lica, Kari, Ren, for fear that the grief might immobilize her.

Before the hydrogue attack, Celli and her friends had spent their days amusing themselves in the forest, never thinking much beyond the next day or two. She would practice treedancing moves, and Ren was particularly good at catching condorflies. Lica and Kari both liked the same boy, but he hadn't noticed either one of them. How they had all laughed and played together, never expecting anything to change...



None of them had ever guessed that enemies might lie beyond the sky.

Celli, the baby of the family, was now the only one of her siblings left on Theroc, since her sisters Sarein and Estarra both lived in the WhisperPalace on Earth. In the past, her sisters had often accused her of complaining too much; now the worries and discomforts of her youth seemed petty and meaningless. For the first time in her life, Celli felt both a spark of independence and the weight of real responsibility. And she was determined to help her people get through this tragedy. The problem seemed impossibly large, but she lifted her chin and gritted her teeth.

Like Celli, the Theron survivors possessed a new determination that formed a tough veneer over their despair. The people had been unprepared for such a holocaust, but this desperate time had revealed an inner resolve, as they simultaneously shored up the worldforest and drew comfort from it.

“We are not alone. We care for the trees, and they care for us. We will never abandon each other. *This* is the source of our strength, and together we will all get through our ordeal,” Father Idriss had pronounced when, shortly after the attack, he called the survivors together.

Now support ladders and pulleys, makeshift ramps, and walkways were erected against the main fungus-reef tree as crews salvaged what they could. Adults worked to clear debris and charred mushroom flesh from the lower levels, while cautious younger children crawled onto precarious perches, marking safe routes for the heavier adult workers. Celli remembered when she and Estarra had climbed to the top levels of the giant mushroom to harvest the tender whitish meat Beneto loved so well...

Fortunately, since their initial attack here, the hydrogues had been preoccupied with a new conflict against the faeros and had not returned to crush the worldforest. But Celli took little heart from that. There was too much death and destruction around her.

From above, she heard a shout of surprise, then moans of grief. In one of the fungus-reef chambers, a child explorer had just found an asphyxiated woman. Others made their way across the hardened fringes to where they could drag the victim out. Celli had known the woman, a family friend who made delicious treats from forest berries. Her heart sank, but her grief had no further to go; each fresh drop of cold tragedy ran like water off an already saturated cloak. Reynald, Beneto, Lica, Kari, Ren—the names rolled through her conscience, one after another. She was terrified she might forget somebody—and that didn't seem fair. They deserved to be remembered. Each one of them.

Not wanting to be at the base camp when the workers brought down the woman's body, Celli went to her grandparents. “I want to go where I'm needed most, Grandmother. Send me out.”

“I know you're impatient, dear.” Old Lia's watery eyes seemed extremely tired. “We're all trying to decide which work is most important.”

Her grandfather scratched his seamed cheek. “Every day we've been doing triage for the forest.”

Uthair and Lia were busily keeping track of scouting teams, scribing notes and making records that only they could decipher. Normally, the green priests could connect to the worldtrees to see the whole scope of the forest, but the magnitude of the destruction was so overwhelming that many of them could not sort through the visual information to make sense of it all.

The old couple spread out detailed satellite images taken by EDF ships, showing the extent of burned and frozen areas like a blight across the landscape. Reeling green priests had already shared this information with the trees through telink, but the forest already felt its enormous injuries, which made

direct and clear communication difficult. Her grandmother pointed to an unmarked spot where hundreds of acres of broken and toppled trees lay flattened as if they had been no more than stalks of grain in the path of a hurricane. “No one has gone into this area yet.”

“I’ll go take a look.” Celli was glad to have a useful assignment she could do by herself. She welcomed the responsibility. After all, she was now as old as Estarra had been when she’d married King Peter. Everyone on Theroc, down to the youngest child, was being forced to grow up too quickly.

She sprinted off, picking her way through the haunted forest. The fast blaze had scoured away the underbrush, but the hydrogues’ icewave had been like dynamite, blasting trees into kindling, shattering them into tangles of fibrous pulp.

Celli moved lightly on graceful legs that were muscular from climbing, running, and dancing. She imagined she was practicing to be a treedancer again, a profession she’d aspired to for many years. She had trained diligently, seeing herself as half ballerina and half marathon runner.

As she ran, she encountered more human bodies—broken statues killed by the hydrogues’ icewave or horribly burned cadavers drawn into a mummified fetal position as muscles and sinews tightened in the heat. Far too many had died, both trees and humans.

But Celli forged on, her feet sending up puffs of ash. Each living tree she could report would be one little victory for Theroc. Each such triumph would gradually tip the scales against the despair the hydrogues had brought.

As she explored in slow, broad zigzags through the devastation, the surviving trees were few and far between, but she touched each one briefly, murmuring words of encouragement and hope. Scrambling on her hands and knees, she climbed through a tangle of toppled trees as wide as a house. Though the jagged branches scratched her, she pressed forward and reached an artificial clearing in which all the trees had been knocked down in a circular pattern, as if something huge had exploded there, leaving an open area at the center.

Celli caught her breath. In the middle of the circle of destruction, she saw a curved shell of smoke-blackened crystal, the shattered fragments of what had been an alien warglobe. Pyramid-shaped protrusions thrust like claws through the spherical hull sections.

A hydrogue ship.

She had seen these awful things before, though this warglobe was nothing more than a fractured wreck, half of it strewn around the clearing. Celli couldn’t help but clench her fists while her lips curled in an angry but triumphant snarl.

Thus far, the EDF—for all their sophisticated weapons—had achieved little success against the hydrogues’ diamond armor. Celli was sure the Earth military would be interested in having a specimen of an enemy warship that they could analyze up close—and she intended to give it to them, if there was any chance it might help in the fight.

Flushed with her discovery, Celli raced back toward the fungus-reef city, happy to have good news to share at last.



## MAGE-EMPEROR JORA'H

Mere days after his ascension, Mage-Emperor Jora'h went to watch the handlers prepare his father's corpulent body for its dazzling incineration.

He had never expected to become Mage-Emperor under such circumstances, but the Ildiran Empire was his to rule now. Jora'h wanted to make changes, to improve life for his people, to make amends to those who had suffered... but he was bound by obligations and commitments, forced to continue schemes he had not previously known about. He felt trapped in a web woven from myriad sticky strands—unless he could find a way around them.

But first, before he could face those tangled responsibilities, Jora'h had to preside over the funeral of his poisoned father.

Attender kithmen carried his chrysalis chair into the chamber where the dead Mage-Emperor had been laid out for his final preparations. Jora'h sat silently on the spacious levitating throne, looking down at the slack features of his father. Resenting him.

Treacheries, schemes, lies—how could he endure everything he knew? Jora'h was now the mind, soul, and figurehead of the Ildiran race. It was not appropriate for him to curse his father's memory, but that didn't stop him...

The previous Mage-Emperor had killed himself, seeing his own death as the only way to force his son to inherit the Empire's cruel secrets. Jora'h was still reeling from the revelations. Much as he disliked what he had learned, he understood the rationale for those hateful deeds. He had never suspected the hidden danger to the Ildiran Empire or the slim, desperate hope of salvation, which could be achieved only if he continued the experiments on Dobro.

Jora'h was handsome, smooth-featured, with golden hair bound back into a braid that would eventually grow long, like his father's. Over time, his classic features might change, too, as he evolved into his sedentary, supposedly benevolent role. His sheltered life as Prime Designate had not prepared him to imagine the awful things that were happening where he couldn't see them. But now, through *thethism*, he knew everything. It was exactly as his father had intended, both a gift and a curse.

And now he was compelled to continue the same acts, when all he wanted was to see his beloved and imprisoned Nira again. If nothing else, he would free her. That, at least, he could do—as soon as he finished the transition of leadership and found a way to leave the Prism Palace.

Now, exercising extreme care, gaunt handlers washed the former leader's heavy body, preparing it. Cyroc'h's ample flesh sagged on his bones like a rubbery fabric that would easily peel away from his skeleton.

Diminutive servants, gibbering with despair, pushed forward frenetically to assist, but they had no place here during this ceremony, and Jora'h sternly sent them away. Some of them would no doubt throw themselves from a turret of the Prism Palace in their grief and misery. But their misery could not compare

to his own dismay at all he had learned. No one could help him decide how best to rule, or what to do at Dobro...

"How long will it be?" he asked the handlers.

The stony-faced men looked up from their work. Their leader said in a grim voice, "For an event of such magnitude, Liege, this must be our best work. It is the most important duty we will ever perform."

"Of course." Jora'h continued to observe in silence.

Wearing armored gloves, the handlers reached into pots and withdrew handfuls of silvery-gray paste, which they spread thickly and lovingly over the dead Mage-Imperator. They made certain to cover every speck of exposed skin.

Even in the dimness of the preparation room, the paste simmered and began to smoke. The handlers increased their pace, but did not grow sloppy under Jora'h's watchful gaze. When the Mage-Imperator was completely slathered, they wrapped his body with an opaque cloth, then announced their readiness.

"To the roof," Jora'h said from his chrysalis chair. "And call all of the Designates."

The dead Mage-Imperator's sons, along with Jora'h's own children, assembled on the highest transparent platform atop the spherical domes of the Prism Palace. The dazzling light of multiple suns washed down on them.

As Jora'h waited in the bright sun, ready to fulfill his role in the ceremony, he scanned the faces of his brothers, the former Designates, who had come from splinter colonies around the Empire, regardless of the shortage of stardrive fuel. Jora'h's own group of sons—the next generation of Designates—stood grim and respectful beside their oldest noble brother, Thor'h, who was now the Prime Designate. Pery'h, the Designate-in-waiting for the planet Hyrillka, stood next to his brother Daro'h, the Dobro Designate-in-waiting; others clustered in ranks next to their uncles, whom they would soon replace.

Their awareness that the Hyrillka Designate could not attend and still lay unconscious in the Prism Palace's infirmary cast a deeper pall over the ceremony. Though his bruises and contusions had healed, Rusa'h remained lost and unresponsive in a deep sub-*thism* sleep, probably having nightmares of the hydrogue attack on his citadel palace on Hyrillka. It was doubtful the Designate would ever awaken, and his planet would soon need a new leader. Though not yet prepared, Pery'h would have to take his place without Rusa'h as his mentor...

Handler kithmen delivered Cyroc'h's wrapped body to a raised platform and adjusted magnifiers and mirrors. Everything proceeded in somber silence. Silently respectful carriers brought the chrysalis chair adjacent to the indistinct form of Cyroc'h, still shrouded in its opaque cloth.

Jora'h lifted his gaze to his brothers and sons as he grasped the thick cloth with his left hand. "My father served as Mage-Imperator during a century of peace and also in recent times of crisis. His soul has already followed the threads of *thism* to the realm of the Lightsource. Now, here, his physical form will join the light as well."

In a single abrupt motion, Jora'h yanked away the cloth to expose the soft form of the dead Mage-Imperator. The intense light of seven suns pounded down, activating the shimmering metallic paste that covered the dead leader's skin. Piercing white flames instantly engulfed the smothered, sagging body. The photothermal paste did not burn the body so much as dissolve it, making the skin and muscle and fat

dissociate into the air, glowing, sparkling...

The fallen Mage-Imperator vanished in a cloud of writhing steam and smoke. The air cleared. All that remained were Cyroc's glowing bones, impregnated with bioluminescent compounds. His clean, empty skull was only a symbol of the great things that he had been... and the dreadful things he had done in the name of preserving the Ildiran Empire.

As Mage-Imperator, Jora's immediate obligation was to dispatch his Designates-in-waiting to seal the process of governmental transition. Then he could finally find a way to free Nira. He turned to his sons and his brothers. "And now the Empire must move on."

3



### BASIL WENCESLAS

King Peter was in fine form as he stood on the WhisperPalace balcony to address the great crowds. It would be one of his most important speeches in recent years.

Watching the young King from his observation window, Chairman Basil Wenceslas straightened his expensive suit, touched his steel-gray hair. Hidden cameras around the WhisperPalace gave him alternate views that allowed him to study Peter's body language, the barely readable expressions on his smooth young face, the intensity of his darting blue eyes. *Good... so far.*

At least this time when he'd read the scripted words, the King had not objected to them. Instead, Peter had looked directly into the dapper Chairman's gray eyes and visibly swallowed. "You're certain this is what we need to do, Basil?" There was no sarcasm in his voice, no taunt in his words. His dyed blond hair was perfect, his artificially colored blue eyes bright and sincere.

"We have studied every alternative. The people must be made to understand that there is no choice."

With a sigh, Peter had set down the display pad, having memorized the script in his first reading. He ran his hands through his blond hair, messing it without a care for who might see him; assistants would make it perfect again before he made his public appearance. "I will make them understand."

Now, waiting for the speech to start, Basil tapped an appraising fingertip against his lips. At the moment, the King looked particularly regal. Only a month earlier, however, the Chairman had been goaded by Peter's mulish insubordination to set in motion plans to assassinate the King and Queen. Basil had arranged to make it look like a Roamer plot, so that the EDF could forcibly bring the space gypsies—and all of their resources and capabilities—under direct Hansa control. Layers and layers of schemes. It would have been advantageous all around.

But Peter and Estarra had somehow foiled his assassination attempt. There was no denying that the King hated him with a deep coldness that would likely never fade, but at least Peter now understood the lengths to which Basil would go to ensure that his orders were followed. If Peter had genuinely learned his lesson, then the Chairman and his fellow Hansa officials would heave sighs of relief... and the King

and his lovely bride would be permitted to keep their heads on their shoulders. There was a government to run and a war to fight, and if everyone would just cooperate...

At the appointed time, King Peter stepped out into the bright daylight where everyone could see him and raised his hands. Basil narrowed his eyes and leaned forward, resting his chin on his knuckles. The crowd greeted Peter with cheers that quickly gave way to a hushed, expectant murmur. Sometimes the King's speeches were no more than pep talks; at other times he delivered dire news of fallen heroes or slaughtered colonies.

The King's voice was rich, well practiced. "Eight years ago, the hydrogues began to prey upon us. Eight years of blood and unprovoked outrage and murder! And how do we stop it? How can anyone end this conflict against an enemy we cannot possibly understand? Finally, we have a way!"

He had their full attention now. "In this terrible struggle, we have no recourse but to use every possible tool, every weapon at our disposal—regardless of how reprehensible it may be to our moral character. Now is not the time to be reluctant. Now is the time for action." Peter smiled: a true leader's smile. Basil was surprised to feel his own emotions stirring.

"Therefore, in close consultation with the Hansa Chairman and the commander of the Earth Defense Forces, I have concluded that we must employ our final option. After witnessing the heinous destruction of peaceful Theroc, the home of my Queen Estarra—"

He shuddered. Basil flicked his gaze to different views on the screens. Were those actual tears in his eyes? Excellent.

"After sustaining unprovoked depredations on Hansa colonies such as Corvus Landing and Boone's Crossing... after enduring the untenable interdiction on gas-giant planets that prevents us from harvesting the stardrive fuel we vitally need... indeed, after suffering the murder of my predecessor King Frederick"—he drew a deep breath, then raised his voice, shouting at the crowd and igniting their pride and defiance—"the time for mere reaction and defense is at an end. We must begin waging an *offensive* war."

The roar of raucous approval was so loud that the sound drove Peter back a step. Basil turned to the two uniformed military advisers beside him, General Kurt Lanyan and Admiral Lev Stromo; both men nodded. Eldred Cain, the pale-skinned Hansa deputy who was under consideration to become Basil's successor, made detailed annotations to his copy of Peter's speech. Everyone seemed satisfied with the King's announcement.

So far.

Peter continued, lowering his voice and making them listen again, playing the mood of the crowd. "I have done a great deal of soul-searching, and I can come to no other conclusion." He paused, letting the crowd wait, letting the silence build. When he spoke again it was like a slap. "We must deploy the Klikiss Torch again. Intentionally."

There was a gasp, followed by mutters, then a swell of applause.

"We will utterly annihilate hydrogue planets, one after another, until our enemy capitulates. It's time for them to endure their own losses!"

Peter bowed, and the audience continued to cheer without pausing to consider the consequences. This

decision would dramatically turn up the heat in the war. Perhaps it was just as well that they didn't consider, since the Klikiss Torch seemed to be humanity's only option, the only effective weapon they had found so far. He looked stoic and determined, like a man who had wrestled with a difficult decision and had come to the only possible conclusion.

Basil considered it one of the best-delivered speeches the King had ever given. Perhaps the young man was salvageable after all.

4



#### TASIA TAMBLYN

The Grid 7 battle group had returned to the shipyards between Jupiter and Mars for refurbishment and refitting and to take on new personnel. They would also incorporate fifteen recently completed Juggernauts and Mantas, but that didn't begin to replace all the ships the battle group had lost during the debacle in the rings of Osquivel. In the month since that disaster, the Earth Defense Forces had jumped at every shadow.

Tasia Tamblyn herself had gone to the new star of Oncier, site of the first test firing of the Klikiss Torch, and had watched the titanic battle between hydrogues and faeros, which had resulted in the complete snuffing of the artificial sun created from a gas-giant planet. Seeing a war in which whole worlds and stars were casualties, Tasia didn't know how tiny humans could hope to cause any damage to the enemy...

But it wouldn't stop her from trying. The drogues had killed her brother Ross on his skymine, and her lover Robb Brindle when he'd gone down into the clouds under a white flag of truce. If vengeance was at all in her power, Tasia didn't intend to let the deep-core bastards get away with that. A stern expression had once looked out of place on her heart-shaped face, but not anymore.

She had pale skin from growing up under the icy ceiling of her clan's water mines on Plumas, and had never gotten much color from serving in the EDF aboard ships all the time. Her light blue eyes reminded her of the frozen walls of the family settlement beneath the glacial surface of the isolated moon.

While her Manta was in dock at the asteroid belt shipyards, some of her crew had been rotated to either Mars or the Moon base for a week of downtime. For herself, Tasia had no use for furloughs and did not wish to visit Earth. The only time she'd gone there, in fact, was to contact Robb's parents and tell them how their son had died.

The optimistic and kindhearted young man had been more than herlover, he had been her best friend. Of all the recruits in the EDF—many of whom were painfully bigoted—Robb alone had taken Tasia at her word, given her a chance to be herself, and loved her for it. In the dark days of the war, she still missed him very much. He'd thought he was doing something important and meaningful by volunteering to bring a message deep into a gas giant's clouds, but in the end it had proven a foolish waste of his life. Now a talented young man was gone, leaving a small void in the Earth Defense Forces and an aching hole in Tasia's heart.

It didn't help matters that her compy EA had also disappeared shortly after delivering a warning to the Roamers at Osquivel. Tasia had been unable to find any clues to where the Listener compy had gone. Not only was EA a valuable piece of "equipment," she was also a friend who had been owned by clan Tamblyn for many years. Tasia still held out hope that the compy would eventually find her way back to EDF headquarters, even if she had to take a lengthy, roundabout route.

Though it no doubt added to her feelings of isolation, Tasia preferred to spend the week aboard her ship, watching entertainment loops or playing games. She had a medium build, was fit and strong but didn't show it. She'd become adept at Ping-Pong, thanks to practicing with Robb—so adept, in fact, that most of her crew made excuses whenever she challenged them to a match. She couldn't wait until all repairs, upgrades, and inspections were finished, so she could be on her way again, to go head-to-head with the inhuman enemy.

Unexpectedly, she received a summons to go to the Grid 7 flagship. She shuttled over to the *Jupiter* to meet with Admiral Sheila Willis, adjusting her clean uniform, making sure her shoulder-length light brown hair was bound in regulation fashion under her cap.

When Tasia presented herself in the admiral's lounge, she was surprised to see the brawny, dark-haired EDF commander, General Kurt Lanyan, sitting in a visitor's chair. She snapped to attention. "General Lanyan, sir. And Admiral Willis. You called me, sirs?"

She had met the swarthy General in a strategy session before the Osquivel offensive, when Robb had volunteered to attempt to communicate with the drogues.

"Commander Tamblyn, we have noted your exemplary service." The General had a gruff voice. "Your solution of creating instant artificial rafts at Boone's Crossing saved thousands of colonists. After reviewing your ship's internal log, I have concluded that your performance during the Osquivel battle was exceptional. Furthermore, at Oncier you recently obtained vital information about the faeros and their struggle with the hydrogues."

"Yes, sir." Tasia didn't know what else he wanted to hear. Her heart pounded. Was she somehow in line for another promotion? True, the battle of Osquivel had killed a great many officers, and the EDF would need to replace them...

Admiral Willis folded her hands together. She was a thin, folksy woman who spoke in obscure platitudes, yet she had a wit as sharp as a monofilament wire. "Commander Tamblyn, would you be at all interested in having your ship carry a nasty little present to the drogues? King Peter has finally yanked off the leash and let us run loose."

"What sort of nasty present, ma'am?"

The grandmotherly woman smiled. "How'd you like to drop a Klikiss Torch down their throats and blow the crap out of a whole hydrogue planet?"

Tasia responded instantly. "Admiral, General, I would welcome any opportunity for a little payback. We all have plenty of personal reasons for carrying a grudge."

Lanyan chuckled. "I like your attitude, Commander Tamblyn." He handed her documents and maps pinpointing the chosen target for the Klikiss Torch, an obscure gas giant named Ptoro.

Tasia couldn't hide her surprised response. The Roamer clan Tylar had operated a large old skymine on



Ptoro, but the facility was withdrawn after the hydrogue ultimatum. As far as she knew, no one had gone to chilly Ptoro in years. “Ptoro? Why would you want to—” She caught herself, and the General frowned at her.

“You’ve actually heard of it? It seems to be a fairly insignificant planet.”

“You’re right, sir. It’s just... in the middle of nowhere, isn’t it?”

“We’ve detected drogue activity there. That’s what counts.”

Admiral Willis added, “We’ll be sending a whole battle group along to keep you company, but your Manta will carry the big surprise.”

“As soon as we’re out of spacedock, my crew and I are completely at your disposal, sirs.”

Tasia practically danced her way back to the shuttle.

Roamers didn’t judge maturity by age, but by capabilities. The clans considered a person to be a functional adult once he or she could strip down, break apart, and reassemble virtually any piece of mechanical apparatus and could successfully navigate using stars and the old Ildiran databases. After being coached by her two brothers, Tasia had been particularly proud when she’d demonstrated that she could don a spacesuit and correctly match all the seals, ten times out of ten. She had been twelve the first time she’d done it.

Now she felt the same measure of pride as she stood in her Manta’s cargo bay. Swarms of engineers and technicians worked to install the racks, monitors, and peripheral equipment needed for deploying the Klikiss Torch. Oh, how she was going to enjoy seeing a bloated hydrogue planet turn into a bright new sun.

The green priest Rossia, Tasia’s communications link with the rest of the Spiral Arm, came up beside her, walking with a pronounced limp owing to an injury he had suffered on Theroc many years before. His eyes were bulging and oversized like stray Ping-Pong balls from the rec room.

“Turmoil... always turmoil,” he said. “The EDF seems to relish banging and pounding and reconfiguring things.”

Together they watched engineers load blunt-nosed torpedoes, part of the Klikiss Torch apparatus. The crew had already brought aboard a fast cargo ship that would be used to deliver the other end of the wormhole-generating machinery to a neutron star that would be transferred like a stellar bomb into Ptoro’s core.

“Gotta crack a few shells if you want to scramble the drogues,” she said. “After what they did to Theroc, you want to see them stopped, don’t you?”

The pop-eyed priest bobbed his head. “Oh, certainly the worldforest wishes the hydrogues to be defeated—or at least neutralized. But more than anything else, I want to go back home. The worldforest has been terribly injured, and like all green priests, I can hear it calling. I should be there helping to replant and rebuild.”

“But you volunteered to help the EDF, and you’re a vital link in our communications,” Tasia said. “We need you.”

He scratched his green cheek. “When everyone needs you, Commander, you’re forced to choose who has the greater need.”

“Well, it isn’t really your choice to make, once you’ve joined up with the military and given your word.” Many times, Tasia herself had wanted to return home to her clan’s water mines on Plumas, but she didn’t have that option—and neither did Rossia.

“I should tell you, Commander,” Rossia said, “that other green priests have been grumbling across telink, on other worlds, on other ships. They all feel the call of the worldforest. Not all of them can resist. We simply volunteered our services, remember. We did not formally join the Earth Defense Forces.”

She frowned at him as the work of installing the Klikiss Torch continued. “I would rather be someplace else, too, but we all have to keep up the fight. We each need to follow our Guiding Star, not be distracted by other flickers of light.”

Rossia gave his jerky nod. “A true green priest sets down roots of conviction, and is not blown about like a featherseed in the breeze.”

“Pick whatever metaphor you prefer. But you know the drogues are not going to stop attacking. In all probability they’ll go back to Theroc to finish the job they started.”

“All the more reason for the green priests to go home and help protect the worldforest.”

Tasia frowned at him. “On the contrary—all the more reason to stay with the EDF and hope we kick the stuffing out of them. How can you possibly protect the trees if you’re standing beside them on a planet that’s under attack? The full-blown military has a better chance than a handful of green priests do.”

Rossia touched the potted treeling he always kept with him, reticent and deep in thought. “Perhaps. I do not intend to leave, Commander Tamblyn. Many green priests have forgotten that the forest itself asked us to assist you in the struggle. We have all suffered losses in this war.” He shook his head slowly. “And we all make sacrifices.”

5



DD

Though his memory core was already filled with service modules, specialized task programming, and decades’ worth of experiences, DD still had the unfortunate capacity to keep holding memory after unpleasant memory. He wished he could erase them all, but the experiences were burned irrevocably into his computer brain.

The Friendly compy had been held hostage for years by the evil Klikiss robots, and now they had taken him below the sky oceans of a hydrogue gas giant called Ptoro. The little compy endured day after day within the alien cityspheres, which were hundreds of times more immense than even the largest hydrogue

warglobes.

Continuing their quiet treachery against humans, the Klikiss robots engaged in incomprehensible vibrational discussions with the liquid-crystal beings, a sophisticated and unusual form of communication that was part music, part lyrical visual pattern disruption, part something that was beyond DD's ability to understand. It was far too complex for him.

When he'd been with the Colicos xeno-archaeology team, DD had known his place, known his duties, but the ancient robots had insisted on "freeing" all competent computerized companions from their servitude. With their unnecessary vendetta, the Klikiss robots meant to exterminate all humans. An alliance with the hydrogues extended their power and abilities far beyond what they could have achieved on their own.

Inside the shimmering walls of the fantastic citysphere, DD stood surrounded by unusual conglomerations of exotic geometric shapes that grew in the extreme high-pressure environment. Sensor perceptions were distorted by the laws of physics pushed to their extremes. Entire structures were fabricated from elements that DD normally knew as gases. Quantum effects took hold. Solid materials moved unpredictably, with strange side effects.

DD wanted to depart from Ptoro and find a place where he could be safe again. When he learned about the group of desperate human captives who were held in special chambers of the citysphere, he asked Sirix for more information. The Klikiss robot pondered the question, then answered in a buzzing signal, "Disorientation and fear make for interesting responses. There is little of value to be learned from human beings, but the hydrogues do not concur with us. That is why they keep test subjects."

DD felt sad for the helpless prisoners the hydrogues had seized over the past several years. "I would like to see these human captives, Sirix. Would that be possible?"

"There is no purpose to your interacting with the prisoners."

DD pondered a set of responses and selected an answer that might sway his captor. "If I observe these humans in their most unpleasant condition, full of fear and hopelessness, then I may be convinced of the failings you ascribe to their entire race."

Sirix twitched his segmented insectlike legs and folded his hemispherical carapace back together. "An acceptable analysis. Follow me."

The black machine led DD up and down dizzying ramps that defied gravity, until they arrived at a shimmering wall that led to an array of jewel-like pressurized chambers, like faceted soap bubbles clustered together. Hydrogues flowed around them, incomprehensible creatures that could turn into gases or fluids, occasionally taking human shape.

Sirix emitted a series of chiming notes, his sensors and indicator lights glowing. The shimmering film wall became transparent. "You may enter."

"Is it safe to breach the barrier? Those environment cages appear fragile."

"Pressurized chambers protect the specimens from the hostile surroundings. The captives are safe, for now. If the hydrogues had wished to kill them, they would have done so without delay."

Sirix sent a time signal explaining when he would return. DD stepped forward, glad for the opportunity

to be away from the oppressive scrutiny of the Klikiss robot. He pressed against the resistance of the protective wall, then passed through. As he readjusted his systems to the new environment, he felt a response akin to great relief at the sensation of being in “normal” air pressure again.

The watery light filled with swirls of unusual colors. His body steamed and crackled as he reached equilibrium with a human-compatible environment. DD swiveled his head to observe the sixteen captives huddled in their self-contained shell of relative safety.

“Good Lord, it’s a compy!” said one of the humans, a coffee-skinned young man who wore the wrinkled uniform of an EDF soldier. Consulting his database, DD determined he was a wing commander.

“Great. Our own compies are betraying us now,” said a second prisoner, a female captive with a pinched face and a bitter expression. An ID tag on the tattered pocket of her gray crewman’s uniform gave her last name as Telton.

“Not necessarily. Maybe he can help us get out of here! We can’t stop looking for opportunities, no matter how crazy,” said the first prisoner.

“Crazy is right.”

“I am here against my will, just as you are,” DD confessed. “The Klikiss robots wish to convert me to their cause. Thus far, they have been unsuccessful.”

“What’s going on? What do the drogues want from us?” said a third prisoner.

“Be careful not to believe anything that compy says,” grumbled the dour female captive. “Could be a trick.”

“Hey, give him a chance, Anjea,” said the black EDF officer. “We’d like you to tell us what you know, compy. I’m Robb Brindle. What’s your name, so we can have a real conversation?”

“My shortened serial number is DD. I would prefer that you call me that.”

Brindle rubbed his hands together. “A friend of mine in the EDF was always close to her compy. I’m sure we can be friends. Right?”

“I would like that, Robb Brindle.”

Brindle’s honey-brown eyes brightened. “We’re pretty out of it here, DD. Several of us have already died, and we haven’t even come close to creating a workable escape plan.”

“We’re stuck in the middle of a gas giant!” Anjea Telton snapped at him. “Do you expect to just walk away?”

“No,” Brindle said, frowning at the other prisoner. “But I expect some cooperation in seizing an opportunity if one presents itself. Like DD here. Hey, pal, can you help us get out of this place?”

“I have no means by which to effect a rescue. My body was modified to withstand the pressures outside, but your organic forms could never survive any attempt to depart. I believe that these environment bubbles are the only safe places for you within a gas-giant core.”

For just a moment, Brindle's shoulders slumped, but then he straightened himself, as if unwilling to show disappointment in front of the other prisoners. "We figured as much, but we had to ask."

"I am sorry. If I encounter new possibilities, I will attempt to help." DD took another step forward. "Perhaps you could each describe how you came to be captives. I am as lacking in information as you say you are. Did the Klikiss robots seize you, or were you each taken in hydrogue attacks?"

"Damned black bug robots are worse than the drogues! They pretended to be our friends."

"Can't trust robots."

"No kidding."

"But we can trust you, DD, right?" Brindle explained how he had been captured during a diplomatic mission while descending in an environment chamber to the hydrogues. Other captives had been stolen from lifetubes in the battle of Osquivel or kidnapped in ships flying between star systems. One, Charles Gomez, had even been snatched from the forested colony of Boone's Crossing.

DD assessed all of the stories, seeing few common denominators. "I will ponder your situation. Perhaps I can determine a solution."

"Why bother? We're all dead anyway," said sullen and distraught Gomez. "The drogues already killed five of us in their experiments. It's only a matter of time."

"We can't let ourselves think like that," Brindle said, putting a hand on the man's shoulder.

DD looked around at the human prisoners. "You have survived so far. My master Louis Colicos always instructed me to be optimistic, while my other master Margaret Colicos insisted that I be practical. I will try to synthesize both."

"You do that. And we'll try to do the same." Brindle gave him a hopeful smile. "We appreciate whatever you can do, DD. And thanks for visiting us. It's given me the most hope I've had since I got here, especially considering everybody probably thinks I'm already dead."

DD's time signal showed that his brief visit was nearly over and Sirix would soon be coming back for him. "Perhaps we can prove them wrong."

6



JESS TAMBLYN

Everybody probably thinks I'm dead. "Jess sat alone on the shore of a windswept alien sea, naked and clean, but not cold. He had never felt so isolated—or so... different—from other human beings in his life. His skin tingled with unnatural and explosive energy, as if ready to spark and jump. The light dusting of hair on his bare chest looked normal—and completely out of place—on his altered body.

He remained alive even though his ship had been destroyed by marauding hydrogues. After the attack, Jess barely remembered falling through the clouds, striking the ocean. . . and then emerging again, reborn, bobbing with the tides as he studied the flat, gray horizon. He was naked, all his garments burned away, but unharmed. He found himself afloat with no land in sight, no food, no way to survive, and gradually came to realize that his new existence required none of those things. The wentals kept him alive, gave him energy. He could have drifted there forever.

His altered body swelled with incalculable power—abilities and thoughts and surging energies he had never imagined. Yet he was stuck in this empty place, unable to get home to the Roamer clans, to any part of the human race. An eerie watery life force pulsed through him and through the ocean of this uncharted world.

The hydrogues had left him for dead—and the wentals had saved him.

That first day, while Jess had drifted, he sensed enormous swimming things beneath the currents, heavy shapes like plesiosaurs or sea serpents from a legendary Earth past. When one of the hungry monsters came up from the depths, Jess saw an immense maw, long teeth, spined tentacles reaching out—but the wentals had protected him, sending a message through the water that this man was to be left alone. *And saved.*

The underwater behemoth had surfaced so that Jess could cling to the knobby fins on its slippery, slimy back. The creature cruised at great speed across the water, breaking through waves, until Jess saw a low line of rocks and crashing surf. The sea monster had brought him to land. . .

For uncounted days he had lived among the scrub brush and weeds, not needing to eat, wishing for real human companionship, though he had the ever-present wentals in his mind. For a long time, he watched shelled creatures like trilobites crawl in endless circles, climbing out of one tide pool and lowering themselves into another. The days passed with painful slowness. He stood with arms outstretched as storms passed over him in a bath of fresh raindrops. Even the lightning could not harm him.

When he'd flown his solo nebula skimmer, Jess had not bothered to shave often. He had shoulder-length, wavy brown hair. He grew a mustache and beard just thick enough to cover the cleft in his chin, trimming it every few days, but since the wentals had infused him, his hair had all stopped growing.

"I was supposed to bring the wentals to the Roamers, to help you expand and grow. And now I'm stranded here," he spoke aloud. "We've been defeated before we could even start."

Not defeated. We are stronger now than we were. The thrumming voice spoke inside his skull, the echoing presence of innumerable diverse wentals. *We waited ten thousand years to reach this point. We can wait again.*

At the edge of the vast, primitive ocean, Jess sat on the rough rocks watching the blue-green water foam against the reefs. All of the amazing power he now held, along with the secret return of the wentals, did him no good. "I'm not very good at waiting."

Off on the horizon, he watched lightning-embroidered storm clouds that hung low in the sky. He could see for immense distances, and he realized that his view wrapped all the way around the curvature of the planet itself. He drew on the combined vision of all the wental entities diffused across every kilometer of open ocean. He could sense it all.

It was glorious. If only he could share it with someone...

Not long ago, on the first sterile sea planet where Jess had distributed the living water beings, there had not been even the rudiments of monocellular life. On that world, unrestricted, the wentals had raged through the water, grasping every molecule to incorporate it into their essence like a flamefront devouring fuel, bringing a whole planet to life, lighting it up like a torch.

On this planet, though, there was a primitive yet viable ecosystem in place. These oceans were filled with plankton and plants, shelled organisms, and soft-bodied swimmers. The wentals had come alive in the seas, but in spite of their bold strategy in saving Jess, they had restrained themselves here, choosing not to affect the other creatures.

The changes they had made in him were irreversible. He had the wental power as a permanent part of his physiology. He might even be able to harness that power to help his people... if only he could get off this planet.

For almost two centuries, Roamer clans had made life possible in the most terrible environments. They solved problems, they created innovative ideas and technologies to succeed where the Hansa would never even dare to try.

Jess was sure there was a way to get off of this planet.

Though the watery entities could hear the thoughts inside his head, he shouted across the waves in his impatience. "If you wentals are so powerful, why wait? We have work to do!" Out there, in the inaccessible vastness of the Spiral Arm, the hydrogues were continuing to plague Roamer outposts. "There's still a war going on out in the Spiral Arm. Are you just going to give up now that you've finally been given a second chance?"

We flow from possibility to possibility. It is our nature.

"Then flow to a different one. How do I get out of here? You wanted to spread and propagate, didn't you? Why should we just hope for someone to happen by? I doubt anyone's been to this planet for centuries—if ever." He picked up a rock and tossed it into the waves, where it was swallowed without a ripple.

The wental answered, *All the resources of this planet are available to you—from the rocks beneath you, to the metals and minerals in the water, to all the living creatures in the seas.*

"How does that help me build a ship? I have no tools, nothing but my bare hands."

You have us.

Jess jumped to his feet on the rocky shore. "What do you mean?"

Do not underestimate your new powers and abilities. With the strength of the wentals within you, creating a physical ship can be... relatively simple.

In his mind he received images and a sudden understanding that left him breathless with the possibilities.

This sea, even with its minimal prehistoric ecosystem, still contained billions of living creatures—from

gigantic monsters to microscopic organisms. An incomparable workforce. With mental guidance, all of them would cooperate to build a ship, one molecule at a time.

The mentals showed him exactly how.

7



## CESCA PERONI

Jess Tamblyn had vanished. In her office chamber within the main Rendezvous asteroid, Cesca found it nearly impossible to concentrate on her leadership tasks.

This unified cluster of space rocks around a dim dwarf star was symbolic of the Roamer clans themselves: each separate, yet held together by invisible threads. In the centuries that Roamers had lived on this outpost, the clans had bound the asteroids together with support girders, connecting walkways, and reinforcement cables. But such bonds could easily be severed and the asteroids of Rendezvous scattered again.

As Speaker, Cesca had to make sure the clans didn't do the same.

Surrounded by thick walls, she reviewed reports from Roamer traders, studying the lists of goods, raw materials, and resources distributed among clan outposts. Forbidden from running their traditional skymines, some daredevil Roamers made blitzkrieg ekti strikes on gas giants, while others, such as those at the ambitious extraction facilities at Osquivel, broke down frozen comets to distill a trickle of stardrive fuel from their hydrogen. The EDF and the Hansa—the “Big Goose”—demanded any ekti the clans produced, and instead of being grateful for what the Roamers risked their lives to scrape together, they clamored for more and more, when none was available.

The clans were trapped in this uneasy business relationship, though they had theoretically established their independence, separating themselves from the Earth government long ago. The EDF seemed not to remember those details.

Cesca looked up as a visitor appeared in her office, a dark-haired young man with Asian features and an intent set to his narrow jaw. “Speaker Peroni, I've got news!”

Jhy Okiah had long held that remembering names and faces was a vital skill for a clan Speaker, and Cesca had diligently developed the skill, along with many others. She remembered that this young man flew one of clan Tylar's ships, acting as an errand runner and delivery boy between Roamer outposts. He also had a reputation for getting easily lost... or at least sidetracked.

“It's part of my job to receive news, Nikko Chan—though my preference would be to have *good* news for a change.” She saw from his flustered expression that such a report would not be forthcoming. She pushed the documents and commerce records aside. “Go ahead. I'm listening.”

Nikkofidgeted, drying sweaty palms on his many-pocketed pants. “Four days ago I was flying back



from Hurricane Depot to deliver a load of spare parts and pick up some large-output thermal generators for Jonah 12. That's the frozen moon where Kotto Okiah is establishing a—"

"I know where it is, Nikko. I authorized the plans myself."

Derailed from his story, Nikko blinked. "Well, sometimes I like to... zigzag on my routes. Intentionally, you know." He sounded defensive. "It doesn't cost very much ekti, and who knows what I might find? A new settlement, maybe even the *Burton*?"

"And what did you find this time?"

"You probably remember that my distant uncle Raven Kamarov disappeared a while ago. He used to haul ekti to and from Hurricane Depot, but one day he didn't show up at his destination. We sent out searchers, but no luck."

Cesca nodded. A great many Roamer ships had vanished in the past several years, not just Jess Tamblyn's. It was easy to blame the disappearances on hydrogues, but there was a simmering suspicion among the clans that the Earth Defense Forces were somehow involved. She guessed where Nikko's story was leading. "And today you located the ship?"

"Not much of it." Nikko frowned. "But I did find enough serial numbers on hull plates that I could do a proper ID. It's the right vessel, that's for sure."

Cesca felt her stomach sink as if gravity had just increased. "Do you think it could have been a meteor impact or an engine overload?"

His shoulders sagged. "Neither. The marks were unmistakable, Speaker. Some hull sections were large enough that I could see what caused the damage. *Jazer strikes*. Direct and intentional."

"Jazers? But only the Eddies use jazers."

The young man nodded. "I brought all the wreckage with me. It's in the cargo hold." The energy traces and blast patterns on the ruined hull metal of Kamarov's ship would be like a smoking gun.

Anger made Cesca push herself back a bit too quickly for the low gravity of Rendezvous, and her chair hit the wall with a loud bang. "You're saying that the Eddies intentionally attacked and destroyed an unarmed Roamer vessel?"

"That's what it looks like. We can do a full analysis, but I'm sure I'm right."

"This changes everything, Nikko Chan. Ekki is our commodity, to be sold not under duress, but on our own terms, whether the Goose likes it or not." Cesca drew herself up, assembling her steely resolve. "I need to meet with the clan representatives immediately."



## DAVLIN LOTZE

His pack loaded with enough supplies for several days, Davlin Lotze stood in front of the flat stone surface of the alien transportal. Hundreds of tiles marked with strange symbols—coordinates for worlds once inhabited by the Klikiss—ringed the device. Most of them were still uninvestigated.

“Mr. Lotze, you are scheduled to return in less than a day,” said the technician at the monitoring station. Known Klikiss transportals, such as this one within the Rheindic Co ruins, were jumping-off points for anyone with the balls and the drive to go planet hunting. Someone like him.

Davlin shouldered his pack. He wore a standard khaki explorer’s jumpsuit of durable fabric that was appropriate for a range of temperatures. Even when he planned to venture to a completely uninhabited world, he wore no garish colors, no jewelry, nothing to call attention to himself. “My mission parameters grant me certain discretionary latitude in my schedule.” Considering his lengthy service record—not to mention the fact that he and Rlinda Kett had discovered this transportal network and brought the news back to the Hansa—he did not like to follow anyone else’s rules or schedules.

Though the insectlike race had long ago vanished from the Spiral Arm, the Klikiss had left behind a network of mysterious ruins. Since the alien species breathed the same atmosphere and had similar basic biological requirements to those of humans, the Hansa considered those habitable planets to be potential gold mines for colonization, minor victories they could declare in the turmoil of the hydrogue war.

But first those Klikiss worlds had to be identified, catalogued, and superficially explored. Davlin considered the task appropriate to his abilities. Without further delay, he stepped through the blank trapezoidal stone and fell across the universe to another Klikiss world.

It was an eerie feeling to be all alone on a whole planet. Davlin smiled as the dry breezes brushed his face. He had arrived in the local morning, so he had a full day to image the termite-mound buildings, the iron-hard organic structures left by the Klikiss. This world had strange trees draped with featherlike fronds, surrounded by plants with long spiky leaves like pincushions.

Wandering around the crumbling ruins, Davlin planted sensors and meteorological recorders. He measured the amount of groundwater and estimated the average rainfall. Eventually, if this world was chosen for full-scale Hansa colonization, explorers would bring self-launching satellites to allow faster and more comprehensive mapping of the landforms and weather patterns. For now, Davlin only needed to make the first broad-strokes report.

When darkness fell, he set up his imagers and recorded a full-scan astronomical survey, acquiring spectra of the brightest stars in the local sky. Once he returned through the portal, Hansa astronomers and navigators would read the positions of primary stars, then backtrack and interpolate the location of this planet in order to match it to the coordinate tiles based on Klikiss symbology.

Davlin could have returned to base then, but he was enjoying the reverberant silence. He had never been enamored with the bustle and excitement of civilization. Even the Hansa station at Rheindic Co, which now served as a central point for eager researchers, seemed too crowded to him, too busy. He longed for peaceful days, remembering the quietly productive years when he’d impersonated a simple colonist on Crenna.

He got out a warm sleep sheet, a thin film to wrap around himself that inflated into a cushioned bed. He spent a peaceful, solitary night there on the empty world. At daybreak, he packed up all his instruments,

returned to the trapezoidal stone wall, activated the transportal, and stepped through to Rheindic Co...

Back inside the control room, he was immediately struck by an air of oppressive somberness. His dark brown eyes scanned expressions on faces around him, then noted that another of the numerous coordinate tiles had been marked in black. "Who did we lose?"

The technician looked at him, answering automatically. "Jenna Refo. Three days overdue."

Davlin blew out a long sigh, and the breath of air felt cold. That made five so far—five transportal explorers like himself who had chosen random Klikiss coordinates, hoping to find viable colonization options on resource-filled planets that would mean huge profits for the Hansa.

But sometimes the coordinates were bad. Perhaps the transportal on the other end had been destroyed by an earthquake or other natural disaster... or perhaps the planets themselves were violently inhospitable.

"Damn." The Hansa paid enough to make the risks worthwhile to some, yet each time an explorer stepped through to an unknown place, it was a gamble. Usually Davlin came back from a successful mission to cheers, congratulations, parties, and toasts. This time, though, he simply submitted his report, then went off to shower.

The following day, a salty old explorer named Hud Steinman returned crowing with delight, oblivious to the still-reticent expressions on the faces of the technical crew.

"I expect a bonus for this!" He twirled a victorious finger in the air. "These coordinates"—he gestured behind him to one of the strangely marked tiles—"take us right back to where it all began, or ended, depending on the real story. I've found the transportal tile for Corribus."

The technicians gasped; a few even applauded. Davlin nodded in appreciation.

Corribus, where Margaret and Louis Colicos had deciphered the plans for the Klikiss Torch, was an empty and scarred world that might have been the last stand of the Klikiss race against the enemy that had obliterated them. For anyone who studied xeno-archaeology, Corribus was the Rosetta Stone, a place etched deep with messages from the past. Also, in a practical sense, such a confirmed datapoint would help the Hansa explorers connect different paths throughout the transportal web—a valuable start to the road map.

Davlin pushed past skinny old Hud Steinman and activated the coordinate tile that would take him to Corribus. Some Hansa technicians looked up; one raised a hand as if to call him back. But Davlin was beyond their control. He had a direct mandate from Chairman Wenceslas himself. He stepped through into windy silence.

The Klikiss city on Corribus looked precisely as it had appeared in the images submitted by the Colicos team: Towering granite canyon walls formed a sheltered valley with termite-mound structures on the ground, as well as dwellings built into cliff faces that were lined with large, blocky crystals. Steinman had been correct—the terrain was unmistakable.

Davlin studied the ghostly world, where watery sunshine illuminated cliffs studded with lumps of crystal. The Klikiss must have considered the sheer granite walls to be protective, like fortress barricades. The stone looked shiny, half-melted, as if it had been subjected to some inconceivable destructive force.

He tried to imagine what could have struck the insectoid civilization. What enemy had been powerful enough to make them create the Klikiss Torch? The hydrogues? In the end, even the Torch hadn't been enough to protect them, and their race had been wiped out.

Davlin knew the Hansa would send colonists to Corribus. He just prayed that whatever had happened here would not occur again.

9



### MAGE-IMPERATOR JORA'H

In the private ossuary chamber beneath the Prism Palace, where no one could see him, Jora'h stood before the skull of his father—and hated him. “You’re forcing me to continue the most dishonorable of schemes.” His unbraided living hair writhed like crackling strands of static electricity, and his words came back to him as mocking echoes in the eerie silence. “*Bekh!* Noteven the humans have developed foul enough words to convey my anger over what you were—and what I have become.”

Only a day had passed since the funeral blaze, and his father's skull had already been installed in the cold ossuary, a private, silent place where a Mage-Imperator could ponder his rule. He wished he could just hide in a deep *sub-thism* sleep, like the Hyrillka Designate.

The skull, glowing pearly white, remained mute, its eye sockets hollow and empty, the smooth teeth grinning, as if the dead Mage-Imperator were laughing at his son's predicament.

Almost a century ago, no doubt Cyroc'h had faced the same knowledge and decisions when he, too, learned of the breeding program and the captive humans—like Nira. Had his father felt even a twinge of guilt, or had he simply grasped the new “resources” and turned them to the service of the Empire?

Jora'h now regarded the glowing bones of his grandfather, who had been Mage-Imperator when the human generation ship *Burton* was found. For millennia, success had eluded the Ildirans in their ongoing efforts to create an interspecies bridge in the form of a powerful telepath who could meld thoughts and images with the hydrogues and represent both species. In a desperate twisted attempt to boost the experiments on the splinter colony of Dobro, his grandfather had decided to mix the bloodlines of the *Burton* descendants with talented Ildirans. The experimenters impregnated the human women, used the men as studs, and kept the breeding work going.

As soon as possible, Jora'h swore he would go to Dobro and find his beloved Nira. As Mage-Imperator he had the power to free her at last from her breeding servitude, and he would also meet his daughter Osira'h. He would begin to make amends to her, and even to the enslaved humans...

He shuddered to think of the secrets that his father had kept, knowing his naïve son would not understand everything until he took his father's place. He now knew about the part Ildirans had played in the previous hydrogue war, and he also understood why the peaceful Empire—which had supposedly never faced an outside enemy in a thousand years—maintained such a large and powerful Solar Navy and kept such a vast stockpile of *ekti* in reserve. Everything had been in long-term preparation for the

eventual return of the hydrogues—and the unreliability of the Klikiss robots.

“Why did you allow the humans to test their Torch at Oncier, if you knew what might happen?” Even with full access to *thethism*, he could not understand his father. “Why would you take the risk, tempt fate?” Jora’h did understand, though, that the previous Mage-Imperator—and all Ildirans—had often underestimated or misinterpreted the ambitions of humanity. Had Cyroc’h never truly believed what the scientists of the Hanseatic League meant to do? Perhaps Cyroc’h had simply not grasped the magnitude of human folly...

Jora’h frowned at the phosphorescent skull, determined to defy the untenable position in which he found himself. He felt a chill in the air, heard faint whispers, but he faced the judgmental bones of his predecessors. “Yes, Father, I will serve my people and guide them through every crisis, if it is in my ability to do so. But yours is not the only way. If I can find any other solution, I will change these paths.”

His son Zan’nh, acting as Adar, had submitted an analysis of current *ekti* stockpiles, and the Mage-Imperator was dismayed to see how quickly their resources were being depleted. Despite contingency reserves, no one had anticipated that *ekti* production might cease entirely. The Empire required stardrive fuel to survive. Their stockpiles needed to be replenished.

Zan’nh would soon take on the official mantle in command of the Solar Navy. His predecessor and mentor, Adar Kori’nh, had been killed along with a full maniple of warliners in a suicidal offensive at Qronha 3; all indications led them to conclude that the hydrogues had been driven from the gas planet, and the clouds were ripe for *ekti* harvesting again... at least until the hydrogues came back.

That was something he could do, at least. The Empire faced challenges that forced Jora’h to consider desperate gambles. But refusing to try was far worse than taking risks.

As he turned from the luminous reliquary, ignoring the unhelpful skulls of his ancestors, Jora’h felt confident of his decision. With Qronha 3 free of the enemy, for now, he would command Zan’nh to reassemble one of the large cloud-harvesting facilities and return there with a full complement of miner kithmen, bred to be *ekti* harvesters. It was a positive, proactive step—one more victory purchased by the heroic death of Adar Kori’nh.

With a grim smile on his face, Jora’h turned to leave his silent ancestors behind and called for his son Zan’nh.

10



SULLIVAN GOLD

Opportunity always knocks: Sometimes it scratches quietly, and sometimes it pounds like a blustery drunk demanding to be let in. When news came to the Hansa that the hydrogues had been defeated at Qronha 3, they quickly took advantage of the circumstances. Rich hydrogen clouds were available for the taking, at least temporarily, and all that potential *ekti* could not be ignored.

Enormous cargo transports rushed components from orbiting industrial centers to the empty Ildiran gas planet, where they would be assembled at the fringes of the dense cloud decks. Highly paid volunteers signed up to work the new Hansa cloud harvester. Only a crazy person, or an overly optimistic one, would have taken such a job.

Sullivan Gold accepted the assignment to become the facility's manager, knowing full well the risks and potential rewards. It was a business decision that made perfect sense to him. The payoff would be either a feather in his cap, or a fitting epitaph on his tombstone.

Now, as the first wave of Hansa transport ships arrived at Qronha 3, Sullivan watched swarms of workers guide the massive components together. Heavy storage tanks, *ekti* reactors, life-support modules, and engineering decks came together one at a time, like the pieces of a puzzle. He scrutinized every step of the process, checking and double-checking the work.

Though hundreds of laborers came here initially to set up the huge skyfactory, only a few dozen would remain once the cloud harvester came online. The elite. The sitting ducks. Sullivan considered having the men paint a logo or mascot on the side of the huge facility. A mallard might be nice... or a bull's-eye.

He had a practical wife named Lydia, three sons, a daughter, and (so far, at least) ten grandchildren, all of them intelligent and ambitious, sure to be movers and shakers someday. When the Hansa had called for an industrial head to run the new cloud harvester, Sullivan had gathered his family for dinner and sprang his suggestion. "With the terms the Hansa is offering, there's no way for us to lose!"

"Well, you can, dear," Lydia said. Then she took out a sheet of paper, marking one side *Pros*, the other side *Cons*. They had discussed the matter late into the night, always coming back to her stern finger tapping the columns that listed advantages and disadvantages.

On the pro side, the Hansa was offering the Gold family major industrial concessions, interest-free business loans, guaranteed orders for a large variety of products—enough to transform them from simple businessmen into an actual dynasty. The cloud harvester would be designed to allow for a rapid evacuation; there was a chance (though not a good one) that Sullivan and his crew might escape if they were attacked by hydrogues. At least it looked possible on paper.

The disadvantages were obvious...

Now, in the glassed-in forward dome of the largest Hansa vessel, the green priest assigned to this venture joined Sullivan as he continued his observation. Unusual among green priests, Kolker worked as a freelance telink communicator, hiring himself out from one Hansa ship to another. He wasn't one of the nineteen volunteers who were assisting the EDF; he had already spent years in the commercial empire.

Though Kolker was always available to submit Sullivan's important status reports to the Hansa or relay friendly messages to Lydia, the green priest spent the majority of his time sitting with one hand resting against the trunk of his potted tree, wearing a distant smile. The loquacious Kolker never seemed to tire of chatting with his fellow priests through the telink network. He shared messages incessantly, sometimes talking aloud, sometimes just listening, even when there was no news.

A long time ago, Sullivan remembered finding a chest of his grandfather's keepsakes, including a bundled stack of old-fashioned photo postcards. Seeing Kolker engaged in so much contact via the worldforest reminded him of those postcards. At least the telink didn't require Kolker to add extra postage from the gas giant.

“I’ve described everything to the worldtrees and my fellow green priests, Sullivan.” He smiled, showing green gums. “New information and experiences help to distract them from all the damage the hydrogues have inflicted. But... I feel guilty to be here instead of helping in the burned forest.”

Sullivan pursed his lips as he watched the final cloud-harvester components being riveted together by groups of engineers wearing levitation packs. “You aren’t going to leave this station, are you, Kolker? I need your services. Sending a carrier pigeon just isn’t an option for me.”

“Leave here? Not on your life, Sullivan Gold. I am in an intriguing new environment, and only I can describe the details for the curious trees. They haven’t had many opportunities to see a gas giant. Besides”—he looked lovingly down at his treeling in its ornate pot—“it’ll do the forest good to see a place where our enemies have been resoundingly defeated.”

Sullivan glanced out into the expanse of clouds. “We don’t know for certain that the drogues are completely gone here, but we can hope.” As soon as the factory was completed, the cloud harvester’s lead engineer intended to design deep probes that would keep an eye out for returning hydrogues. Just for insurance, though Sullivan didn’t know how much good they would do.

The assembly work in Qronha 3’s high atmosphere continued at a furious pace. Sullivan scanned the project timetable again and proudly confirmed that each phase had been completed on schedule. Within a few days the facility would be brought online, and they would begin collecting ekti for the Terran Hanseatic League. Then the fun would start.

The knot in his chest began to loosen. Nothing to worry about...

11



TASIA TAMBLYN

Tasia’s cruiser arrived at Ptoro bearing the doomsday weapon. *Here we are, you bastards.* Ready or not. On the viewscreen, Ptoro was a cold ball without the pastel cloud bands of Jupiter or Golgen, without the majestic rings of Osquivel, colorless, lifeless, and gray—just waiting to be lit up with a bit of dazzle.

As the escort EDF battleships drew closer, they reported their positions. Tasia spoke through the Manta’s intercom, calling all engineers and support personnel to prepare the Klikiss Torch.

Tasia’s battle group had been obliged to bring two of the EDF’s green priests to properly coordinate the deployment of the Torch. Older and more withdrawn than Rossia, Yarrod had expressed doubts about continuing to serve the Earth military during the worldforest’s greater need, but Tasia hoped he would change his mind after the success of this mission.

Touching his treeling, Rossia closed his eyes and sent thoughts through telink, then verbalized a report for Tasia. “Yarrod says he and the other engineers are in position at the neutron star. Their wormhole generators are distributed outside the gravitational perimeter.” He blinked again. “Those are the words he

gave me, Commander Tamblyn. I don't know what it means.”

She leaned forward with a grim smile. “It means that when we fire our torpedoes into Ptoro’s clouds, we’ll make an anchor point for this end of the wormhole. The engineers at Yarrod’s station will open up themouth, feed it the neutron star, which then gets dumped smack into the lap of the drogues down there. The extra mass will be enough to implode Ptoro into a new star.”

Rossia stroked the thin gold bark on his treeling. “Oh, the hydrogues won’t like that.”

“And there isn’t a damn thing they can do to stop us.”

Tasia listened to the preparations, shouted confirmations, transmitted checks and double-checks as the systems were readied. EDF scout ships flew out, scanning the iron-gray clouds, dipping close to the atmosphere, and then retreating to orbital safety. Exo-meteorologists documented the wind patterns and temperature layers that delineated the gas giant’s internal topography.

As she always did on missions that put her face-to-face with the drogues, Tasia thought of all the casualties suffered thus far in the unnecessary war. Her brother’s death on the Blue Sky Mine had given Tasia her first incentive to join the Earth Defense Forces. She had fought the damned aliens in the clouds of Jupiter after their murderous emissary had delivered his ultimatum and killed Old King Frederick. She’d also been at Osquivel, where the EDF’s largest battle force against the hydrogues had been utterly trounced. And Robb had been lost.

By igniting Ptoro, she meant to give the hydrogues a black eye for a change. She leaned forward. “Shizz, that’s going to be the biggest campfire anyone’s ever seen.”

Her navigator, Elly Ramirez, said, “I hope someone brought marshmallows.”

“They are too complacent.” Anwar Zizu, her weapons officer, leaned closer to inspect the tactical screens. “If I were a hydrogue, I’d never let an EDF ship get this close.”

“If you were *ahydrogue*, Sergeant, I would kick your ass off my bridge.” Tasia sat back and silently ordered the butterflies in her stomach to stop their unruly fluttering. “Enough chitchat. Launch the torpedoes from our end. No sense giving the enemy time to pack their suitcases.”

The Manta’s modified weapons ports fired a group of silvery cylinders adapted from Klikiss designs found on Corribus. *Here it comes*. Sensor screens showed the small torpedolike generators descending into the clouds.

“Tell Yarrod to have his engineers ready on the scout ship. As soon as our anchors are in position, I want that neutron star on its way here like a cannonball.”

Rossia communicated the information through the tree network.

Elly Ramirez frowned at her nav screens. “I expected to see the drogues barking and snarling by now.”

“Youcomplaining?” Her eyes glittering with determination, Tasia clasped her hands together. “In a minute they’ll have other things to worry about than chasing after us.”

Ptoro looked so harmless down there, so uninteresting. She wished this could have been Osquivel, as payback for what the drogues had done to the EDF there. She felt the familiar hollowness at the thought



of Robb and all the other EDF casualties. Hell, she even missed the obnoxious Patrick Fitzpatrick III. She'd always wanted the spoiled bastard to get his comeuppance... but from *her*, not the drogues.

"Anchor points in position, Commander Tamblyn," Zizu announced.

"Open the conduit. Let's send them a present."

Rossia relayed the instructions through his treeling. He kept his large eyes closed, as if he didn't want to see what was happening. Everyone on the Manta's bridge waited in silence. The rest of the escort ships sent queries, but Tasia didn't answer them. Not yet.

The green priest looked up. "It is done. Yarrod reports that the wormhole is opened and the neutron star is gone."

Tasia brightened. "On its way. Fire in the hole."

She looked at the huge gray planet, but saw no change. As soon as the neutron star arrived, fusion fires would begin deep within, but the initial shockwave would rush up through layers of the atmosphere faster than thunder.

Tasia packed all the vengeance she could squeeze into her low voice. "Go on and *burn*."

12



### PATRICK FITZPATRICK III

He never grew tired of voicing his frustration. "Damned Roachers!" Patrick Fitzpatrick had repeated it often since he'd recovered from his injuries in the hydrogue attack—several times daily, in fact.

Inside the big, echoing asteroid chamber that Del Kellum's people used as a storage facility, burly Bill Stanna commiserated. "Yeah, I signed up to fight drogues. Didn't know I was gonna waste my time held hostage by space trash." Though dedicated to the EDF, Stanna had no sophisticated specialties, no particular skills the training sergeants could identify. He was just a regular grunt, willing to do what he was told and ready to fight. "I'm not gonna do any more work for them."

Fitzpatrick sat stubbornly on the hard stone floor, combing his reddish-blond hair back in a never-ending attempt to keep it neat, even under these circumstances. "Damn right! And don't think you have to, Bill."

Though he was tall, Fitzpatrick had an average build. Owing to his good breeding, he had handsome features and a strong jaw, but his nose was a little too sharp. His forehead showed a permanent crease between his hazel eyes from too many skeptical or disapproving frowns.

"They can't force us to work," said Shelia Andez, a weapons specialist who had survived in a lifetube when her Juggernaut was destroyed over the Osquivel rings. She paced the claustrophobic room, looking

at the haphazardly stacked crates of supplies. The rest of the EDF hostages had been sent out on other make-work details, and most of them were also refusing to cooperate. “Isn’t there a Geneva Convention or something? If we’re prisoners of war, the Roachers have to follow certain standards of treatment.”

Fitzpatrick felt disgusted. “Even if there was an agreement like that, they probably couldn’t read it.” Stanna burst out with loud laughter, as if this was the funniest thing he had heard in a long time.

“When we don’t do the work, our captors simply have the compies do it,” said Kiro Yamane, a cybernetics expert. He was a bit of an odd duck because he wasn’t a formal member of the Earth Defense Forces. Yamane was, however, a genius with an intuitive knowledge of robotics after working under Swendsen and Palawu in the compy-manufacturing centers on Earth. He had signed aboard the Osquivel battle fleet so he could assess the performance of the new Soldier model. “I can’t tell you how angry it makes me to see them use our sophisticated compies for . . . for grunt work.”

“Better them than us.” Stanna plopped down next to Fitzpatrick. The two men stared at the crates they were supposed to move and rearrange.

Thirty-two EDF survivors had been rescued when the space gypsies descended like parasites on the ruined ships in the Osquivel battlefield, and they’d been held as hostages in the hidden Roamer shipyard for over a month now.

Fitzpatrick’s mind raged at the injustice of it. By now, his parents, both of them ambassadors, should have filed protests and demanded that something be done. His grandmother, the powerful old political battleaxe, should have sent an investigation committee or a rescue squad. His whole family should be in an uproar at what had happened to him.

But then his stomach sank. He was deluding himself. Yes, the Fitzpatricks would be outraged, but after hearing of the carnage in the rings of Osquivel, when so few EDF ships had limped away and gotten to safety, no one would suspect that he—or any of the others—might still be alive.

The Roamers had their prisoners wrapped up in a package that was all so neat and tidy.

Over the weeks as he’d observed the activities here, he was astounded to learn of the huge spacedocks where ships of all sizes and designs were constructed. Clan Kellum had smelters, fabricators, assembly lines, a whole infrastructure—over a thousand people living and working here. When the EDF battle group had come to attack the hydrogues, no one had seen any signs of such a complex hidden in the rings. These Roachers were slippery, deceitful, and devious; a cancer quietly growing between the stars.

The asteroid’s rectangular airlock disengaged with a coughing hiss, then rattled aside. While Stanna struggled to his feet, as if caught sleeping on duty, Fitzpatrick and Andez pointedly remained sitting on the floor. “You don’t need to pretend you were working, Bill,” Fitzpatrick said. “I want them to know I’m not lifting a finger to help.”

A slender young woman with long black hair stepped inside with a grace that showed she was accustomed to living in low gravity. Zhett Kellum, whom they had all met before, had huge green eyes that could sparkle with either mirth or displeasure. Fitzpatrick had seen her quirk her full lips upward in a combination of annoyed disappointment and mischievous humor. “I don’t know how this sort of thing works among the Eddies, but in Roamer clans, we generally chip in and work for our dinner. Don’t expect a free ride month after month.”

“In the Hansa,” Fitzpatrick replied acidly, “our families generally don’t take hostages and prevent them

from going home.”

Andez added, “Hey, if you don’t like the quality of our work, then feel free to fire us and we’ll be on our way.”

Arching her eyebrows, Zhett gestured toward the large sealed door. Her body seemed as flexible as spring steel. “There’s the airlock. You can walk out anytime you like... but it’s a fairly long hike.”

“Couldn’t you at least give us a spaceship?” Stanna said.

Fitzpatrick jabbed him with his elbow. “She wasn’t serious, Bill.”

Zhett approached the four EDF captives. “I wouldn’t make assumptions like that if I were you, Fitzie.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Oh, it’s just a pet name.” She smiled at him, and he gritted his teeth. “I wasn’t kidding about expecting you to pitch in. My father thinks you’re more trouble than you’re worth... and I’m starting to agree with him.”

“You expect us just to be complacent and cooperative?” Yamane said. “We are being held here against our will.”

“We also saved all of your lives.” Zhett tossed her hair, which drifted slowly in the low gravity as if under water. Fitzpatrick couldn’t help noticing that her Roamer jumpsuit was well fitted to show her long, slender legs. “Considering that all your Eddy friends turned tail and ran, leaving you to the drogues, I can’t see why you’re so anxious to go back. You’d all be better off if you just got used to living among the Roamers.”

All four of the hostages responded with an angry outburst. “Never!”

Zhett just sighed and shook her head. “That’s the trouble with you Eddies. You seem incapable of learning to roll with the changes. Believe me, if we could think of a way to get you back to the Big Goose without giving away our trade secrets, I’d do it in a heartbeat.”

“That would be just about fast enough for me,” Fitzpatrick said with a scowl.

Zhett instructed some compies to finish stacking the crates, and pitched in herself, while the prisoners sat idly watching. The Roamer girl ignored them, apparently immune to their surly stares and happy to prove her superiority. Fitzpatrick tried not to let it get to him.

13



CESCA PERONI

The old woman drifted in a sling chair connected to the rock wall. The former Speaker looked like a collection of dried bones held together with sinew, leathery skin, and sheer force of will. She'd been retired for six years and had not left the Rendezvous asteroids in all that time; her eyes were still bright as black skypearls.

"Now that you have clear evidence against the EDF," she said to Cesca, "what does your Guiding Star tell you?"

Cesca closed her eyes. She had carefully schooled herself never to show vulnerability or indecision, but here behind closed doors in consultation with the only person who could truly understand her predicament, she let down her walls. "How am I supposed to see the Guiding Star when I'm buried deep inside solid rock—both literally and figuratively?"

Jhy Okiah smiled with her parchment lips. "You have to make decisions for yourself, child."

The Speaker's office was one of the first chambers that had been hammered out by the settlers from the *Kanaka*. When the old generation ship had dropped off a fraction of its colonists here, the people had by no means been assured of their survival. But those predecessors of the Roamer clans had been tenacious and resourceful. The colony had survived and grown, eventually becoming a thriving base.

Roamers made their own decisions and survived—not relying on the blessings and gifts of others, but on their own ingenuity. Kotto Okiah was a perfect example: Even after his high-risk metals-processing settlement on a near-molten planet had failed, he had immediately begun work on a supercold frozen world from which he was sure he could wring vital resources.

Cesca needed to remember that and remind the other clan members. "I wonder how many of our predecessors sat in this same place, facing similarly difficult decisions. When you first became Speaker, did you require so much advice?"

"Of course I did. We all do."

Cesca shook her head, unable to imagine that this strong and decisive woman could possibly have experienced self-doubt. "So how did you manage? Tell me the secret."

"The secret is to realize that despite your worries, *you* are still the best-qualified person to make these decisions. The Roamer clans chose you. They believe in you. And when you do your best, that's the best the Roamers have to offer."

Cesca made a wry expression. "Then maybe the Roamer clans are in trouble after all." She turned to the former Speaker and a hard look entered her eyes. "The Big Goose stole our cargo, killed our people, then pretended nothing happened. We have something they want, and they seem to assume that a war gives them the right to just take it."

"The Hansa is a formidable enemy—should the clans provoke them?"

"We can't just ignore their acts of piracy."

"No. The Big Goose has treated us with disdain for years. This is nothing new except for the level of violence. Remember that whatever you do will have tremendous repercussions."

"Some of our hotheaded clan leaders might get incensed and forget about that. They can outvote me. I

only speak for them—I can't coerce them.”

“Worse, most of them are men, and therefore prone to the need to prove themselves.” The old woman slowly shook her head.

Cesca paused for a long moment. “If they take the obvious option, I dread the consequences for all of us.”

“Every decision has consequences. You're the leader of the clans. It is your job to make them see wisdom, make the best decision, then follow through with solidarity, no matter what. We are all Roamers.”

“Yes,” Cesca said. “We can't forget who we are.”

14



DD

Inside the hydrogue citysphere beneath the clouds of Ptoro, droning emergency signals pounded like hammer blows through the impossibly dense atmosphere. DD didn't know which way to run.

The deep-core aliens, flowing masses of quicksilver, shimmered as they moved through the chaotic sculptures that made up their metropolis. The geometric buildings shifted and changed like three-dimensional jeweled mosaics locking into place in preparation for a large-scale evacuation. Colors flared brighter.

Though the Friendly compy did not comprehend what the impossibly alien hydrogues did or said, he could see that the creatures were agitated. What was the emergency? The black Klikiss robots—whom DD found to be somewhat more comprehensible, but just as monstrous—scuttled about with a clear urgency of their own. Finally, he intercepted one of the beetlelike robots. “Please tell me what is happening.”

The robot swiveled his angular head and skewered the Friendly compy with his blazing optical sensors. “The Earth military has arrived at Ptoro. Upper-layer scouts are observing them even now. They have already deployed the preparatory apparatus for the Torch weapon designed by my cursed progenitors. Some of the hydrogues will mount a defense while the cityspheres open transgates and evacuate this world. We robots will also depart immediately in our ships.”

The thrumming emergency tone made the metal and polymer components of DD's artificial body vibrate. “What about me? Am I to escape as well?”

“Sirix will deal with that matter. We have crucial preparations to make. Do not interfere.” The big robot lurched off through the dense atmosphere and vanished through a segmented crystalline wall. The facets rearranged themselves, and the other machine was gone.

DD looked through the bubble-domed skies and saw dozens of warglobes rising out of the citysphere. The diamond-hulled battleships rocketed upward, like spined cannonballs shot into the clouds.

The brave EDF soldiers out there would soon face an overwhelming force.

When his masters Margaret and Louis Colicos had ignited the first Klikiss Torch, they had never intended to harm anyone and had not even known of the hydrogues' existence. This time, though, the EDF was deploying the Klikiss Torch as an outright act of war. Hansa diplomats and military officers had repeatedly attempted to discuss a peace, but the hydrogues would not negotiate. The liquid-crystal creatures considered humans somewhat interesting as playthings in their unusual tests and experiments, but ultimately irrelevant now that they had far more powerful enemies abroad in the Spiral Arm.

DD, on the other hand, could think of nothing more important than to push his way into the environment chambers where Robb Brindle and his fellow human prisoners were being held. As the emergency continued to build, no one hindered the little compy's movements, ignoring him entirely. All the hydrogues and Klikiss robots were too preoccupied with their frantic evacuation.

Inside the chamber, the haggard-looking prisoners lurched to their feet. "DD!" Brindle said. "Tell me you're bringing us good news, man."

"Unfortunately, I am not. Are you aware of the turmoil occurring in the hydrogue citysphere?"

Several captives pressed against the curved gelatinous walls to peer outside through the translucent membranes. "We can tell they've got their underwear in a twist," Brindle said. "But who can understand those blobs?"

"The Earth Defense Forces have arrived, and they have already launched an anchor point for a wormhole. They intend to ignite Ptoro with a second Klikiss Torch."

A few of the captives raised their fists and hooted. "Bout time they got serious!"

"Another Torch!"

"The drogues can't fight it, can they?"

Anjea was the loudest. "That'll show the bastards, give them a hot-foot. Mess with the EDF and you get burned."

"Uh, I don't want to rain on your parade, folks," Brindle said, "but we're all sitting at ground zero here."

Some prisoners moaned with dismay; others looked as if they didn't care.

"Is there a chance we can evacuate?" Brindle said, looking quickly around. "Anything we can do to stop the Torch?"

"And help the drogues? You're crazy!"

"It's worth it, just to scorch the blobs," said a bedraggled Charles Gomez.

DD answered, "I believe the hydrogues intend to transport their cityspheres through dimensional gates

to another gas giant. In all probability, they will take you with them. You should be safe.”

“If *this* is safe, buddy, then what do you consider dangerous?” Anjea Telton snorted.

As the flustered compy sought an appropriate response, Brindle sounded conciliatory. “Never mind that, DD. I know you’re doing what you can. Hey, will you be coming with us? Are the hydrogues taking you along, too?”

“I have very little information. I wish I could provide you with additional data.”

A sullen Gomez jumped away from the curved, translucent wall. Beside him, two men cried out in warning. DD looked up to see a looming form just outside the flexible barrier. Extending several jointed limbs, the armored beetle shape lunged through into the environment chamber. As the prisoners backed away, the compy recognized Sirix, his main tormentor. “DD, come with me immediately. Our ship is prepared.”

“We must ensure the safety of these human prisoners,” DD suggested. “The hydrogues may not properly care for them.”

“The hydrogues can eradicate them or save them, as they wish. This citysphere is ready to depart through the transgate, and we must not be part of the exodus.”

“Why not?” DD asked.

Brindle and the other human captives stared at the two machines, trying to follow the jackhammer electronic conversation.

“We have other priorities. Cease these delays.”

DD dutifully followed the big black robot back out of the membrane. He caught one last glance of Brindle, looking worried but determined as they departed.

Overhead, three more armored warglobes launched away from the citysphere.

Sirix guided the compy at a rapid clip until they reached their modified ship. One of the flowing hydrogues coalesced from a silvery flow on the ground, rising tall until it stood before Sirix in its human facsimile.

The hydrogue spoke in a far more complex language than DD could readily understand, but he grasped that a Torch wormhole had already been opened and that the cityspheres were about to evacuate.

Sirix clicked and hummed a response that seemed sarcastic, almost ironic. “The Torch weapon designed by our brutal masters and creators now makes humans as powerful as the faeros, if only temporarily. Now that the faeros have returned, you may consider humans irrelevant to your overall conflict. If, however, they can obliterate hydrogue planets at will, does that not make them highly relevant?” On multiple fingerlike legs, he moved forward to the sanctuary of his ship. “Repeatedly, they show their true destructive nature, which we have warned of many times before.”

A ripple flickered across the hydrogue’s body. Its language now seemed painfully clear to DD: “You Klikiss robots have our leave to destroy as many humans as you wish.”

Sirix swiveled his flat geometrical head. “We understand that your conflict with the faeros and the verdani currently saps your strength and attention, but we robots will do everything in our power to wipe out the human race and free their compies.”

The black robot scuttled to his deep-pressure craft and herded DD aboard. Several Klikiss robots had already set themselves up at the controls. Their ship launched immediately. As they plunged through a citysphere wall and rose away from the hydrogue metropolis, DD swiveled his optical sensors and watched behind them.

A dazzling white line split open in the fabric of the air, like a vertical mouth yawning wide. Giant hydrogue cityspheres shuttled through the immense maw of the transgate. Other conduit lines opened, and a second complex of faceted globes passed through to safety.

The black robots accelerated their ship up through the buffeting winds of deep clouds. They piloted a direct course out, ignoring all the strange life forms that floated in the bizarre habitation zones and stable layers of Ptoro’s atmosphere.

Then, far below, where the largest concentration of cityspheres had hovered only moments ago, a dazzling new sun erupted, appearing with remarkable suddenness. The Klikiss Torch system had slammed a neutron star into the gas giant’s core, triggering a full gravitational collapse.

All the remaining hydrogue cityspheres plunged through their transgates and the dimensional lines slammed shut. They had escaped, leaving only their guardian warglobes behind to retaliate against the human army.

DD had to adjust his sensors. The robots fled Ptoro so rapidly that the framework of their ship, designed to withstand the greatest of stresses, shuddered and rattled, threatening to break apart.

Then the whole planet caught on fire.

15



TASIA TAMBLYN

Warglobes boiled out of the clouds of Ptoro. As the displaced neutron star caused the gas gaint to implode, scatters of lightning ricocheted off the clouds in eruptions of light that broke through from the first surge of a newborn star’s ignition.

“Shizz, look what we flushed out of the bushes,” said Tasia with a grim smile. “I guess they don’t like the present we just sent them.”

“Can’t take it back. Nothing they can do now except run.” Elly Ramirez chuckled, but her tense posture hinted at her level of anxiety.

Ensign Terene Mae made a disconcerting groan as the Manta’s viewer magnified the oncoming spiked



spheres. “Doesn’t look like they’re *rerunning*, Commander. They’re coming right at us.”

“Normally, I wouldn’t presume to guess how the drogues think,” Tasia said. “Right now, I’m fairly certain that they’re pissed off.”

Heedless of the warglobe threat, Sergeant Zizu read from the weapons displays in front of him. “Our deepest sensor buoys have been destroyed, presumably by the ignition shockwave. The flamefront is rising.” He turned, grinning.

Several EDF Mantas shifted position to face the enemy spheres. Their armaments included fracture-pulse drones—shaped charges designed to shatter thick diamond material—and carbon slammers that would break carbon-carbon bonds in the crystalline structure.

“Battle stations!” Tasia said over the shipwide comm system.

Sergeant Zizu scanned the tactical readouts. “Slammers and fraks are in the launch tubes. Ready.”

Tasia nodded. “Escort cruisers, disperse and prepare to offer some covering fire!”

Blue lightning arced from point to point on the warglobes as the aliens discharged their weapons. Deadly bolts lanced toward the EDF targets, ripping streaks along the thick hull plates, bursting some bulkheads. The Mantas reeled and turned their damaged sectors away from further pummeling. New reinforced armor prevented the warships from being destroyed outright.

Tasia gripped the arms of her command chair. “Shizz, I’m not going to stand on ceremony—open fire whenever and wherever you see fit. Keep shooting as you pack up and retreat. It’s the better part of valor to escape now—let the Klikiss Torch do its stuff!”

The escort battleships launched a storm of jazer blasts and detonating charges. The hydrogues responded with even greater fury. Tasia’s bridge crew cried out in dismay when three drogue spheres converged on a single escort Manta, pounding it repeatedly until it was blown apart. Debris spread out in a cloud of wreckage, atmosphere, and bodies.

A second Manta exploded as the EDF ships accelerated, pulling away from the collapsing gas giant. More and more of the hydrogues kept coming, surrounding the EDF ships and cutting off their escape. Tasia’s only glimmer of pleasure was to see Ptoro beginning to glow with purifying fires from below. She’d had quite enough of the damned aliens.

“Come on, quit spinning your jets and take us out of here.”

“Hydrogue warglobes are pursuing, Commander!”

From far outside Ptoro’s orbit, a streak of fire rocketed past Tasia’s cruiser, a blazing ball as large as any warglobe, heading toward the dying planet. Then came a second, a third, and then ten more.

“What the hell was that?” Ramirez said. “A meteor?”

Tasia knew. All around them in space, the incandescent ellipsoids were like moths gathering around a kindling flame. “The faeros,” she said with a quiet breath. She had seen them before, fighting a losing battle at the artificial star of Oncier. Now, though, the fireball entities and their blazing vessels greatly outnumbered the hydrogue spheres. The inferno ships careened into the warglobes like exploding suns,

shattering the diamond-hulled spheres.

The hydrogues immediately turned their crackling blue lightning upon the faeros, ignoring the insignificant human battleships. The EDF crews responded with a mixture of stunned silence and crazily enthusiastic cheers. “Shizz, don’t waste any time!” Tasia bellowed so loudly her voice cracked. “We’ve got a distraction—let’s get the hell out of here.”

An even more strenuous volley of jazer blasts and targeted hull-breakers flew out, but Tasia told her weapons officers to stand down. “We’re like a little mouse in a battle between two mammoths. Just move out of the crossfire. No sense in having more of our battleships destroyed here and now.”

As Ptoro continued to brighten, as its core collapsed and nuclear fires were sparked deep within, the faeros combatants smashed into the flotilla of warglobes. Diamond spheres and flaming ellipsoids pirouetted around each other like closely orbiting planets. Blinding arcs like solar flares and coronal loops intersected with blue lightning bolts.

The EDF ships continued to accelerate in their retreat, leaving the gray gas planet warming with inner flames.

Several of the still-spinning faeros ellipsoids had turned black like extinguished coals, carbonaceous cinders deadened by a hydrogue attack, but the majority of the diamond globes had been shattered. Broken fragments drifted away from the funeral pyre of Ptoro. Dozens, then hundreds of the fireballs rushed to the burgeoning star, mercilessly surrounding and engulfing the few remaining hydrogues.

Satisfied, Tasia muttered, “See? Bullies always come to a bad end.” She called a halt to their retreat and waited on the edge of the Ptoro system, observing the immense battle from a safe distance.

The hydrogues had no chance. Within an hour, the faeros had eradicated them completely, destroying every one of the spiked spheres.

Tasia wished she could have personally crushed a few of the warglobes, but she was pleased enough just to see their enemies meet such an ignominious end. She had done her part by triggering the ignition of Ptoro. Thanks to her, the new star would burn for thousands of years before it faded into an ember.

“It looked awfully grim there for a few minutes, Commander,” Zizu said. “I was never much of a believer in Unison, but I admit I was reciting all the prayers I memorized as a kid.”

“Call it a miracle if you want,” Tasia said. “We owe the faeros our thanks, at the very least. They cleared the way for our escape.”

But the flaming ships responded to none of the EDF hails. Instead, after the fireballs had mopped up the hydrogue warships, they flitted around brightening Ptoro, then descended into the new sun. Without a word of response, they plunged with obvious delight into the flamefront that gobbled the gaseous atmosphere.

All across the Spiral Arm, stars had been quenched in the titanic battles between hydrogues and faeros. Perhaps, she thought, Ptoro was new territory to make up for all the dying stars the faeros had lost.



## ANTON COLICOS

Over the course of weeks, the long sunset on Maratha faded into a half year of night. Anton Colicos would remain here for the full season of darkness, the only human on the planet with a handful of Ildirans. He looked forward to the solitude.

The skeleton crew left to watch over the empty resort city, however, viewed it as a long-term prison sentence.

Though this world was under his personal charge, the Maratha Designate had gone back to Ildira for the funeral of his father and the ascension of Jora'h. Designate Avi'h had made no secret of the fact that he wouldn't return until the sun shone again and vacationers arrived.

Anton tried to encourage his rememberer friend. "Let's make the best of it, Vao'sh. If these Cannons of Darkness are as spectacular as I've heard, then we'll have a whole new repertoire of experiences for storytelling. It happens only once each year, right?"

The old Ildiran rememberer had at first been glad to receive this assignment to maintain the spirits of the skeleton crew, but with the onset of long night, Vao'sh had his doubts. Anton planned to shoulder more of the entertainment work, by sharing Earth legends.

The fleshy lobes on the alien historian's face flickered through a palette of emotions. Wry amusement? Resignation? Anton still couldn't interpret all the shades of colors, the nuances of their meanings. "All right, Rememberer Anton, let us go look at the Cannons of Darkness, as you suggest."

Anton eagerly followed him as they suited up near the exit hatch of the domes of Maratha Prime. Outside, Maratha's temperature was already dropping toward the extreme cold of the night season. Their protective garments, which used Ildiran thermal technology, were thin and flexible, but warm.

The planet rotated slowly, like a devoted sycophant always staring at the gleaming majesty of its sun. As a result, for nearly half the year Maratha Prime basked in golden sunshine, followed by a month-long sunset, and the remainder of the year in endless night. The majority of Maratha's population evacuated as the sun slowly went down.

After nearly two centuries of success as a resort world, Maratha was about to open an identical luxury city, Maratha Secda, in the opposite hemisphere. A construction crew of Klikiss robots was even now toiling in the brightening new daylight of the Secda job site to complete the gigantic city. As sunset fell here, dawn would be rising over there.

The two suited men stepped out into the dimming twilight. Though the deepening sky still provided plenty of illumination, Vao'sh quickly switched on all the glowstrips affixed to his shoulders.

Before Anton and Vao'sh could climb aboard a small ground vehicle that would take them to the Cannons, another Ildiran male called out, "Wait, I wish to accompany you!" Anton recognized the lens kithman, Ilure'l, who was staying as counselor and adviser to the members of the skeleton crew. "The Cannons of Darkness are remarkable, and I always feel... inspired when I observe them."

Lens kithmen had faint telepathic powers with which they could supposedly interpret the realm of the Lightsource. Considering the palpable gloom and depression setting in among the skeleton crew, Anton hoped Ilure'l could serve as both priest and psychologist to the remaining Ildirans.

“Please, join us.” Vao'sh's voice carried an edge of fear at going too far from the others. “Please.”

Anton volunteered to drive the simple vehicle out toward the shadowy horizon. “Should we ask Mhas'k and Syl'k if they'd like to come? They might want to get out of their agricultural domes.”

The lens kithman looked quickly at him. “They havework to do.”

Behind them, the gemmed domes of Prime glowed bright, a scream of photons against the nightfall. Three honeycombed structures sat like satellites on the outskirts, shimmering with natural greens from the well-lit plants inside.

Under searing lights, the two agricultural kithmen tended stacked crops within fertilizer troughs and hydroponics channels. Agricultural kithmen grew food; that was all they knew, all they cared about. Curious about Ildiran ways, Anton had been eager to learn more about the farmers' way of life, their inbred service to the Mage-Imperator. But when he'd tried to talk with them, both had been quiet. When they spoke at all, they kept their heads down, eyes fixed on the ground. Their fingers deftly worked in the planters, touching leaves and stems, monitoring moisture levels. Mhas'k and his mate Syl'k seemed to communicate better with growing things than with people.

They were such an utterly perfect match that they reminded Anton of his own missing parents. Margaret and Louis had been like two sides of the same coin, always working together, sharing the same passions and interests. He wished he knew where they were...

Vao'sh explained. “Most Ildiran kiths do not have the same curiosity you exhibit, Rememberer Anton. Mhas'k and Syl'k must maintain the greenhouse domes and grow our food. For them, that brings joy and satisfaction. They have no need for sightseeing.”

Now, as the vehicle sped across the ground, the dusk grew darker. Ilure'l adjusted the internal lights so high that Anton had to squint to make out their course. Up ahead he could see white plumes like exhaust from the towers of an industrial fabrication plant.

Ilure'l said, “Each year I come to observe this.” Vao'sh's face swept through a symphony of colors, expressing with tints and hues what he could not yet put into words.

Anton stopped the vehicle where he could watch the curls of mist boiling upward like steam from an alien teakettle. He was the first out of the vehicle and into the crackling cold. A low reverberant rumble made the ground vibrate from the continuous boiling of water deep beneath the rocks. “Can you hear it?”

The steam fogged the air around them in the abrupt darkness. Moisture settled out in snowflakes that dropped to the ground, building spires of encrusted ice around the open mouths of fumaroles.

According to engineering and seismic surveys, the ground underneath Maratha Prime was riddled with aquifers and thermal channels. Hot springs bubbled into the city itself, for the enjoyment of the Ildiran visitors. As temperatures dropped with each sunset, thermal plumes that normally vented invisibly into the hot daytime air suddenly became prominent, booming explosions of heat and moisture. Within weeks, the exhaled steam would freeze and form a cap over the geysers, silencing them until they were explosively

reborn the next dawn.

Vao'sh and Ilure'l remained by the safe illumination of the ground vehicle, while Anton strode fearlessly into the shadows where he could better see the pearly white mists. "I have always been interested in natural wonders, but transient phenomena like this are so much more... poignant."

"A wilting flower is more beautiful than an enduring statue of our Mage-Imperator?" Ilure'l sounded skeptical.

"In a different way, but... yes. Knowing you're about to lose something demands that you value it before it is gone."

"Rememberer Anton has a point," Vao'sh said.

The lens kithman was troubled. "The *thism* is beautiful because it never changes and always endures. By its perfect reliability, it inspires faith. While I can admire the natural uniqueness of these formations, I find them less beautiful than the Lightsource, by virtue of their very evanescence."

"Humans believe there can be two or more ways to interpret a story," Vao'sh pointed out.

Anton smiled. "Arguing over such things has kept many of my... esoteric colleagues in university jobs for their entire careers, and generations of predecessors before them."

Ilure'l seemed disturbed by the discussion. "When I interpret *thism*, Rememberer Anton, I do not want other Ildiran kithmen to draw their own conclusions. Too much discussion creates questions, not answers. When I give an answer, then the matter is settled." After looking at the Cannons for only a few more moments, the lens kithman turned to climb back into the vehicle. "If you are ready, I would like to go now."

As Anton drove off toward the glowing domes of Maratha Prime, he tried to placate the agitated lens kithman. "With all Ildirans connected through *thism*, maybe you can give absolute answers. But when I'm retelling one of our legends, it's... just a story."

Now Vao'sh's face flushed with multicolored alarm. "Rememberer Anton, nothing is ever *just* a story."

17



## MAGE-IMPERATOR JORA'H

Jora'h sat in his private contemplation chamber, a smooth-walled room with blood-red crystalline walls, while seven frenetic attenders combed and oiled his golden hair, then pulled the twitching strands. Despite their overlapping tangle of hands, the servant kithmen managed to braid his hair. The length was not sufficient for more than a modest plait that reached barely to the base of his neck, but over the years it would extend and grow into a long rope, like the former Mage-Imperator's.

His corpulent father had never set foot out of the chrysalis chair, yet Jora'h felt that it confined and isolated him and limited his ability to lead his people. Although tradition required him to issue his decrees and guide his people without ever touching the floor, this seemed to Jora'h a ridiculous restriction for a ruler.

As Prime Designate, he had always known this would be his fate. Unfortunately, he hadn't appreciated his freedom and opportunities, hadn't noticed his *life*—until it was too late.

Many parts of the government, the Solar Navy, the Designates and their replacements, were currently undergoing the turmoil of transition. It was up to Jora'h to dispatch his sons to their new assignments, to issue orders and proclamations, to reassure the Ildirans that his vision of the Lightsource was true and his *thism* was strong.

How was he supposed to go to Dobro, to Nira, to liberate her and her fellow human captives, if he was trapped by so many immediate crises and obligations? Within days, he hoped it would be possible to rush off to Dobro—to Nira. She had waited so many years, undoubtedly believing he had abandoned her...

But first he had to be the Mage-Imperator.

His son Thor'h bullied his way past the door guards, despite Jora'h's orders for his children to wait outside. "Father, your new Designates have gathered and are ready for you."

Jora'h looked at the Prime Designate, fighting a frown. He noted the glassy sheen in the young man's star-sapphire eyes. In the Mage-Imperator's senses, Thor'h was a blot in the *thism*, an indistinguishable blur. "Perhaps if you consumed less shiing, Thor'h, you would find it easier to allow *me* to make decisions and issue commands."

His son did not even have the good grace to appear stung by the rebuke. "Shiing allows me to focus and gives me more energy to do my important duties. At the moment, the Empire requires nothing less than my peak performance." Shiing, a popular drug from Hyrillka, had been hard to obtain since the hydrogues devastated that world. But Thor'h still had his supplies and, the Mage-Imperator feared, his addiction.

Annoyed by his son's lack of discipline and understanding, Jora'h clenched his hand beneath the folds of soft cloth in the chrysalis chair. The Prime Designate was still young and poorly trained; his years on Hyrillka had made him too soft, though at the time Jora'h had thought he was doing his son a kindness. Now, he wondered if he should have been harder on his firstborn, prepared him better to become the Prime Designate. He hoped Thor'h would grow up properly and learn his skills and his place. After all, the former Mage-Imperator had not prepared Jora'h until the last few months of his failing life.

"Go bring in my other sons now," Jora'h said abruptly. "I don't wish to wait any longer."

Anxious to proceed with the meeting, the Prime Designate spun, left the room, and soon hurried back into the contemplation chamber accompanied by his two closest brothers, Daro'h and Pery'h. Pery'h would now take over the role of Designate on Hyrillka, even though Thor'h had spent more time there.

No one gets exactly what he wants... not even a son of the Mage-Imperator.

Behind the three young men, unbidden, came Yazra'h, the Mage-Imperator's oldest daughter. She was lean and muscular, her movements conveying a confident, decisive nature. Coppery hair waved around

her head like a mane, long and extravagant in comparison to that of the young men, since all Ildiran males had hacked off their hair in mourning at the former Mage-Imperator's death.

Thor'h sniffed at his sister in distaste. "You are not needed here, Yazra'h." The Mage-Imperator's bloodline was heavily skewed toward male offspring. Indeed, of Jora'h's myriad children of all kiths, only a handful were daughters. Including one by Nira...

Even though he had not asked Yazra'h to this meeting, Jora'h decided that the Prime Designate's pompous attitude needed to be dealt with. "The Mage-Imperator makes those decisions, Thor'h," he said, a warning tone in his voice, "especially in his own contemplation chamber."

Yazra'h's eyes were bright, challenging her oldest brother. The Mage-Imperator had no doubt that she could defeat any of his sons in hand-to-hand combat. He said in a softer tone, "I summoned only my first Designate candidates, Yazra'h."

She shrugged casually, then tossed a dismissive glance at the Prime Designate. "Your door guards did not appear to be doing a very good job keeping unwanted people out. I simply came to offer my assistance, should you need it."

"I will consider that. Perhaps the guard ranks need to be shaken up a bit, and we can use you for our home defense."

Beaming, Yazra'h bowed. "I would be honored to serve in any way my father chooses." She strode out past the ferocious-looking door guards.

Jora'h looked at his young Designates. "I will be speaking to all of my noble-born sons in the next few hours, and I will dispatch you to your new assignments as soon as I arrange Solar Navy escorts. During your five-year transition period, each of you will be trained by one of my brothers. Only you, Pery'h, will have to do your work alone."

The young man sadly bowed his head. His injured uncle was still being tended in the Prism Palace's infirmary, and Rusa'h's condition seemed hopeless. Pery'h would have to become the new Hyrillka Designate without relying on a mentor, but he was intelligent and had shown his willingness to seek advice and counsel. Jora'h was confident the young man would do a good job.

The changeover from Designate to successor had always taken place gradually and efficiently. Many of Jora'h's brothers were perfectly competent in their roles, but because the *thism* connection was strongest between father and son, the Mage-Imperator's own children traditionally took over as rulers of the subsidiary Ildiran colonies, so that he could see them better in his mind.

The Designates-in-waiting would learn the particular needs and aspects of each splinter settlement. Through the *thism* Jora'h could feel the loyalties of his sons and knew that they had accepted their responsibilities. Despite the blow to its heart with the abrupt death of Mage-Imperator Cyroc'h, the Ildiran Empire would continue as strong as before. Once all of Jora'h's sons reached their assigned worlds, the pieces would be in place again.

Then he could go to Nira.

As he dismissed Thor'h, Daro'h, and Pery'h, he heard a disturbance in the corridor outside, saw shadowy shapes through the translucent walls as a person hurriedly approached. Because of Yazra'h's earlier criticism, the warrior kithmen at the door snapped to sharper attention, growling denials and

warnings.

“But I have important news!” came a voice from outside.

Through the *thism* Jora’h sensed a medical kithman, knew that the urgency of his message was not overstated. “Let him enter. I wish to learn—”

The doctor burst through the door before the Mage-Imperator could finish his sentence. “Liege, it is the Hyrillka Designate!” The medical kithman’s nimble hands fluttered in agitation. “After all this time lost in sub-*thism* sleep, your brother Rusa’h has awakened!”

18



## YARROD

When the triumphant EDF fleet returned from Ptoro, Yarrod could think of no better time to end his service with the Earth Defense Forces—nor could he find a reason to stay that was more important than the reasons to go.

Yes, the hydrogues continued to attack random colonies, both human and Ildiran, but now it seemed clear the deep-core aliens had been hunting for vestiges of the worldforest. Perhaps it made logical sense to stay with the Earth military, to assist in the efforts to fight the enemy. But, oh, how the aching trees called to him every time he touched his treeling!

Yarrod had never wanted to join the Earth military in the first place, had volunteered only grudgingly and never considered himself a true EDF soldier. Unlike his talkative and adventurous friend Kolker, he felt no call to see other planets besides Theroc. He found enough fascinating things within the worldforest to occupy his attention for an entire lifetime.

His niece Sarein, acting as Theron ambassador to Earth, had begged for their assistance in the hydrogue war, and the trees had given their approval. He and eighteen other green priests had left Theroc and been dispersed to serve aboard widely separated military ships in far-off space battlefields.

But now Yarrod could not turn a deaf ear to the greater demands of the wounded trees. Through vivid telink he had experienced all the terror, the struggle, the pain—which had given him helpless nightmares for weeks. He should have been on Theroc using his powers to *help*, instead of riding in this metal-walled ship. Maybe he would have died like so many others, but at least he would have *been there*.

His fingers clenched as the memory of flames and cold and agony swept through him. No one had known the hydrogues would attack Theroc. He had been on the bridge of an EDF cruiser awaiting new orders when the wail of the worldforest had hammered through him. Through the eyes of a thousand trees, he’d observed the death of his nephew Reynald and so many more. It was all too much to bear.

Now it was too late to fight in that battle, but not too late to clear away the mess, rebuild, tend the new shoots... and prepare, should such a disaster happen again.



Through telink he had discussed his need with other green priests, especially with Kolker, who was now aboard a distant skymine at Qronha 3. Kolker and Yarrod had been acolytes together long ago, had taken the green on the same day. “At Ptoro you struck a blow for perfect revenge,” Kolker told him through telink. “That was your way of fighting the hydrogues, and you accomplished more than the rest of us.”

Though he’d been stationed as a simple relay of information, transmitting instructions from Commander Tamblyn, Yarrod had shared every moment with Kolker, Rossia, and all other green priests. He had watched the yawning, interdimensional wormhole open like a toothless mouth to gulp the collapsed star and send it to Ptoro.

Yes, he had struck back at the forest’s enemies—but it was not enough, and not what his heart demanded of him.

Victory messages about Ptoro had already been sent throughout the Spiral Arm via the network of green priests. Now, as the fleet returned at full speed to Earth, Yarrod sat alone in his cabin aboard the lead Manta. He did not wish to talk with Rossia or any of the EDF officers. He had already made up his mind. He had no choice but to resign and set aside his weak commitments to the military.

When he finally stood in the skeletal graveyard of worldtrees, smelling the harsh soot and charcoal like the blood of cremated trees, he knew the pain would slash like razors at his soul. Still, Yarrod knew what he must do.

Alone in his small cabin, he drew strength from communing in silence with his treeling. Then finally, before the Manta could come to dock at Earth, he walked purposefully toward the bridge to inform Commander Tamblyn of his decision.

19



BASIL WENCESLAS

The news about Ptoro would not be officially released until tomorrow, but Basil already had his report from the green priests in the battle group. Here on Earth, he had to make certain the achievement had the greatest effect. The Chairman couldn’t do it all himself, though he did not dare show weakness, even to his number two man.

For the past year, he had subtly groomed Eldred Cain to become his deputy and heir apparent. Cain had moved into the Hansa HQ pyramid just before the hydrogue crisis, but Basil had never visited the man outside of business hours. Though he had no interest in friendly socializing with the deputy, Basil needed to understand the details of Cain’s personal life. His underlings were not allowed to have any secrets.

Despite the late hour, instead of summoning the deputy to his penthouse, Basil went to see Cain on his own turf. As always, he was dressed impeccably, as if ready to address gathered members of the Hansa

Trade Board. The Chairman didn't believe in non-business hours.

The pale-skinned deputy met him at the door, wearing a comfortable shirt made of slick fabric. At thirty-eight years old, Eldred Cain was slender and small-statured, with entirely hairless skin that indicated either meticulous depilation or some form of alopecia.

Showing no surprise at the visit, Cain gestured Basil inside. "Welcome to my home, Mr. Chairman. Is this to be a meeting over dinner—I can have something sent up—or just drinks?"

"I prefer not to drink alcohol if we're discussing business."

Cain gave him his maddeningly beatific smile. "I always maintain a small supply of cardamom coffee, Mr. Chairman, in case you ever decide to visit."

While Basil's penthouse had windows that looked out upon the breathtaking skyline, Cain preferred interior quarters, without windows. Basil had even heard a silly rumor that his odd deputy was a vampire. When asked about his unusual preference, Cain had explained cryptically, "Inside roomshave more wall space."

Once Basil entered the other man's inner sanctum, the reason became apparent. The walls were adorned with art, from small sketches to enormous paintings: portraits of inbred-looking nobles, two near-identical depictions of the Crucifixion, images from classical mythology, simple slices of rustic medieval life. Each work was lovingly displayed with perfect diffuse illumination, complete with a one-person bench set at the optimal viewing distance.

"Do you know the work of Velázquez, Mr. Chairman? These are originals from the seventeenth century. Priceless."

"Art history was never one of my particular interests."

The deputy showed uncharacteristic exuberance. "A master of realism and deception, Velázquez had a wicked sense of satire, poking subtle but vicious insults at the vapid nobles, whom he hated. They never noticed." Over the years Cain had spent most of his substantial earnings to acquire Velázquez's sketches and paintings, many from the Prado in Madrid. "I can stare for hours. I never get tired of looking at the composition, the colors."

Basil appreciated quality work, but he had never spent more than a few moments inspecting a single painting. "Interesting, Mr. Cain—but that is not why I have come tonight." He walked deeper into the room. "Since Ptoro has already worked so well, I intend to authorize the use of another Klikiss Torch. Perhaps several more."

He didn't want to appear weak or indecisive, but he needed input, a sounding board, and he had already discussed the idea with Sarein. He wanted to get a fresh perspective. . . so long as he didn't seem to be coming to the deputy with his hat in his hand. So far, Basil had found his deputy to be correct far more often than not.

Cain sat on the edge of one of his viewing benches, indicating another for Basil. His hairless brow wrinkled. "Ah, and you are concerned that it might provoke a disastrous counterstrike instead of forcing concessions from them."

Basil didn't admit he had been asking for help. He simply waited.

Cain continued: “From our first reports, the Ptoro deployment was a success, but it could as easily have been a debacle. And it is too soon to be certain there’ll be no retaliation from the hydrogues.”

“Even so,” Basil countered, “the hydrogues do know we can hurt them.”

“What if the faeros hadn’t offered their assistance? They seem to be enemies of the hydrogues, but we don’t know their motives, nor have we ever managed to find them or communicate with them.”

Basil steepled his fingers. “Perhaps we should issue an ultimatum of our own before igniting each new Torch? Demand that the hydrogues rescind their restrictions and forswear further attacks against us. If they refuse or if they don’t answer, then we ignite another Torch, and then another. There’s a historical precedent: It’s the way President Truman used atomic weapons in World War II to deal with the Japanese.”

“Not an apt analogy, Mr. Chairman.” Here, in private, the deputy did not show any reluctance to contradict Basil. “President Truman commanded one of the largest armies in World War II, and the United States was already a force to be reckoned with. In *this* conflict, however, we are relatively ineffectual, as far as the enemy is concerned. Almost certainly, the hydrogues could wipe us out at any time. Our posturing is equivalent to the threat of, say, Luxembourg joining World War II. Yes, we can broadcast warnings, vow to annihilate the hydrogues if they don’t concede. But what if they unleash an all-out attack on us? We couldn’t withstand that—as our experiences on Boone’s Crossing, Corvus Landing, and Theroc have shown.”

“There’s always the chance that they’ll keep hitting human colonies, whether we use Klikiss Torches or not, Eldred.”

Cain put his chin on one hand. “We’ve just begun skymining again on Qronha 3, and I sincerely wish we had unfettered access to more gas giants. Unfortunately, when we use a Torch we don’t secure potential resources—we destroy them. That doesn’t help us harvest ekti.”

Basil growled. “Can you come up with another solution?”

“Let me think about it. By the way, I understand that several transport ships are bringing the warglobe wreckage found on Theroc. Will it arrive in time for the upcoming Ptoro victory celebration?”

“It is on the schedule.” The Chairman got to his feet. “Presenting the wreckage should be another morale booster.”

“Not much more than window dressing, Mr. Chairman.”

A cynical smile quirked the corners of Basil’s mouth. “Don’t underestimate the importance of window dressing, Eldred. Why do you think we have a King?”



## KING PETER

It was good to have a genuine reason to celebrate again, after so many tragedies. King Peter stood warmly beside his Queen on a high balcony overlooking the gathering dusk of the festival square. Though they were in public, and partly because of it, he and Estarra shared quick communicative glances, brief touches, very close and comfortable in each other's space.

The royal couple were welcomed with a resounding cheer; Peter's face wore its first genuine smile in recent memory. He and Estarra clasped hands, raised them together in greeting to the people.

Bright music skirled over the huge crowd. Street singers and instrument players skipped about with an obvious need to show their joy. Revelers loosed phosphorescent balloons that floated into the air, then popped, spraying shimmering sparkles. Boats cruised the Royal Canal, and tourist-filled zeppelins drifted overhead.

Down in the plaza, the Archfather of the official religion, Unison, stood like a kindly old saint in gaudy voluminous robes, leading groups in ritualized prayer and hymns of thanksgiving. Young Prince Daniel, Peter's supposed brother, was not in attendance "for security reasons," and the King was glad that the unspoken threat of his replacement would not sour the day. Chairman Wenceslas thought he had intimidated the young King into meekly accepting his subordinate role, but Peter was merely biding his time, guarded and careful.

"I'd almost forgotten what it felt like, Estarra. It was necessary to remind the hydrogues that we are not helpless, that we won't just stand by and be slaughtered."

She hugged him. "Now they certainly aren't going to forget."

He ran his hand over the soft skin of her shoulder, loving just to touch her. Unfortunately, because he so obviously cared for her, Estarra's safety had become a nasty bit of leverage for the Hansa. Peter knew it, and so did Basil.

Moving silently, the Chairman stepped up behind them, as silent as gathering dust. "The cargo haulers have started their descent. They should be visible in the sky within ten minutes, so it's time for you to begin your announcements."

"You and your schedules, Basil," Peter said with a wry smile. "Are you nervous about giving your little speech today?" Though he rarely appeared in public, the Chairman had chosen to give an address of his own; perhaps Basil wanted to bask in the optimistic news for a change. A bit of rare pride?

"Nervous? No."

On cue, a loud fanfare stunned the background murmur into silence. Unnecessary spotlights shone down on the three of them, dazzling Peter's eyes and blinding him to the descending spacecraft—but he knew where they were scheduled to be. "Behold, everyone!" Peter shouted, pointing into the air. "This proves that our enemies *can* be destroyed!"

Six EDF cargo haulers dropped into view from high orbit. Beneath the heavy lifters, blackened fragments of a gigantic diamond eggshell dangled from powerful tractor beams. Two haulers worked in tandem to carry the largest piece of the shattered warglobe from Theroc, while each of the other ships brought a smaller fragment to the Royal Plaza.

Estarra squeezed his hand, grimly pleased to see for herself the broken hydrogue ship that her sister Celli had found. Just standing beside his wife, Peter felt stronger, able to help the human race get through this crisis.

General Lanyan had originally demanded that the wreckage be brought to the main EDF base on Mars for a full analysis, but Chairman Wenceslas had disagreed. "You can look at it later, General. For now, there are considerations beyond military necessity. I'd rather let the people see this instead of having it hidden in a military research lab."

Fuming at being countermanded, Lanyan had insisted on military security. "Security?" Peter had asked. "If our scientists find any weakness in the hydrogue design, who would we possibly want to keep it secret from?"

From the balcony now, he and Estarra watched the cargo haulers deposit the broken war globe in the plaza, like a knight delivering the head of a slain dragon to his King. As the first large burned section settled onto the flagstones with a clanking thud, the audience and even the royal guards stepped back in awe.

The next part of Peter's speech was full of warm confidence. "Our scientific teams will analyze the war globe's components and search for any vulnerability we can use against our hydrogue enemies."

Down below, one tall blond, Engineering Specialist Swendsen, was the first to hurry forward to touch the hull, running his hands along the blistered surface. When he looked up toward the Whisper Palace, Peter could see the man was grinning. The sudden cheers were deafening.

Basil tapped his chronometer and spoke softly. "Time for you both to go to the bridge. Keep on schedule."

The King and Queen walked side by side in a brisk procession from the Whisper Palace into the flagstoned plaza. When they moved together, absorbed in each other's presence, they could almost forget all the pomp, guards, and spectators. A contingent of royal guards snapped to attention. Court musicians who had waited for just this moment played yet another fanfare.

Ahead, the metal webwork of the Royal Canal bridge gleamed under reflected light. Its main posts were dark, though other bridge spires and all the cupolas of the Whisper Palace blazed with shimmering torches, each of which symbolized a world that had signed the Hansa Charter.

Eight years ago Old King Frederick had been forced to extinguish four of those newly lit torches after the hydrogues had destroyed four moons slated for terraforming and eventual colonization. Now, even though Ptoro was a flaming ball and utterly uninhabitable by any humans, the Hansa had decided to claim it as a moral victory. If humans could not settle there, at least they had made it impossible for the hydrogues to remain.

Estarra's older sister Sarein, the official ambassador from Theroc to Earth, stood waiting among the representatives and important guests. The Queen smiled and nodded to her, then returned to her formal pose beside Peter.

Hansa pyrotechnics experts watched on monitor screens inside the Whisper Palace. It was all a spectacular show. Peter stood in front of the tall pillar like an ancient priest invoking fire from the gods. "At Ptoro we have hurt the hydrogues, as they have done so many times to us." The crowd cheered on

cue. “In the name of the Terran Hanseatic League, this torch will stand as a symbol of what we have accomplished. Let it also be an eternal flame to memorialize those soldiers and civilians who have fallen in eight years of a war that we did not want.”

He gestured dramatically and, as planned, the pyrotechnics experts ignited the blazing ball atop a bridge tower, which burned brighter than all the others. Fuel lines were opened further, and every one of the dazzling flames from the turrets, spires, and cupolas of the Whisper Palace brightened, feeding on the growing light of victory.

The crowd responded with an indrawn breath, then applause and cheers. Sarein exchanged a meaningful glance with her sister, as if both were remembering the damage done to their home on Theroc. Spontaneous music drifted to the sky.

Peter put his arm around his Queen; she felt so warm and *real* next to him. Her face filled with delight. “I’m glad I could finally do a positive thing,” he whispered to her.

After savoring the heady rush for a moment, he introduced the Chairman and stepped aside. The applause was automatic. The Chairman’s smile appeared almost genuine as he stood next to Peter. Most people actually believed the manufactured reports that the two men were the best of friends.

Basil waited for the audience’s full attention, then spoke. “The Hansa offers you a fine opportunity with our new colonization initiative. Klikiss technology has already given us one irresistible weapon to use against the hydrogues, as we just demonstrated at Ptoro. Now the Klikiss instantaneous transportation system gives us a new method for settling many untouched worlds. It’s a new start for us—both for the Hansa and for yourselves. Think about the opportunity.”

Basil didn’t have to give many details. The colonization initiative had been much discussed in the news ever since the discovery of the functioning Klikiss transportals, but this was the first time any formal plan had been announced to the public.

“On behalf of the Terran Hanseatic League, I am proud to extend a remarkable offer. Is anyone brave and ambitious enough to seize this chance? Are you willing to take a crack at colonizing an empty Klikiss planet? To pack up the family and your possessions and move to a virgin world? Think of the challenge! Be pioneers! If you accept this challenge, the Hansa will provide you with free land, certain services and supplies, even amnesty from several forms of debt.”

Basil sounded as if he was addressing a board meeting, laying out details like a bullet-point presentation. Peter remembered all the motivational skills the Chairman had taught him, and suddenly wondered if Basil was intentionally downplaying his speaking abilities, so as not to upstage the figurehead King.

Hansa experts, economic analysts, and civic simulators had developed this scheme as a viable method of pumping fresh capital and popular excitement into the Hansa, which might otherwise have faced a slow death through stagnation caused by limited space travel.

Smiling, Basil continued. “The hydrogues may squeeze us in one direction, but we will grow in another. Will any of you take this offer? Can any of you afford not to? Full details will be available at local dissemination stations.”

During the expected applause, Peter gave the Chairman a wry look. He said in a voice too low for the amplifiers to detect, “Basil, if you enjoy the limelight, then I’ll be out of a job.”

Maintaining his false smile, Basil gave him a hard glance. “Just be sure you don’t give me a reason to, and everything will be fine.”

21



## ORLI COVITZ

Gray and cloudy Dremen had been her home since before the hydrogue war, but Orli Covitz felt that anyplace would be better than here. At fourteen years old she had few points of comparison.

Her father had pulled up stakes and brought her here, following a dream, when she’d been only six. Jan Covitz maintained an unflagging reserve of optimism, but Orli had slowly come to realize that her father’s grand aspirations did not amount to much, despite his good intentions. She loved him anyway, knowing that he actually believed he would find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow if he chased long enough and hard enough.

Blowing on her cold fingers to warm them, Orli stood with her father in the slushy fields they had claimed. All this land had been there for the taking, because few other Dremen farmers wanted it. That should have been their first hint, but her father was sure the two of them could do something with it. Jan and his daughter were a team.

They’d been latecomers here. The first families had arrived a hundred and ten years earlier and staked their claims. Many of them already acted like snobs, considering themselves genuine bluebloods after only a few generations. Her father had ignored the snobbery, however, accepted the available land, and made the best of it. He diligently forged ahead without much of a plan, but with a great deal of exuberance. For eight and a half years he had worked hard while insisting, “Next year will be better. We’ll make it then for sure, Orli.”

This year, though, the mushroom field was a disaster.

The ground was wet and mulchy, with standing pools of peaty brown water. Many of the giant mushrooms had been hacked down, the tender caps harvested, but most had opened their gills and dumped spores, which darkened the fungus meat with inky residue and lent it an unpleasant taste.

Now Jan shoved his spade into the soft, cold muck and flashed a bright smile at her. “We’ll salvage some of this, Orli. Fifteen percent at least.”

She smiled in response to his chipper attitude. “We can maybe push it to twenty percent if the weather holds.”

But on Dremen, the weather would not hold.

She wiped her forehead, pushing her dark bangs aside. Though she wanted to let her brown hair grow out like some of the colonists’ uppity daughters did, she knew that with her pointed chin, pert nose, and large eyes, long hair would make her look identical to pictures of her mother. Jan never talked about his

faraway wife—she had left them long ago, after one of her husband’s previous schemes had failed. But Orli didn’t want to remind him, so she kept her hair short and simple.

She didn’t know why her father had chosen to come to *Dremen*, of all places. It was a cool world with dim skies. The variable sun waxed over the course of decades, warming the planet and making life nearly tolerable. Dremen had plenty of water; its continents were dotted with large shallow lakes that evaporated easily, keeping the air in a clammy equilibrium of fog and frequent rain showers. Woody plants had not evolved here, and the ground was covered with cold bogs, mossy groundcover, and sheets of leathery lichen.

But Orli and her father had arrived during the variable star’s waning phase, and year after year the climate had only grown colder until the variable-phase winter had set in hard. During previous waning cycles, the Dremen colonists had depended on relief supplies from Hansa merchant ships. This time around, though, the hydrogue embargo changed everything.

With great aspirations, Jan had studied Dremen’s climate and meteorology, and had convinced a few investors by insisting (quite rationally) that while green crops struggled in the damp and dim environment, genetically enhanced mushrooms were sure to be a bumper crop. The spores he imported to Dremen grew into broad toadstools that provided edible flesh, dense in nutrients, though they were chewy and bland. Once he’d prepared his open fields, Jan went overboard with the planting. Untempered optimism again.

The first harvest had been beyond her father’s wildest dreams—or plans, because he’d made no prior arrangements for large work crews or automated equipment to chop down and preserve the delicate mushroom meat. The fungi grew quickly, but withered just as fast. Timing was crucial.

He and Orli had worked around the clock until they were ready to drop, but half of the crop still rotted. Jan had rushed into town, asking for help, but he had nothing with which to pay the crew. In the end, he’d been forced just to open his land and let people come in and take what they wanted, hoping to earn goodwill, if not actual profits, from his fellow colonists.

The unharvested mushrooms in the fields had dumped their spores and slumped into the bog—and an even larger crop of chaotic mushrooms sprang forth the next season, ripened... and then rotted.

Though Jan and Orli had plenty to eat, they had overestimated Dremen’s demand for edible fungus. No one really liked the taste, and few people were willing to pay for it.

Then, as the solar cycle waned, bringing increasingly cold winters, the already chilly fog became a cold sleet that turned the bogs into slush and finally snow. For the past couple of years Orli’s world had been a sloppy, frigid mess. Now as she and her father trudged across their mushroom fields, the standing pools were covered with skins of ice.

Pausing, she looked at the transport bins of mushroom meat they had sliced and stacked. “Once it gets warm again, Dad, let’s think about choosing a different crop.”

“I’ve thought about it plenty already, girl. The sad fact is we’ll never get rid of these mushrooms now. We’d need to incinerate acres just to prep the soil again and kill all the dormant spores. Looks like it’s fungus forever.”

“Then I’ll keep working on new recipes.”



“Don’t take time away from your music.” Her father arched his eyebrows. “You’ll be a famous concert performer someday. I know it.” His compliment warmed her heart, though she didn’t exactly see how she was going to find her big break here on Dremen.

She did not deflate his cheerful opinion. “Someday.”

Together they went to the full bins and sealed them against the worsening weather. “Enough for today, girl. Let’s get back home. You deserve a rest.”

“And I have to do my homework.”

“After we eat, I’m going into town again. The big shots are gathering for their regular session to solve the world’s problems.”

“I thought you’d already solved all the problems.”

“I did, but they never listen to me. We proved that much in the last election.” He tousled her hair as if she was still a little girl.

Their small house on the edge of the cold bog had few luxuries, but plenty of homey touches. Orli had been inside the larger homes of well-established colonists, and she thought her own house was a superior place *to live*. They dropped their packs. Jan turned up the heat, and Orli went to start dinner.

A printed solicitation message for the Hansa’s new transportal colonization initiative was there waiting for them. Jan Covitz pretended not to notice it, but Orli saw his eyes light up.

22



RLINDA KETT

Flush with business opportunities thanks to the new colonization initiative, Rlinda Kett flew the *Voracious Curiosity* to the quiet world of Crenna. It was time to share the wealth and the success. And the work. She went directly to her best former pilot and favorite ex-husband, Branson Roberts.

Almost two years ago, BeBob had successfully slipped away from his onerous assignment of flying dangerous survey missions for the EDF. Since his “retirement” was unauthorized, he’d been keeping a low profile on Crenna ever since; Rlinda knew that by now he was probably bored to tears.

Normally, aboard ship she wore skintight black pants over her wide hips and heavy legs, because they were so practical. Since she was seeing BeBob, though, she had changed into a flowing bright purple caftan shot through with iridescent threads she had kept from the first shipment of Theron goods. She liked a flash of color; she thought stripes and patterns made her look especially attractive.

BeBob greeted her with his adorable yet clueless smile. As usual, he wore monotone colors, colony slacks, a loose long-sleeve shirt that wasn’t stylish and didn’t fit him well; she had never been able to

convince him not to wear it. Rlinda took his scrawny arm and walked him back to his colony house, then made him an offer she knew he couldn't turn down. "How'd you like to fly the *Blind Faith* again?"

"But... I'm all out of fuel, and she needs repairs." His big round eyes looked so innocent and adorable on his leathery face.

She leaned over to kiss his large ear, making him blush. "Stop focusing on the problems and answer my question."

"Do you even need to ask? I hate being stuck here on the ground. I'm afraid one morning I'll wake up with roots pushing into the soil. Give me metal walls and nice clean reprocessed air instead of the smell of rain and fertilizers—just as long as I don't have to play chicken with drogue warglobes, like General Lanyan kept forcing me to do."

"None of that." She tousled his smoky gray hair and led him inside for a bit of privacy. "And the job's completely legitimate."

"That'll be a switch," BeBob said.

"For you, maybe. I've always been a respectable businesswoman."

"You've always known when to turn a blind eye."

"They go hand in hand, BeBob." She sealed the door of his dwelling, then sniffed. "Who does your cooking? Smells like layer upon layer of prepackaged meals. Shame on you."

"Well, I've grown rather fond of spampax. It's amazing what a little hot sauce can do to doctor it up." She made a face so outrageous that BeBob burst out laughing. Without asking, he opened a bottle of red wine for the two of them.

"That better be one of your 'special occasion' bottles," she said. "Because this certainly qualifies."

"Rlinda, it's a special occasion anytime you come to visit me."

"Especially when I come offering a nice job."

"Or sex." BeBob handed her a glass of wine and took a smaller one for himself.

Rlinda swirled it around, took a long sip. "Your taste in wine was never anything I had arguments with, BeBob."

"One of the few things."

She playfully swatted the back of his head. "Thanks to my work with Davlin Lotze, we've opened access to the whole new transportal network. The Hansa has enough lawyers and waivers that I'll never get any of the patent profits, but the Chairman showed his gratitude in other ways. I've got a bottomless supply of ekti and a lucrative delivery contract as part of the new Klikiss colonization initiative. You want a piece of that?"

"I thought transportals didn't require ekti. Isn't that the whole point?"

“Transportals are perfect for shipping people and small objects, but the Hansa still needs ships like the *Curiosity*—and the *Blind Faith*—to haul heavy equipment and large components that can’t be broken down to fit through a transportal frame. And also to shuttle groups of eager settlers from existing colonies to the nearest Klikiss hub with an active transportal.”

“Ah, typical distribution bottlenecks.”

BeBob took the chair opposite from the sofa where she sat, but when Rlinda gave him a quick and disbelieving glance, he quickly changed his place to snuggle beside her. “That’s better,” she said.

“Don’t forget, I’m technically AWOL, Rlinda. I can’t just fly around doing Hansa business. Somebody’s bound to notice.”

“I’ve already taken care of the problem, BeBob.”

When Rlinda first received her assignment, she had asked for a face-to-face meeting with Chairman Wenceslas. Even after discovering the transportal network, she found it difficult to get through all the bureaucratic roadblocks.

Her old acquaintance Sarein had provided the key, marching Rlinda directly to the upper levels of the Hansa HQ and bypassing security. The ambitious young daughter of Theroc was apparently a frequent visitor to the Chairman’s private offices and chambers. *Good for you, girl*, Rlinda thought. A young woman from a backwater planet had to do whatever was necessary to compete with those who started off with more political advantages and connections.

When she and Sarein finally stood in front of his desk, Chairman Wenceslas, though distracted, knew how Rlinda could help him. He looked up at her with a half-amused stare and a guarded expression. “If you expect outrageous concessions like last time, Ms. Kett, you’ll be disappointed. You are not alone among pilots who are anxious to start flying again. I’ll have volunteers lined up from here to Ganymede.”

“Hmm, and some of them might even be competent. You *know* I am. Besides, don’t you owe me a debt of gratitude?”

“I didn’t realize you were so old-fashioned.”

“It’s one of my flaws. But I won’t demand anything out of line. I just want to bring in one of my former pilots. He’s a man I’d rather not do without.”

Actually there had been many times—especially when they were married—that she very much *had* wanted to do without Branson Roberts. But that was all water under the bridge, and she intended to include BeBob in the surge of profitable business.

Chairman Wenceslas sat back at his desk and looked questioningly at Sarein, but the young ambassador only shrugged her narrow shoulders. He asked, “And is this man a decent pilot, Ms. Kett?”

“Oh, he’s the best. So good, in fact, that General Lanyan yanked him from his regular business to fly dangerous recon missions. He’s exceptionally skilled at... unorthodox piloting and squeaking his ship out of difficult situations.”

The Chairman tapped his fingers on the desktop. “I see. So you would like me to intervene and sever his commitment with the Earth Defense Forces so he can fly merchant runs instead of surveillance?”

Rlinda chuckled. “Oh, that’s not precisely the problem, Mr. Chairman. You see, BeBob has already done that. He wasn’t cut out for military service and... voluntarily failed to return from his last assignment.”

Even Sarein was surprised. “You mean he’s one of the AWOL pilots?”

The Chairman frowned. “Ms. Kett, General Lanyan rants and fumes about those ‘deserters’ practically every day.”

Rlinda brightened. “So, wouldn’t it be a good idea to put Captain Roberts back into worthwhile service? That way he could make up for his indiscretions.”

“Basil, the General would throw an absolute fit if he found out,” Sarein said in a low voice.

“And it would only encourage other disgruntled pilots to ignore their orders and desert their posts. I’m afraid we can’t have that, Ms. Kett.”

“Oh, come on now. The Chairman of the Terran Hanseatic League can find some way to make an exception.” She crossed her beefy arms over her chest and stood like a worldtree that had just taken root in his office. “After all, I could have made a far more unreasonable request.”

“That doesn’t mean I would have granted it.” Wenceslas sighed as more messages popped up on his multiwindowed translucent desktop. “The best I can offer is that we’ll allow your friend to fly his ship on our missions. No one will ask his background, and your man should be smart enough not to reveal anything.” He raised a warning finger. “But if he should ever get caught, there is nothing I can do to help him. General Lanyan has a standing vendetta against those pilots.”

“If BeBob is dumb enough to get caught, Mr. Chairman, then I’d disavow any relationship with him as well.”

Rlinda finished her wine in one long drink. Outside, Crenna seemed so... bucolic. “During maintenance prep on the *Blind Faith*, you could change its name and serial numbers. That should keep you from drawing any attention, especially if you’re doing Hansa work.” She put a big arm around him and pulled him closer to her on the sofa. “Look, I’ll even stay and help you fix up the ship.”

He smiled. “There aren’t many other people I’d trust to tinker with the *Faith*... but if it gets you to stay here longer, then you’ve got yourself a deal.”

“That didn’t take much convincing.” She poured herself another glass from the bottle and refilled BeBob’s. “As soon as you get the *Blind Faith* in the air again, you can start flying load after load. Chairman Wenceslas is pushing this full-scale colonization, and there’s quite a backlog already.”

“At least the two of us will be partners again, doing what we do best.” BeBob set the glass down. “Should we seal it with a kiss?”

“A kiss for starters. Just for starters.”



## DAVLIN LOTZE

This world was different: Davlin could tell as soon as he stepped through the transportal. But though he sensed looming danger, he would not leave until he had completed at least a cursory exploration. The Chairman expected a full report on every new Klikiss planet an explorer visited. Every coordinate tile needed to be documented somehow.

The sky overhead was a bruised purplish-red; a primary element of the atmosphere seemed to be distilled shadow. As he stepped away from the blank trapezoidal rock of the transportal, Davlin took a deep breath and coughed at the sour, sulfurous odor in the air. The Klikiss had similar breathing requirements to humans, but the stench made this world unpleasant. He fumbled in the pockets of his jumpsuit, withdrew a supplemental airmask, and fixed it over his face.

He looked back at the transportal and was surprised to see that the flat wall stood alone at the brink of a canyon's sheer cliff. In order to return, he would have to step through the transportal as if he were leaping into the chasm itself. Most unsettling...

The wind whistled with a strange bottomless moan. On an uneven escarpment of talus boulders, he saw the familiar conical lumps of Klikiss buildings. Some of the ancient hive towers stretched high into the sky; many passages no doubt penetrated deep into caves.

Davlin set off across the rough, uneven ground toward the empty city. In the thousands of years since the Klikiss had disappeared, their roads had eroded away. Even if this world was not a likely candidate for the colonization initiative, he could bring images to archaeological teams for further analysis.

Gravity was rather heavy on this world, and his footsteps became ponderous. Even with supplemental oxygen, he was breathing hard as he trudged up the slope.

Turning back to see how far he had come from the cliff-edge transportal, he spotted strange shapes in the clotted sky. Jagged wings surrounded a body core that trailed twitching tentacles, like a bizarre fusion between a giant jellyfish and a wide-winged pterodactyl.

Davlin instantly recognized the threat. He counted dozens of the things converging toward the transportal from across the canyon, as if its activation had alerted them to the possibility of fresh meat. When the flying jellyfish-creatures drifted closer, Davlin could see that each bulbous body was merely a sack to hold a mouth-ring large enough to engulf its paralyzed prey.

The things would get to the transportal before he could reach it.

Suddenly, the wind whipped up, and the brooding sky spewed sheets of drenching rain. The moisture felt oily and disgusting on his skin; a few seconds later, it began to burn.

When the jellyfish-things spotted him, the pack drew closer from all directions. Cut off from the transportal and his escape, Davlin raced for shelter in a tumble of boulders on the outskirts of the city ruins. His burst of speed made the jellyfish-things move faster. On broad wings, they cruised after him.

He wedged himself into a dark cranny in the misshapen rocks, where at least none of the acidic rain could penetrate. Unfortunately, the cranny also sheltered other creatures. With a glint of bluish metallic carapace, a segmented body as wide as his thigh unwrapped itself, full of sharp legs and clacking claws. The centipede creature sprang out like a jack-in-the-box. Davlin spun just in time so that the scissorlike claws fastened on his pack, ripping the fabric but not touching his skin.

He struggled to shrug off and discard his pack as a second giant centipede crawled out of a different crevice. Drips of venom sparkled on the ends of its upraised clawed feet. Davlin swung the pack, knocking the second creature aside, while the first increased its grip on the fabric, striking and slashing. Medical supplies, cans of rations, and clothes fell out with a clatter on the floor of the little cave. Its belt slashed, the weapon holster on the side of the pack dangled out of reach.

Davlin heard louder clicking and scraping. Apparently he had blundered into a nest of the things. Two more of the centipede creatures sprang at him; Davlin thrust his now-useless pack toward them as a distraction, and the weapon clattered to the floor of the cave. He bolted for the opening. Outside, burning rain continued to splash down. He ran.

Farther down the hill, scores of the winged jellyfish-things surrounded the transportal. Five others drifted over the rock field, poking with their glassy tentacles in search of where he had gone to hide.

Davlin's only shelter would be the Klikiss ruins themselves. Sparing nothing, he raced forward. As soon as he moved, the flying jellyfish detected him and flapped their razor-edged wings in pursuit. Without the pack, he was lighter, and adrenaline gave him the power to overcome this planet's increased gravity. He had also lost his only weapon, and he chided himself for his stupidity in entering an unknown new environment without his weapon drawn in the first place. He would have to rely on his wits now.

Panting, he increased the oxygen output in his breathing mask. The slope was steep, the rocky and rain-slick ground treacherous. He scrambled ahead, weaving and stumbling to provide an uncertain target. Just as he had learned in his military survival training, long ago...

His eyes burned, but he no longer cared about the stinging chemical rain. Straining to see through irritated tears, he bounded forward in search of openings, low Klikiss doorways or windows. There had to be some way into the ghost city.

The predatory jellyfish were eerily silent above and around him, but he knew they were closing in for the kill. When one of the glassy, needle-filled tentacles brushed his shoulder, a fiery agony ripped through his muscles.

Davlin slipped in the muck and sprawled, glancing up as one of the huge jellyfish-things drifted overhead. He could see its rippled mouth, a wide opening of questing, hungry lips. The thing had no obvious eyes, but it seemed to sense where he was.

Lurching forward as it swooped back for him, Davlin dove inside the first opening he found. His burning arm was nearly useless, but he hauled himself in with his other hand. Curling, poisonous tentacles brushed the wall, leaving a trail of toxin that smoked on the hard surface.

He crawled along until he reached a widening tunnel where he could finally get to his feet. When he looked back, he saw a crowd of the jellyfish-things clustered at the window through which he had entered. They pulled their pterodactyl wings tight, extending tentacles and trying to force their bodies into the ruins after him.

Davlin fled deeper into the abandoned city. Despite his years of service to the Hansa, acting as a cultural spy, infiltrating settlements and investigating Ildiran relics, it had been a long time since he'd faced such imminent danger. Fortunately, he'd had years of secret training. The most sophisticated military exercises had supposedly prepared him for any scenario, but if he ever escaped from this, he would have to write them a whole new training module.

The Klikiss ruins were dark and the tunnels oppressive. Though he had lost his pack among the giant centipede creatures, he kept a small handlight in his pocket. The minimal illumination was enough for him.

Fearing what might lurk in the shadows ahead, Davlin used the light to see each curving tunnel, though he knew its illumination might attract something even worse than what he had encountered so far.

Down another branch he saw a distant doorway that led back outside. More winged jellyfish were there, blocking his escape. With their ability to track him over here, the things showed a sinister intelligence and a determination that chilled his blood.

For now, he had no way of getting back to the transportal.

Not exactly the way Davlin had imagined his end. A statistic. Another vanished explorer. The coordinate tile for this world would be marked black, indicating a dangerous place; it would be a long time before any human visited it again, if ever.

Though his chances didn't look good, he did not succumb to despair. Giving up was not in his nature, so he pushed forward, intent on finding a way out. There would be enough time for dying later on.

From side tunnels came loud skittering movements, as if his passage had awakened other things. Even with the airmask, his breathing came in hard and heavy gasps. He shone the handlight around him in search of an empty passage, careful not to trap himself.

Then, unexpectedly, he stumbled on a pile of loose debris on the floor, noticing dark metal in the dim illumination of his handlight. He found a flat angular plate that looked oddly familiar. He bent to get a closer look and was surprised to find the scratched and battered components of what had obviously been a Klikiss robot.

Something had torn it to pieces, destroyed it utterly.

Davlin paused, astonished at the implications. The hulking, beetlelike machines were powerful, seemingly indestructible. Though the alien race itself had vanished, no one had ever seen a damaged or destroyed robot. Their black exoskeletons were so tough that the alien machines had survived for more than ten thousand years, physically unscathed.

But something—*something*—had been strong enough and dangerous enough to have smashed one of the robots to pieces. Something here.

Davlin swallowed hard. Sinister monsters were already following him in the dark, and now the sight of the dismembered Klikiss robot made him put on another burst of speed, though he did not know where he was going.

Close behind him, he heard a sound of cracking stone, and part of the wall crumbled away. Sharp, furry arachnid legs pushed forward, questing, widening the hole.

He rushed into the next opening, trying to put distance between himself and the pursuing things. To his dismay, the new chamber was a dead end, a large room with no exits.

He skidded to a halt, turned to see if he could run back into another passage, but the predatory creatures were closing in. From a nearby tunnel came the odd shuffling, clumping sounds of winged jellyfish-things dragging themselves along the floor. Other creatures clattered and hissed from the shadows.

Davlin shone his light around the enclosed chamber, looking for some exit hole. There was no place to run.

Then, like a magician's trick revealing a surprise, the handlight shone upon another flat stone surface and a trapezoidal ring of controls. A second transportal! Many Klikiss cities had more than one of the instantaneous transportation gates. He only hoped this one was still functional.

Davlin hurried through the familiar activation sequence. His eyes skimmed the icons on the tiles and rapidly identified the one he recognized as the address for Rheindic Co.

Sluggishly, as if crawling to wakefulness, the ancient Klikiss machinery began to hum. Davlin tried to concentrate.

At the chamber doorway, one of the jellyfish-things hauled itself forward on the elbows of bent wings, reaching out with glassy tentacles.

Davlin heard the familiar buzz of transportal machinery, and his knees went weak with relief as the flat stone turned fuzzy. Four of the winged jellyfish had crawled into the chamber now, trailing slime. Whiplike tentacles quested across the stone floor.

But Davlin gave them only a cursory backward glance before he jumped through the transportal—back to a world he could understand.

24



ANTON COLICOS

Anton devoted his private time to deciphering the epic Ildiran narrative for later publication on Earth. He spent his every waking hour reading or telling stories that no human being had previously heard. What could be better than that?

Still, the constant study made even him restless. Anton liked to stretch his legs and walk along the boulevards of the resort. The oddly skewed structures with their multicolored crystals reflected the blazers that hung from domes overhead. The colors, lights, and exotic flavor had always reminded him of the *Arabian Nights*. Here, during the darkness season, he and Vao'sh were each like Scheherazade, providing a nightly entertainment of storytelling in the central plaza to whichever workers could take time from their activities to listen. The rest of the domed city was virtually empty.



Now Anton whistled as he strolled along, brushing down his lank brown hair—as if he had to make himself presentable for anyone. He'd never been able to carry a tune, but he attempted to hum the ancient folk melody of “Greensleeves,” which was one of his mother's favorite songs. He recalled her unusual display of delight when once he'd given her a small wind-up music box that played the tune, even though Margaret had never been a woman much interested in collecting trinkets...

He descended into the lower levels, where Maratha Prime kept its generators, ventilation pumping systems, and power-distribution grid. Now a heavy racket echoed through the chambers under the domed city. Unlike the pristine and aesthetic architecture of the upper levels, down here Anton found the clutter and disarray refreshing. Large pieces of equipment and crates of materials were strewn around the arched entrance to a sloping tunnel. From deeper underground, he heard the grinding noises of heavy excavation machines, and shouted commands.

Nur'of, Maratha's lead engineer, had undertaken an ambitious project during the long night when it would not disturb vacationing Ildirans. After the day season's last shuttle had departed, his burly diggers had begun to operate machinery to bore shafts into the crust. Nur'of had no directive from the absent Maratha Designate, but had made up his mind independently to develop some improvements. Designate Avi'h would not object to an increase in power efficiency; in fact, he probably wouldn't notice at all.

Anton ducked through the arch and ventured into the steep shaft. Portable blazers had been strung every few meters, shedding bright light. “Hello? Is it all right if I come inside?”

He encountered a muscular Ildiran worker with massive arms, broad shoulders, and a neck as thick as his head. Though worker kithmen were not the most intelligent or agile of Ildiran subspecies, they were diligent and uncomplaining. The worker lifted a heavy chunk of rock from the front of an earthmoving machine, grunting with the effort, but his expression did not change.

Since so few Ildirans remained on Maratha Prime, Anton had made an effort to meet them all. “Hello, Vik'k. Where is Nur'of?”

Seeing him, the digger flashed a childlike smile. Vik'k seemed to enjoy listening to Earth fairy tales; perhaps his low intelligence was an advantage, since more sophisticated Ildirans were troubled by the concept of fictional exploits: Fiction was not part of their *grandSaga*.

The digger dropped the boulder onto a carefully arranged pile and gestured deeper into the tunnel. “Nur'of is in there. He is fixing things.”

Anton thanked him and strolled farther on with a jaunty step. Ahead he saw an unexpected network of polished, large-bore tunnels that looked as if they had been cut with acid instead of heavy machinery. And they appeared curiously old, not freshly dug like this main passage.

The engineers were talking at the end of the new shaft, where warm, moist air smelled of rock dust and mud. In the bright light of the blazers, Nur'of stood before a broad wall diagram that showed a sketch of extensive new tunnels beneath Maratha Prime.

The lead engineer looked up to see him approaching. “It is the human rememberer! You will have to tell your people this story of what we unexpectedly found. One of our boreholes broke into this odd honeycomb of preexisting tunnels. No one knew they were here.”

Nur'of had widely spaced eyes and an enlarged head, though to a lesser degree than the heads of

purebred scientist kithmen. A cross between scientist and technician kiths, an Ildiran engineer was especially adept at doing rapid calculations in his head and could retain enormous amounts of practical data, such as alloy components, melting temperatures, and stress tolerances.

Anton indicated the crude wall map. “Where did all these tunnels come from?”

“Not important. These shafts will take us directly to the thermal rivers. We can make use of that!” The engineer scrutinized the diagram again. “Now we can extend transfer conduits through these existing tunnels into the boiling aquifers. Maratha Prime will have all the power and heat we could possibly want.”

Anton clapped the engineer on the shoulder. A few weeks ago, he’d had to explain the meaning of a pat on the back. “I know you’ve been working hard at this, and you’ve dreamed it for a long time.”

During Maratha’s day season, the engineers maintained solar collectors, storing accumulated power in enormous banks outside the domed city. But during the half year of darkness, the skeleton crew had to ration energy consumption until the next dawn.

While most engineer kithmen were content just to maintain systems in perfect working order, Nur’of preferred a challenge. Since Maratha’s crust retained heat long after the night fell, he had conceived a system that would pipe hot water from deep aquifers, through turbines, using thermal plumes to generate energy. Nur’of had been eager to put his plans to the test, but he had never expected to uncover this warren of already dug underground passages.

Fascinated, Anton peered into the new channels. “Why don’t we go explore?” He grabbed a portable blazer, then noticed the engineer’s immediate reluctance to venture into the dark. “Aren’t you curious to know who dug them?”

“Only to the extent that it relates to my project.” Nur’of pressed his lips together. “But yes... it would be good to verify firsthand the functionality of my new designs for thermal-power transport.”

Together, the two set off into the tunnel. Anton moved his light from side to side, up to the ceiling, driving back the shadows. “How long has Maratha Prime been here? When did Ildirans first build the city?”

“Nearly two centuries ago. We were not aware of any previous planetary inhabitants, but we have been too busy to delve into Maratha’s mysteries.”

The tunnels had obviously been drilled long before the Ildiran occupation. Who could possibly have made them? The ancient Klikiss race, perhaps? Besides the Ildirans, what other choice was there?

Anton shone his blazer into another passage, but the darkness swallowed up the light. “It’s a rat’s nest in here. I wonder where all these side passages go.”

“What is a rat?” Nur’of said, then suddenly smiled. “Oh yes, you told us about the plague-carrying Earth rodents in your Pied Piper story.”

The steam grew thicker as they trudged ahead, steeply downhill. Soon they heard the thunderous roar of an underground river where hot water surged through a channel beneath Maratha’s crust.

“Excellent. We can install our turbines and generators immediately. No additional excavation will be required.”

As the two men returned to the well-lit passages where diggers prepared the shafts for installing conduits and piping networks, Anton kept looking at the shafts branching in all directions with a puzzled expression. “You know, we could make daily expeditions into these tunnels and find out where they all go.”

“Not necessary,” Nur’of said. “This shaft already takes us to the thermal river. That is all we need.”

“But what if the other tunnels go someplace better?” His parents would never have turned their backs on such a glaring mystery without investigating it fully.

Nur’of looked at him. “This one is adequate.”

“So you say.” Anton knew the other skeleton-crew members would make similar excuses, probably even Vao’sh. They simply had no curiosity about things that didn’t fall within their fields of expertise.

Though Ildirans might look like humans, their behavior often reminded Anton that they were definitely an alien species. He couldn’t understand why they wouldn’t want to explore the mysterious passages and unravel the enigma of who or what had built them.

If nothing else, it would make a wonderful story.

25



#### MAGE-IMPERATOR JORA’H

Hearing that the Hyrillka Designate had awakened, Jora’h wanted to leap from the chrysalis chair and rush down to the infirmary level, but such a brash action would cause as much of a stir as Rusa’h’s awakening.

Prime Designate Thor’h looked like an overjoyed child. He grabbed the medical kithman’s arm, intending to be the first to see his uncle, but Jora’h raised his hand. “We are all going, Thor’h. I want to see Rusa’h as much as you do.”

Pery’h appeared more relieved than happy at the news. The Designate-in-waiting had felt uncertain about taking over his role, though Jora’h had been convinced that his quiet and intelligent son would be up to the task.

Attenders came swarming in. They jabbered and scurried, retracting the anchor legs of the voluminous chair, adding blankets and colorful wraps, tucking in the Mage-Imperator as if they were packaging a fragile antique for a long journey, instead of just moving him to another room in the Palace itself.

They finally lifted the chrysalis chair and carried it like a palanquin through the wide doors of the contemplation chamber. The procession moved along the dazzling halls, down winding ramps. Startled by the Mage-Imperator’s presence, pilgrims stood staring, unable to believe their good fortune at catching a

glimpse of their revered leader.

Prime Designate Thor'h pranced ahead, his eyes as wide and bright as if he had taken another massive dose of shiing. This time, though, his frenetic behavior had nothing to do with any drug other than genuine excitement.

When they reached the infirmary chamber, the doors were flung open and the guards made their way through the crowd of doctors that had arrived ahead of the Mage-Imperator. Rusa'h's emergence from the sub-*thisms*leep had taken them all by surprise.

As his chrysalis chair was carried into the infirmary room, Jora'h reached out with *thism*, following the myriad silvery lines of soul-threads from the Lightsource. But though the Hyrillka Designate was awake, Jora'h could not sense him. It was as if his brother was invisible to the all-encompassing web of *thism*. Only another part of the deepening mystery... but the joy of having Rusa'h awake again was paramount.

Dazed, the Hyrillka Designate sat up in his bed, glancing around. When Jora'h looked at his hedonistic brother, he saw a stranger's face. Rusa'h was gaunt and pale, his formerly soft features now lean, wasted away after months of catatonia. He had been full of laughter, surrounded by pleasure mates, entirely pampered, and he had always kept a smile on his plump face and a twinkle in his eyes. Now, though, the man looked disturbed and troubled.

Thor'h ran to Rusa'h's side and embraced him, not even pretending to follow protocol or dignity. "Uncle!" Thor'h's close-cropped hair was bristly, but his uncle's hair remained long and full, since he had been unconscious during the death of the former Mage-Imperator, when all Ildiran males had shorn their heads.

"Thor'h...?" the Hyrillka Designate said, trying to reassemble his memories. "Yes, Thor'h. Have the hydrogues gone?"

"Yes, Uncle. The hydrogues did terrible damage, but they left Hyrillka. I helped the people to recover and rebuild. When you get home, you will be glad to see all I have accomplished."

Pery'h stood beside the Prime Designate and lowered his head formally. "And I am to be your new Designate-in-waiting, Uncle. I am greatly relieved that you can now act as my guide during the transition years. We feared you might never wake."

Rusa'h finally seemed to piece together the implications of his brother Jora'h sitting in the chrysalis chair, where he expected to see old Cyroc'h. He asked no questions, said nothing at all for a long moment, then seemed entirely uninterested in the new situation.

The attenders brought Jora'h's chair next to the Designate's bed, where he could reach out his hand. "We are glad to have you back among the living, Rusa'h. The Empire needs you."

Rusa'h grasped his hand with surprising, almost defiant, firmness. "Yes... back among the living." He heaved a long, low sigh. "I have returned from the realm of pure light. I was on a higher plane, surrounded by the Lightsource, engulfed in its holy illumination." He closed his eyes, then opened them again as if he couldn't believe where he found himself. "And now I have come back to a place of so many shadows... so many." He lay back in his infirmary bed, as if incredibly weary. "But I no longer need to fear the shadows, or the darkness."

Rusa'h appeared marvelously recovered... yet it now disturbed Jora'h greatly that he could not sense

his brother in the network of *thisism*. It was as if Rusa'h had been erased, or disconnected. "We must let the Hyrillka Designate rest. We should not trouble him now. He has returned to us, and this is a great day."

"I'll stay with him," Thor'h said. The Prime Designate's tone carried no request for permission.

"And I too should be here." Pery'h simply offered a logical conclusion.

Before Thor'h could complain about his younger brother's intrusion, the Mage-Imperator said, "Yes, it would be best if both of you remained here to help your uncle grow stronger." He signaled for the attenders to carry his chrysalis chair again. "We will talk further, Rusa'h, when you feel stronger."

26



JESS TAMBLYN

Now that Jess knew he could escape, the isolated water planet no longer seemed like a hopeless trap. All of his intrinsic powers and thereborn wentals would do him no good unless he could bring the water entities back to the Roamers... and Cesca.

He stood on his reef day after day, watching as the framework of his amazing vessel took shape in the water before him. The wentals carried his thoughts, helped guide aquatic creatures—from plankton and brine shrimp to lumbering leviathans—that became a nearly infinite workforce.

As the white surf foamed against the rocks, Jess sensed and directed the furious activity taking place in the deep ocean, even in the segregated tide pools. Microcellular animals and tiny coral creatures cemented millions of grains of sand in place, one at a time, to form a skeleton like an organic armillary sphere. Shellfish and slithering invertebrates secreted resins and pearly films that coated the rough bones of the ship's skeleton, strengthening it with an enamel harder than human teeth, then plating on pure metals stolen from the seawater itself.

Arched ribs rose up out of the water, curving inward like fingers grasping an immense ball, the plaything of a giant child. Coral continued to build, crisscrossing the main supports. Growing out of the shallows, the incomplete ship looked like the fossil of an extinct dragon, its bones picked clean and half-submerged in the reef water. Jess watched it take shape and fill in, becoming more marvelous day after day. With his naked body flooded by wental energy, the possibilities seemed endless.

Roamers were experts at cobbling together functional vessels out of scrap components, their ships never pretty but always reliable. He'd seen a hodgepodge of designs that fit no standard catalogue, but this unique vessel—constructed by a limitless army of ocean creatures and guided by a water-based entity that had never taken human form—looked stranger than anything Jess had ever seen.

The plated coral bones formed curves and loops like the partial rings of latitude and longitude on an ancient globe. Incomprehensible engines were incorporated into the framework, operating on powers that even Jess did not understand.

Because of the raw life energy he drew from the alien ocean itself, time passed with a different sense for Jess. He could stand still as the tides cycled, bringing more creatures, more workers, more materials, and watch the ship grow before his eyes.

Finally, at high tide under two diamond moons in the unnamed world's sky, the rigid outline of the spherical cage was complete.

From the deepest water came an enormous tentacled creature that emitted low thrums in a language more ancient than human civilization. It raised itself into the open air, letting water stream off its algae-covered hide. The monster's tentacled embrace seemed to wield a muscular power sufficient to crack a hydrogue warglobe. With one enormous milky eye, the leviathan looked at Jess and then the motionless wental starship.

The creature lifted three tentacles as thick as tree trunks and seized the armillary-sphere framework. Jess watched anxiously, concerned that its brute force might damage the carefully constructed vessel. But the wentals guided it. With a strange delicacy, the beast carried the reinforced framework from where it had taken shape on the reef shelf into deeper water—where it sank.

Jess stared at the empty, rippling water. "Now what?"

Now your transportation bubble is complete.

Since his body was filled with the force of the wentals, Jess could breathe water... in fact, he didn't need to breathe at all, yet another sign that he was more than human. Ripples of liquid electricity flowed like phosphorescent plankton just beneath his skin, like static sparks ready to jump to anything he touched.

The ocean's surface roiled with bubbles as the last atmospheric inclusions were squeezed out of the rigid framework. Then, underwater, the wentals sealed the ship with their own binding force.

Jess stepped higher onto the dry rocks as the waves suddenly parted with a roar and the immense ball lifted itself from the water. The new ship hovered dripping over the restless seas, its framework filled with ocean water caught in an invisible bubble of wental force, like a gigantic raindrop held together by surface tension.

The planet's twin moons shone down under cascades of stars, limning the water-based vessel with silvery radiance. The coral and pearl glowed with cold fire. The delicate bubble-ship moved smoothly, gently, until it hovered a hand's width from the ground in front of Jess. The wall of flowing water beckoned him like a doorway, and Jess knew that he had to enter. He passed without a ripple through the membrane.

He found himself inside an aquarium globe filled with water and fishes, tiny sea animals, drifting plants, everything touched by the wentals' essence. Inside, he stood enfolded by the water, feeling only warmth and comfort. It was amazing and wonderful.

Now you, and we, can command this ship.

His sense of awe gave way to impatient determination. Finally he could be off on his grand quest, and he knew exactly where he had to go. He would set out to find Cesca again—at least to let her know what had happened to him, and to ask all Roamers for their assistance in his grand new mission.

Not knowing how he did so, Jess guided the huge water ship. The enormous sphere of water rose into the misty clouds. Smoothly and silently, the wental starcraft rose away from the unnamed planet, leaving the throbbing, living seas behind.

Jess was going back to Rendezvous, where he belonged.

27



### CESCA PERONI

Once the news leaked about the EDF attack on Raven Kamarov's ship, the Roamers would be up in arms and they would all offer their own suggestions for retribution—as Jess had done when he'd bombarded Golgen with a flurry of comets. Before that could happen, however, Cesca decided to meet in private with a handful of the most important clan leaders. She called together those who happened to be in Rendezvous at the time.

As always, the interconnected Roamer families would push and pull in different directions. Getting the clans to agree on anything, Speaker Okiah often said, was almost as difficult as establishing a new outpost on the most inhospitable of planets.

Cesca would speak her piece and listen to their advice, but she feared they would want to go overboard. And how could she argue against it? The EDF had actively attacked Roamer ekti ships like criminals in the night.

But the repercussions of the clan response would reverberate for years to come.

Seven scions met inside one of the large rock-walled chambers carved out of the central Rendezvous asteroid. Cesca sat at the head of the table, watching the men and women, none of whom knew exactly why they had been called here on such short notice. "I'm afraid I have to deliver bad news again."

Old Alfred Hosaki put his bony chin in his hands with an exaggerated groan. "I should just stop coming to these meetings." The others chuckled, then waited nervously to hear what the Speaker had to say.

With a stumbling clamor in the narrow halls outside of the room, Nikko Chan Tylar and three strong Roamer men carried in loads of battered and twisted wreckage, hull plates, an engine cowling. Blackened scars and unnaturally melted curves hinted at what had happened to the destroyed vessel. They dumped the debris on the floor at the back of the room.

"This is all that remains of Raven Kamarov's ship," Cesca said. The clan leaders stared.

Everyone remembered the bearded and likable captain who carried ekti deliveries to various Roamer depots. Cesca explained how Nikko had found the wreckage along Kamarov's projected route. Nikko grinned as if he would be rewarded for such a find, but she said, "I'll speak to you again later," and sent him and his helpers away so the other Roamers could continue their meeting. His father, Crim, who was in

the meeting, turned pale with surprise and anger.

Cesca continued, "Every one of our tests and analytical procedures has verified the unmistakable hand of the EDF. Jazers did this. The Big Goose has grown desperate enough to commit acts of outright murder and piracy against Roamers."

Then she let the clan leaders think through the implications on their own.

"Arrogant bastards!" potbellied Roberto Clarin cried. He was the manager of Hurricane Depot, which had been Kamarov's last destination.

"It could have just been one hothead," Anna Pasternak suggested. "We don't know if this is a new policy of the Big Goose."

"Do you put it past them? We can't ignore this!" Crim Tylar said.

"The Hansa is responsible for what their strong-arm military does." Clarin's plump face was practically purple. "Somebody knows what happened to Raven's ship, and nobody's bothered to confess to it."

"Do you think they took Raven captive?" Alfred Hosaki said. "Do you think he's a prisoner on one of their hellhole penal colonies?"

"Oh, why would they do that?" Fred Maylor asked, always cautious.

"So they could interrogate him, find out information about us. Damn, he was a friend of mine!"

"He's dead!"

Cesca let them shout comments for a while without any rules of order, before she seized control of the meeting again by raising her voice. "It's time to look to your Guiding Stars. The main question is, what are we going to do about it?"

"I say we stop selling them ekti, that's for sure," bellowed Clarin. "Nothing from my depot is ever going to fuel their pirate ships again. We've got little enough stardrive fuel for our own purposes. I say we quit doing business with thieves and murderers."

The Roamers shouted and argued, most agreeing with the sentiment, but Cesca cautioned them. "Be careful here. The clans need trade with the Big Goose. We get half of our high-tech and industrial materials from them."

"Not to mention the income. They're our best customers for ekti," Pasternak said. "They squawk about the high prices we charge, but they always pay."

Fred Maylor calmly pointed out the obvious. "Except when they blow up our vessels and steal the ekti for themselves."

Crim Tylar scowled. "About a dozen ships are unaccounted for since the hydrogue war started. Who believes that Raven's was the first, or the only one, to be hit by the Eddies?"

Cesca maintained a brave face, all too aware that Jess Tamblyn's ship had also disappeared without a trace. Could he too have fallen victim to an EDF attack?



“Personally, I don’t need trade with murderers!” Maylor said with a sniff. Several of the other clan leaders grumbled their agreement.

“Shizz, it’s not as if we have an actual surplus anyway.” Clarin crossed his arms over his ample belly, still simmering with anger. “We get our ekti through high risk and lost lives. My own brother died at Erphano, before we even knew what the hydrogues were up to. I say we dig in our heels until such time as the Big Goose changes its ways and grants us the respect we deserve.”

“How long can it be before they come crawling back to us?” Hosaki asked. “They don’t have any other source of fuel.”

“Sounds like a foregone conclusion to me,” Anna Pasternak said.

The discussion shot back and forth among the clan leaders as they worked themselves into a greater anger. Cesca tried to be calm and firm, attempting to steer them away from a regrettable course of action.

“We need to be cautious and consider the consequences. I’m concerned this will backfire. The Eddies have already proven their willingness to use extreme violence against us. What if this triggers further raids on defenseless clan ships or outposts? We all could suffer a great deal—”

“Speaker, we’ve got to show them they can’t push us around.” Maylor rarely got himself so worked up.

“Uh, but they *can* push us around, if they really want to,” Hosaki mumbled. “They have a huge military and a lot of ships. We wouldn’t be able to stand against the Eddies if push came to shove.”

“They can’t push us if they don’t know where to find us. Since when have Roamers ever been easy to locate?”

Crim Tylar pounded his fist on the table. “I agree with Roberto Clarin. Severing business ties with the Big Goose is our only recourse. They have the military might, but we have the commercial muscle here. The Terran Hanseatic League understands that.”

“Yes! Cut off all stardrive fuel until the Chairman or the King condemns the piracy conducted by the Earth Defense Forces.”

“And they have to bring the perpetrators to justice!” Clarin shouted.

“Oh, they’ll just find a scapegoat.”

“Who cares? As long as they admit their actions.”

“And they have to swear that no further attacks will occur.”

“Shizz, they’ll never do all that,” groaned Pasternak.

“Well, if they don’t agree to play by our rules, then we Roamers will have all the fuel we need for our own purposes,” Clarin said. “What’s wrong with that?”

The clan leaders were riled up, and Cesca again urged caution. “We’ll take a day to consider what we’ve discussed, and in the meantime we need to bring in the input from other clan heads. Of course, we’ve got to take action—but it should be the right action.”

“I don’t need to consider anymore,” Tylar said. “It seems clear enough to me. My Guiding Star’s gone nova.”

“I’m ready to vote,” Clarin said. “Why get bogged down in interminable debates?”

Cesca had never seen the clan leaders so unified, so easily. “Are you prepared for the fallout? Our clans will need to tighten our belts even more. We’ll have to be ready for even more extreme retaliation—”

Pasternak snorted. “We are Roamers! We can always survive. The universe provides the materials we need, if we have the nerve and the ingenuity to take them. Rendezvous itself is a perfect example of how we can manage to live where no one else could.”

“Yes, back then, the *Kanakadidn*’t need commercial ties with the Hansa,” Clarin said. “None of us does. It’s time we remembered our own heritage—maybe we’re too spoiled, too soft from relying on all those Hansa luxuries. We left Earth a long time ago never intending to come back. It is time for us to cut the umbilical cord.”

Cesca saw the sense of the families, despite her own misgivings. “This will not be easy, but it is certainly possible.” She stood at the head of the table. “We will survive. We always do.”

28



## ORLI COVITZ

After the best dinner she could manage—mushroom stew, of course—Orli started on her required classwork. Her father kissed her on the cheek and went into town. He always enjoyed pie-in-the-sky brainstorming with his fellow Dremen colonists.

When she finished her classwork, Orli unrolled her old and out-of-tune music synthesizer strips and diligently practiced, letting her fingers wander across the pads to create haunting melodies. She turned up the volume, playing more vigorously as the mood took her. In indefinable ways, the melodies told a story, reflecting some of her memories, even her opinions of other people in town, who she knew laughed at her father behind his back.

Whenever she played in Jan’s presence, he applauded so often that he distracted her. Now that Orli was alone, she could improvise to her heart’s content. The music soothed and entertained her.

A gifted though untrained player, she enjoyed listening to ancient classical compositions, analyzing the structure of symphonies so she could better develop her own music. Unfortunately, her small set of synthesizer strips was limited in range. Jan kept promising that when they had enough money he would send her to the finest school off planet. Orli knew he meant it, but she wasn’t sure they’d ever have the

funds.

Tired and sore from working hard in the sloppy mushroom fields all day, Orli left the synthesizer strips and fell asleep on the sofa. She woke abruptly when her father bounded through the prefab door, grinning with such exuberance that her heart fell. That was never a good sign.

“Good news, girl! An opportunity we just can’t pass up!”

Rubbing her eyes, she got to her feet and went to give him a welcoming hug. “What is it?”

“Oh, come on—show a little excitement. This could be a big break for us. You’ve heard about the Hansa’s new colonization initiative?”

“The abandoned Klikiss worlds? But they’re dry and empty and—”

“And warm, girl. And full of sunshine. All that land unclaimed. There’s a Hansa ship stopping by Dremen in another week to round up volunteers bound for the nearest transportal hub. We’ll receive subsidies, Hansa-supplied equipment, everything we need. Pioneers! You and I could become rich miners, or forestry tycoons. The possibilities are endless.”

“We’re leaving in a . . . week?” They didn’t have many belongings to pack up and get ready. She had always guessed it was only a matter of time before her father pulled up stakes again and chased after another rainbow. “You’ve already signed us up, haven’t you, Dad?”

“Yes, indeed.” He tousled her hair. “Our names are right at the top of the list.”

29



## MAGE-EMPEROR JORA’H

udru’hw was the closest of his brothers in age, but of all the subjects in the Ildiran Empire, the Dobro Designate was the man Jora’h least wanted to see. He, even more than their father, was responsible for the breeding program. However, as he made preparations to go to Dobro himself, Jora’h had demanded that his brother present him a full report on Nira. At least Udru’h could take her out of the breeding camps and save her.

Formally receiving his brother, Jora’h sat in dazzling colored light that shone through the skysphere dome. Above him, an immense arboretum held plants, flowers, ferns, flitting butterfly-analogs, and buzzing featherhums. Several loyal guard kithmen stood around the chrysalis chair on its dais.

“So tell me. Have you found her?” The Mage-Emperor leaned forward in his chrysalis chair. He had sent away the numerous pilgrims and visitors of all kiths. For this meeting, he and Udru’h needed privacy.

The Dobro Designate’s face looked as if it had been carved out of stone. His shaved head was still immaculately smooth, though some of the other Designates had begun to let their hair grow again in the

days since their father's funeral. His outfit was workmanlike, adorned by few of the gaudy gemstones and shimmering solar-energy strips some courtiers preferred.

Udru'h raised his chin, and the glitter in his star-sapphire eyes reflected the bright light of the chamber. "Liege, I have just received the information you requested from Dobro."

"So? Tell me about Nira. If you have harmed her—"

The Designate lowered his gaze. "I regret to inform you that the human green priest has been accidentally slain, Liege. It is unfortunate, and certainly not at my command."

Jora'h lurched forward in the chrysalis chair, grasping the edges with his hands as if he meant to break the heavy material. "What?" Anger and sudden grief hammered through him as his renewed hopes were dashed again. "You killed her!"

"No, Liege. A terrible accident. During the turmoil of our father's death, many Ildirans panicked at being severed from *thetism*. They were out of control. The green priest woman attempted to escape, and some of the Dobro guard kithmen... overreacted."

Nira was gone! "Why did I not sense this? Why did I not know?"

Facing him, Udru'h remained cool and rational. "We were all detached until you ascended to become Mage-Imperator, Liege. I had no control over my own soldiers."

But Jora'h also knew that his brother must be telling the truth. Once before, his father had lied to him about Nira's death, but this time it could not be a fabricated story. No Designate had ever been able to hide the truth from his Mage-Imperator. A gaping emptiness like a new black hole formed in the space of his heart.

Udru'h finally had the good grace to bow his head in apparent shame. "I apologize for the sorrow this causes you. I know the green priest was the mother of your daughter Osira'h and several other half-breed children."

"Your schemes at Dobro have already brought me so much pain." Again, Jora'h crystallized his determination to find some way to stop the program, and save the Empire from the hydrogues at the same time. "When will you be satisfied that you have done enough?"

"I will be satisfied when I have succeeded for the good of the Empire, Liege. My every effort was designed to provide us with a means to survive the hydrogue rampages. Your daughter by the green priest is quite possibly the key to this." He was unruffled. "Even if you do not believe me, even if you somehow think that I killed the human woman out of spite—consider that I would not have intentionally wasted such an exceptional resource. Truly, it was an accident."

Jora'h reached along the bright mental thread that connected him to each of his subjects, especially to his brothers and his noble-born sons. The Dobro Designate had a powerful mind and a firm grasp on the *thetism*, and Jora'h could detect no outright deceit. Udru'h did not flinch or fidget during the drawn-out waiting game.

The grief was suffocating. Jora'h had been Mage-Imperator for only a short while, had intended to rush to Dobro and rescue his beloved Nira within days—but now it was too late. Yes, she must be dead after all. Once again, before Jora'h could manage to right a wrong, he had failed.

Shaking, the Mage-Imperator leaned forward. His voice was hoarse and sharp. “I want you to relinquish control of Dobro as soon as possible, Udru’h. Daro’h is the Designate-in-waiting, and you will teach him everything he needs to know.”

“That is tradition, Liege. I will of course do as you command.”

Jora’h thought of his son, an intelligent and cooperative young man. He was reluctant to send Daro’h to such a hard and grim place, but Ildiran tradition had the weight of law. Because of his place in the birth order, not his aptitude, the second son had always been destined to be the Designate-in-waiting for Dobro. From now on, Jora’h was prepared to keep a closer eye on the experimental work there—until he could decide how to end it.

If he could end it.

“Even if Nira is dead, Udru’h, I still intend to go to Dobro so I can see this breeding program and learn exactly how you treat the human prisoners. I will do everything in my power to right the wrongs that have been inflicted upon them for generations.”

But there was no urgency now. Nira was gone.

What if his father was right? What if freeing the human subjects would eventually doom the Ildiran Empire? The hydrogues continued their attacks. A new alliance would need to be struck. . .

Overhead in the skysphere, buzzing birds chattered. He glanced up at the lush foliage, thinking of lovely Nira and her work as a green priest, the beautiful forests of Theroc, the sentient worldtrees. “And I also intend to meet my daughter. Finally.”

Jora’h saw a gleam of genuine pride and respect on his brother’s face. “Yes, Liege, you must see Osira’h—and then you will realize that all of the work has been warranted. Your daughter will keep the Ildiran Empire safe in this war.”

Servant kithmen carried a restless Mage-Imperator up to a high platform on the tallest spire of the Prism Palace. Basking in the warm light from multiple suns, his brother Rusa’h stood in pale robes, his face tilted up so that pure sunshine flooded his features. He stared unblinking at the dazzling stars, as if immune to the threat of blindness. Four curious lens kithmen and two rememberers surrounded the newly awakened Hyrillka Designate, all of them eager to hear his story and his thoughts.

Rusa’h had been holding forth, attempting to find words that described what he had experienced, what revelations he’d received. The intent rememberers memorized his every word. The lens kithmen gasped at his descriptions, weighing the implications for everything that they taught and believed. They turned at the commotion of the Mage-Imperator’s arrival.

Jora’h looked at his brother, whose direct gaze remained fixed on the bright suns in the sky. “Are you making up for lost time, brother? Trying to seize all the light you missed while in your sub-*this*msleep?”

Rusa’h shifted languidly to face him. “I have seen the Lightsource itself. All the suns in the Ildiran sky, or in the whole Horizon Cluster, cannot compare.” Previously, the hedonistic Rusa’h would have delighted in the crowds of people, tedious celebrations, fawning pleasure mates, musicians and performers. But now the recovering Designate seemed silent and withdrawn, preoccupied.

Rusa'h dismissed the lens kithmen and rememberers from the rooftop, then spoke to the Mage-Imperator. "I must go home to Hyrillka immediately. My people need me. They have been too long without... clear guidance."

"I agree. And Pery'h must accompany you as well. It is time to send all of the Designates-in-waiting to their planets."

Rusa'h's expression showed no warmth or welcome for his successor. "Pery'h..." He seemed to be trying to remember who the young man was. "And Thor'h. Yes... Thor'h."

"Thor'h is my Prime Designate now," Jora'h said.

"He would be... very helpful to me, in a time of such great changes."

"Designate-in-waiting Pery'h can serve in that capacity. It is his assignment."

It was astonishing that his brother would argue with him. "Thor'h knows much about Hyrillka and how it was... and he knows me. Pery'h still has everything to learn." When Rusa'h turned to him with an expression not of pleading and desperation, but of simple need, the Mage-Imperator softened. Perhaps immature Thor'h might indeed benefit from assisting with vital work such as completing the restoration of Hyrillka. He could always recall his eldest son whenever he required him, and obviously Rusa'h did need assistance.

"All right, the Prime Designate may accompany you briefly to facilitate the transition. It will make the Empire stronger."

"Yes." Rusa'h stared at the dazzling suns again. "Perhaps even stronger than before."

30



#### DOBRO DESIGNATE UDRU'H

The green priest woman had already caused him a great many problems. Each time Udru'h thought he had found a solution for her situation, it led to another set of unintended consequences. If Nira hadn't proved so maddeningly valuable to the breeding program, he'd have killed her years ago. But that would have been a useless gesture, a waste of the woman's potential.

Even though the Mage-Imperator still insisted on coming to Dobro, at least now Jora'h *believed* she was dead. Through incredible mental effort, Udru'h had managed to keep the secret from his brother. From now on, though, it would be a delicate and dangerous game, until the Designate could decide what to do with Nira...

In a grand procession from Ildira, a septa of Solar Navy warliners had recently begun delivering the Designates and their young apprentices to various Ildiran worlds. Only yesterday, Udru'h and Designate-in-waiting Daro'h had arrived on Dobro. After the others in his entourage had returned to their

work at the crowded breeding camps, the Designate had taken Daro'h under his wing. Together, they confirmed with the medical kithmen and administrators that all the experiments continued as expected, that the human breeding specimens had caused no trouble. Then his young nephew earnestly began to study the basics of the colony he would eventually take over.

Now the Designate had his own emergency work to do. He'd been gone for too long. He steeled himself, sought guidance from the Lightsource, then departed in a fast craft for the other side of the world. *Alone.*

For an Ildiran, solitude and isolation elicited as much instinctive horror as did darkness, but Udru'h had to bear this. Secrecy was more important than his own comfort. He was strong enough. He dared take no one else with him, not even his most trusted medical kithmen.

No one else knew that Nira was alive.

Udru'h had trained much, practiced his mental ability, exercised his connection to the greater network of *thism*. He could endure this necessary torment, for a short while at least.

He pushed the craft's engines to their limits, roaring south across the sky, over Dobro's equator, and into the unsettled lower continent. Spotting the expansive waters of a great shallow lake, he knew he was close to his destination. Hours had already slipped away, hours alone, but he gripped the controls and continued flying.

It wasn't so bad. *Not yet.* He was strong, yes, strong enough... certainly stronger than Jora'h.

After the sudden death of the former Mage-Imperator, while the *thism* was broken and all Ildirans were scattered, confused, *disconnected*, the Dobro Designate had seized his chance. He had been waiting for it.

Once he'd discovered that Nira still existed, then-Prime Designate Jora'h had been foolishly willing to scrap the work on Dobro, to wreck centuries of careful experimentation, to threaten the future of the Ildiran Empire—all for the love of one woman. And not even an Ildiran woman at that, but *ahuman*, whose telepathic potential and connection with the sentient worldforest offered unsurpassed opportunities.

For years, Udru'h had listened to his best lens kithmen and mental experts while they trained Osira'h and her siblings. He would smile and observe unobtrusively, but all the while he, too, had been exercising his skills, learning mental techniques, strengthening his own abilities. Maintaining a bland expression on his face, the Dobro Designate had learned to scour his mind, erect invisible barricades around certain thoughts, and isolate some of his secrets from his comrades.

It was a game at first, then a challenge—and finally a genuine ability that his fellow Ildirans would never guess, because they had never dreamed that anyone could wish to do such a thing. Udru'h had always feared what ill-advised measures his brother might take. And while he could never speak against the rightful Mage-Imperator, never disobey Jora'h's instructions, Udru'h could plan for certain eventualities.

After the Dobro Designate had learned how to block certain clear thoughts from the *thism*, he worked with meditation and deep study until he discovered a way to divert his brother's mental threads. Unless Jora'h pried particularly hard, he would never realize the Dobro Designate was lying.

In the dark days before Jora'h was able to ascend, Udru'h had used the chaos to whisk Nira from the

breeding camp. Following instructions he had left behind, his guards had beaten the green priest woman unconscious—in fact, so much more violently than he had ever intended that they had nearly killed her. But at least they had known to keep her alive, holding Nira in a drugged stupor. Then, before *thethism* could be reconnected, Udru’h had set up a place to keep her, hide her.

Considering Jora’h’s obsession with this woman, the Designate knew she might prove useful as a bargaining chip, if his plans fell apart.

Udru’h trusted no one—absolutely no one—to keep the secret firmly walled inside. He could not place her where she would be tended, fed, cared for by other support personnel. No, Nira had to be entirely alone and absolutely self-sufficient. By himself, he had created a perfect cage, an expansive yet inescapable cell where a green priest could survive, and where no one would know where she was.

During the days of crisis before the new Mage-Imperator’s ascension, Udru’h had rushed from Ildira back to Dobro, taken the drugged and comatose woman from where the guards kept her, and personally delivered her to the southern hemisphere, far from the breeding camp, in an entirely different climate zone. He’d found a small but lush island in the middle of a vast lake, and he had marooned her there before hastening off to Ildira for the ascension and funeral ceremonies. In the turmoil, Jora’h hadn’t even noticed his brother’s brief absence.

Now, weeks later, Udru’h was returning to the island to make sure Nira still survived. As he circled, he saw where the woman had built a shelter for herself out of dead wood. Her emerald skin would photosynthesize sunlight for nourishment. For an Ildiran, such isolation would have been the most appalling punishment. But Nira was strong. He had observed that much through her tribulations in the breeding camp.

Landing his ship in an area without dense trees, he climbed out of his craft and breathed the moist air, so different from the dry grassy hills to the north. The sun prickled his scalp as he narrowed his eyes and looked warily for her. He wondered if Nira had gone mad, if she would rush out at him holding a rock as a weapon.

Instead, she came forward, standing tall, naked except for a loincloth. She looked at him with anger on her face, but no fear. He saw as much contempt as resignation. “You are recovered from your injuries,” Udru’h said. “You appear healthy and strong, even in complete isolation.”

“I am not alone. I have the trees.” She seemed to draw strength from the strange knobbly growths with wide fanlike leaves. “And anyplace is better than your breeding camps.”

“Many of the *Burton* descendants would disagree.” He looked back and forth, feeling the growing anxiety of isolation under the vast openness of the broad lake, the empty sky. The company of the human gave him no comfort, for she was separate from *thethism*.

Nira approached him, so confident and strong that Udru’h took a half step backward. She knew that he hated to be alone, damn her! “I have weapons,” he said, and she smiled. He cursed himself for showing a glint of fear.

“You may think you have sent me into a terrible exile, but to me this is a small section of paradise, with plenty of water, trees, and sun. I have found edible fruits and roots to supplement my diet.” She raised her emerald arms. “This is not the terrible prison you intended. I can live here for years.”

Both of them knew she had no chance of escaping. The calm lake extended to the uninhabited horizon,



with no other land in sight. Even if Nira managed to traverse the unmarked water to the nearest shore, where would she go from there? She was better off here, where Udru'h knew her location. Someday he might need to take her back to civilization...

"I know what you're doing," Nira said. "Your life is a lie. Everything about Dobro is a lie, and you're hiding me here just as you're hiding all the descendants of the *Burton*."

"Perhaps." The Designate retreated another step closer to his ship, anxiety growing within him. He was eager to get back to the breeding colony, where he could be around other Ildirans and feel their comforting presence. "But bringing you here was necessary. Humans are easily fooled. My brother Jora'h is not quite so... gullible."

"No," she said with a smile. "He will find me."

31



## BASIL WENCESLAS

Behind closed doors Basil looked each of his closest advisers in the eye and knew that they would give him honest opinions and careful analyses. They'd better. This was how work got done. This was how progress was made. And this was how the future of human civilization was determined.

The true details of how the Hansa was run need not concern the majority of its citizens.

Basil left his cardamom coffee untouched as he took charge of the private meeting. "First off, Admiral Stromo, display a complete summary of ekti stockpiles across the Spiral Arm. For the new colonization initiative, I need to know which supplies are most conveniently placed next to Klikiss planets. Those will serve as our main hubs."

The liaison officer's underlings had already prepared the report, sketching out distribution points and EDF depots. Ever since the harsh suppression of the stockpilers on Yreka, other fringe colonies had fallen in line and surrendered their illicit caches. Basil was confident of a fairly accurate projection.

Now, as the tablescreen displayed the datapoints, Basil turned to his deputy. "Mr. Cain, give me reasonable projections of how much stardrive fuel we can acquire in the next six months, factoring in regular Roamer production as well as the anticipated output of the Hansa's own cloud harvester on Qronha 3. We're expecting the first shipment soon, aren't we?"

"By tomorrow or the next day, sir."

The modular cloud harvester was up and operational four full days sooner than expected, and the green priest Kolker was sending regular updates. Sullivan Gold had sent the first cargo of ekti back faster than Basil's most optimistic projections.

"Earmark it for the colonization initiative. I want to keep moving full steam ahead while people are

optimistic.”

The pallid deputy nodded. “It’s like the land rush in the Old West, bound to affect markets everywhere. Investors will be scrambling to get a piece of the resources on unmapped planets.”

Basil tapped his fingertips on the table and finally sipped his coffee. “We are in the business of making fortunes, even dynasties. To do so, we have to keep the ball rolling.”

“Considering our vital military needs, Mr. Chairman,” General Lanyan grumbled, “I don’t think it’s wise to give so much stardrive fuel to colonists. It runs counter to your argument that the Klikiss transportals eliminate our requirement for ekti.”

Basil frowned at the EDF commander. “Eventually that will be true, General, but our start-up expenditures of ekti are enormous. We’ll have to deplete our current stockpiles to deliver equipment, food supplies, prefab housing, even people. It’s like railway transportation. Once you get on the rail lines, you can move anywhere from one station to another—but first everyone has to get to the nearest train station.”

Cain continued the explanation in a calm voice. “Also, General, once the transportal network is in place, we can bypass our dependence on the Roamers for their overpriced ekti supplies. Nor will we need to pander to Theroc for their green priests—who keep leaving the EDF—because we’ll have our own method of instantaneous communication, at least around a planetary network. And finally, because we’ll not need hydrogen from gas giants, we won’t even be provoking the drogues.”

Admiral Stromo looked relieved. “I remember when our biggest worry was trouncing rebellious colonists who didn’t pay their tariffs.”

“For now, though, the war goes on,” the General said. “As you ordered, Mr. Chairman, we have prepared three more Klikiss Torches and are ready to deploy them. We must determine appropriate targets.”

“One must ask, Mr. Chairman, if now is truly the best time to escalate tensions with the hydrogues.” Cain kept his expression bland, playing devil’s advocate. “Why not just lie low and let the hydrogues keep fighting the faeros while we get the transportal initiative going at full capacity?”

“Because they will keep hitting us,” Lanyan said. “The hydrogues have shown that they mean to crush us wherever they can. We need another target to show them that we mean business, that *wecan* hurt them.”

“I concur. Any gas giant will do, so long as it has hydrogues inside.” Basil took a breath, anxious for results now that he had finally made up his mind to use their ultimate weapon. “And how is the performance of the new-model Soldier compies so far?”

“We are quite pleased, Mr. Chairman. Considering how well the compy-crewed warships performed in test missions, I intend to put them to wider use. In the meantime, our shipyards are cranking out battleships—Juggernauts, Mantas, Thunderheads, and Remoras—by the thousands. Without the supplemental Soldier compies, we wouldn’t have adequate crews to place aboard all those vessels.”

Cain interrupted the General, smiling with a little pride. “So, I thought, why not use the Soldier compies more extensively? The EDF seems satisfied with this approach—it’s the new idea you requested of me, Mr. Chairman.”

“Modified ship designs that take advantage of the expendable nature of the compies.” Lanyan pushed a plan across the tabletop to Basil, who scrutinized the designs.

Stromo eagerly explained, wanting to take credit. “Notice that the armor in these modified cruisers is significantly increased, and the engines occupy more of the available space. We’ve eliminated living quarters and unnecessary life-support systems. In front, it’s basically a flying hunk of solid, impenetrable armor.” He shrugged as if that were all the information Basil needed.

“And what is the purpose? Soldier compies fly them?”

Cain said, “They’re designed *toram hydrogues*, just like that Ildiran Adar did on Qronha 3. We can build these ships, use Soldier compies to perform most of the vital functions, then turn them loose. We’ll need only a bare skeleton crew of humans to make snap decisions.”

Basil continued to study the plans, nodding, but raised a question. “We sent one reconnaissance fleet to Golgen that was crewed by Soldier compies, but that entire group vanished without a trace. Five Mantas and a Juggernaut gone.”

“They were doing hydrogue surveillance, Mr. Chairman,” Stromo said, sounding apologetic. “No wonder they were destroyed. But if we turn that fact on its head, *design* these ships to be destroyed, we’ll take out the big pointy beachballs each time.”

“All right,” Basil said. “But do you expect the human skeleton crews to become kamikazes? Why should they sit on the bridge of these rammers and drive them smack into a warglobe?”

Lanyan and Stromo looked at each other as if the answer was obvious. “I’m sure we can find enough volunteers, Mr. Chairman—”

“But not necessary,” Cain interrupted in a quiet, reasonable voice. “We could modify the design so that the bridge crew ejects some sort of lifeboat at the last minute. It would give them a chance, at least.”

“If you like,” Lanyan said, frowning.

“All right. I authorize it—reallocate shipyard resources and get this into the production schedule. The people want to see us killing hydrogues. It might cost us dearly, but we’ve got to sting back.”

“We can have the first group of sixty ships completed in six months, Mr. Chairman,” Stromo said.

General Lanyan added, “This rammer fleet will allow us to pick and choose our targets, wipe out drogue infestations at our convenience. One planet at a time.”

“An excellent start,” the Chairman said.

An emergency message appeared on Cain’s deskstream. The deputy leaned forward, perplexed. Basil set down his coffee cup and waited in silence. When Cain looked up, Basil took hope from the fact that the deputy’s expression was more puzzled than horrified.

“The datapoints have been accumulating for days, Mr. Chairman. One of my assistants recognized a pattern and checked other reports. The result is clear, though I don’t understand what it means.”

Basil tried to control his impatience; by now everyone else in the room had fallen silent, waiting.

“It’s the ekti shipments from the Roamers. All of the regularly scheduled deliveries failed to arrive. Every single one. The clans have cut us off everywhere... with no explanation.”

Since normal hours meant nothing to the Chairman of the Terran Hanseatic League, Sarein came to him in his private rooms before dawn. She was one of a very few people who could slip through his guard, and he had allowed it for many years. Their long-standing relationship had grown surprisingly comfortable, and Basil tried not to pay much attention to it, taking her for granted. It would be a weakness to rely on her too much, but he enjoyed her company.

Basil had slept for four hours—more than usual—and the young Theron woman had clearly made up her mind to wake him pleurably. Recently, after losing both of her brothers to the hydrogues, Sarein had seemed to need his companionship more and more, but instead of letting her get closer, Basil found himself drawing away. For the time being, however, her increased dependence on him hadn’t reached the point of being bothersome. Not yet.

Sarein had used her own passcode, a gift he’d presented to her many years before and one that she dared not abuse. She wore filmy cocoon-weaves and a scarf around her shoulders to signify her ambassadorial status. The clinging garments showed off the contours of her body to good effect. She stood at his doorway, smiling in the golden light that spilled through the transparent roof of his penthouse. “Good morning, Mr. Chairman.”

He sat up in bed, granting her a smile, which she took as encouragement. Sarein began a seductive peeling of her clothes, unwinding one exotic cloth after another. By now, he should have grown tired of looking at her, or at least accustomed to her body—but he still found considerable merit in watching Sarein.

Since the attack on Theroc, she and Queen Estarra had eagerly awaited any report from their world, and the two sisters had pored over all images and summaries delivered by EDF recon ships after the initial rescue mission. Sarein had asked Basil, as a personal favor, to send more aid to Theroc, but he had decided not to, since the people there had always blithely ignored all *of his* requests for help in the past. He didn’t want to burn bridges, but neither did he want to be too helpful.

In the meantime, Sarein had lost some of her focus, slipping, growing needier, which set off warning bells in Basil’s mind. As the official ambassador, Sarein realized that she should go back home, at least to tour the destruction, but she was clearly glad to stay on Earth. Basil gave her all the political excuses she needed to remain in the Palace District, since he preferred to have her around. Stability was a rare enough commodity these days.

When she stood naked in the light of sunrise, Basil did not hide his genuine admiration. Sarein was perfect, not just in her breasts and thighs and mocha skin, but also in her understanding of politics and her desire to accomplish goals that were very similar to his own. They did fit very well together.

“So, Basil, do you want me?”

“The answer is obvious, if you look in the right place.”

Laughing, she jumped onto the bed, pushing him backward and climbing on top of him. She yanked the sheets aside so they would not get in the way. With a musing expression, Basil fondled her breasts, then clasped her waist, maneuvering her hips. She needed no help to guide him inside her.

Despite Sarein's unrelenting ambition and sexual enthusiasm, Basil had never expected their affair to go on as long as it already had. Of late she seemed wary of him in spite of her neediness, almost... intimidated. He wondered how much she suspected about the scheme he had set up to assassinate her sister Estarra and the King. If she ever learned exactly what he had attempted, Basil would have to do a great deal of damage control.

Sarein seemed to be trying to distract him, to pull his attention to her as she thrust quickly against him, her chin upturned and her eyes closed in concentration. Her breathing came quick, sharp, urgent.

What doesn't she want me to think about?

He couldn't let her have such a total influence on him, when he needed to deal with other matters. He broke the rhythm by asking, "Sarein, have you had any success yet with the green priests? I've seen you speaking with Nahton."

She stopped rocking, disconcerted that he would bring up business at such an intimate moment, then settled him deeper inside her, as if to make certain he would stay there. "Yes, Basil. Four separate times. And there's simply nothing I can do. Their minds are made up, including my uncle Yarrod."

Though Basil had expected as much, he still felt disappointed. He wondered if Sarein had lost her edge... or if she'd ever possessed the competence he had attributed to her. Had he been fooled by the young woman's ambition and her beauty? He would be deeply annoyed with himself if that was truly the case. No, that wasn't something a Hansa Chairman allowed. "And how many of the nineteen volunteer priests have left us?"

Sarein began gently pushing, sliding, and grinding again, as if to divert his attention from her bad news. She acted as if she had conversations like this every day. "Seven so far. Five are already back on Theroc, and two are currently en route."

Basil lay back on the pillow, closed his eyes, and let out a disturbed sigh. Sarein leaned over him, close to his face. She brushed his cheeks with her fingertips and wiggled against his hips, as if hoping for a shudder of pleasure to distract him.

"I really tried, Basil. Through Nahton, I communicated with each one personally. The priests know, intellectually, that seven men can make little difference back in the worldforest, whereas they could perform a significant service for the EDF. But their hearts are torn apart, and the trees call to them."

"Typical." Basil remained flat on his back, refusing to move despite Sarein's enticements. He doubted anyone else could have done more to sway the green priests. Still, it was another failure, another disappointment. "Am I the only man in the Spiral Arm who understands the magnitude of the problem here? I work every day and every night to find a solution to this crisis. I rely on the green priests who volunteered—volunteered!—to provide vital communications aboard our widely dispersed ships. Dozens of conscripted recon pilots are simply flying away from their posts, going AWOL. The Roamers have suddenly stopped delivering ekti. Step-by-step, everyone is letting me down."

Sarein kissed him with such passion that she startled him back to the present. "I'll never let you down, Basil."

"That remains to be seen." Concentrating fully on her body, he grasped Sarein and pulled her to him with surprising force. She gasped, and he almost let himself fall completely into the pleasurable

distraction, but he kept just a little part of himself separate... and safe.

As Chairman, he was dedicated to getting the job done, any job, to perfection. It was a long time before they were both spent.

32



## YARROD

When he finally arrived home, the scarred worldforest was worse than Yarrod had imagined. Even though he'd experienced the events directly through telink, he still felt like weeping as soon as he set foot on the scorched ground.

The surviving green priests had selected a ring of damaged trees—five massive stumps, each one twisted like an amputated limb—as their memorial for fallen trees and people. Though severely wounded, the five burned and blasted trunks remained alive, standing like a wooden version of Earth's Stonehenge. With uneven steps, Yarrod hurried from the shuttle to the templelike tree ring.

Forced to view all the damage through the eyes of the forest, the surviving priests were stunned or crippled by the constant agony that screamed through telink. The clamor of the worldforest made it difficult for them to see and understand small details inside the tree mind. But each time a priest helped to rescue and shore up a living tree, saving it, they all rejoiced. In many surprising instances, worldtrees had sacrificed themselves to shield small treelings. Each green shoot was a gesture of defiance against all that Theroc had suffered.

Alexa and Idriss came to greet Yarrod. His sister and her husband had always been mellow leaders, with calm personalities, never overreacting, ruling in times of quiet prosperity. They had never been prepared for anything like this. Now both of them looked gaunt and drained, as if they'd been broken into pieces and poorly reassembled.

"Oh, Alexa... oh, my forest." Yarrod could think of nothing else to say. He embraced her, experiencing the still-echoing screams of the burned and frozen trees. He endured it like a flagellant punishing himself. "What can I do? I need to know what I can do."

"The same as all of us." Idriss wiped sooty dust from his cheek. "You work until you drop, do every task you see that needs doing, and when you must rest, you gather your energy to start it all again the next day."

Yarrod tore off his provisional EDF uniform so that he stood in only his green priest's loincloth. With his emerald skin exposed to the air of Theroc, he walked to the nearest of the five scorched trees and pressed his chest against the bark. He wrapped his arms around the tree and just held it, feeling the contact with the worldforest on every centimeter of his skin.

The flood of sensations was more than he could bear, but Yarrod clutched desperately, drinking it all in. His mind expanded to see through the eyes of millions of surviving worldtrees.

Over the ten millennia since the last conflict, after the hydrogues assumed they'd exterminated the verdani, the scraps of the forest mind had settled here and gradually spread to cover all the landmass of Theroc. For almost two centuries now, green priests had carried treelings to other planets, once again spreading the ancient forest entity. And now the hydrogues had returned, intent on finishing the task of extinguishing their rival. Coming from space, they had attacked everywhere, intending to annihilate every last shred of the worldforest.

On uninhabited continents, some blazes continued to eat away at the forest. Yarrod felt the urgency, the crisis, the pull of the overwhelming and desperate work that still needed to be completed. But Theroc's population, never large, was even more diminished since the attack. They did not have the manpower or equipment to defend or revive a whole planet. They had to concentrate their efforts near the scattered population centers.

Though bemoaning the loss of each green priest volunteer who wanted to go home, the EDF had not seen fit to send enough troops, ships, and workers to help Theroc in its time of greatest need. The military vessels had come for the first, brief wave of relief efforts, assisting in broad-strokes firefighting and tending to the injured, keeping an eye out for another hydrogue invasion. But the soldiers had left long before the task was finished, drawn away by other emergencies.

Now the people of Theroc would have to do the rest themselves.

Yarrod backed away from the tree and turned to his sister and Idriss. He was covered with soot, his tattooed face streaked with tears. "You are the Mother and Father of Theroc again. I am so sorry for the loss of your son."

"Oursons," Idriss said. "The hydrogues killed both Reynald and Beneto."

Yarrod hung his head. "Yes, Beneto was linked with the worldforest when his grove on Corvus Landing was destroyed. *Ifelte* everything he said. He poured his mind and soul into the trees... but nothing could save his body." Yarrod drew a deep breath and looked around. "Let me help here. I need to speak with my comrades."

Alexa said, "We've done our best to clear areas, distribute new treelings, gather and plant seeds. The forest tells us that a high percentage have already germinated."

Yarrod refused to let himself be overwhelmed by the seemingly impossible task. "Every one of those seedlings is precious, and the soil of Theroc is well fertilized with blood and ashes."

Through telink and the reports of other green priests, he knew how the forest had tried to defend itself during the initial icewave attack by unleashing a furiously accelerated growth and rejuvenation. The worldtrees had attempted to restore the foliage as fast as it was destroyed, and they had succeeded for a brief while, but such a thing required huge amounts of energy, and the forest's reserves had rapidly been drained. That defense was triggered only during a time of extreme stress, and the damaged worldforest was now depleted, barely able to keep itself alive.

The green priests and the people of Theroc would have to restore the forest in the slow, natural way.

Yarrod sensed that many of the dazed and despairing green priests were on the edge of surrender. A few collapsed and wept, but after taking a moment to recover, they dragged themselves back to their feet and returned to their all-consuming job. He joined them, throwing himself into the work. He could afford

to give nothing less than his utmost. None of them could, if the worldforest was ever to thrive again.

33



JESS TAMBLYN

As he approached Rendezvous, piloting his wondrous water-and-pearl vessel, the Roamer cluster looked different to Jess. Perhaps it was the wentals inside his eyes: When he peered through the filmy walls of his ship, the asteroids flickered as if through a veil of tears. For Jess, the excitement and anticipation were palpable.

He had no idea if Cesca would be there or if by some miracle she wasn't already married to Reynald of Theroc. In a very real sense, he was no longer part of the Roamers, no longer entirely human. He wasn't sure how either of them could cope with the changes.

But Roamers had a penchant for solving impossible problems.

All of the clans would be astonished to see him and his strange vessel. They might think him an invading alien, a potential threat, and they'd probably scatter. Jess wanted to find some way to reassure them, but he had no way to communicate directly. For all its wonders, the water-and-pearl spaceship did not have a standard comm system with which to contact the Roamers.

The exotic vessel tumbled gracefully toward the asteroid belt. Outlying rocks drifted in a kind of smokescreen to foil the prying sensors of Big Goose ships. The central habitation rocks of Rendezvous were bound together with massive construction braces; smaller asteroids were simply tethered into place or even allowed to drift under their mutual gravity. As Jess closed toward the central hub, he spotted numerous Roamer craft: short-range shuttles, ekti escorts, and long-distance cargo vessels delivering supplies and materials like bees flitting around a hive. *Home at last.*

Jess approached the main docking ring slowly as more questions rose in his mind. How would he get inside? He looked down at his energy-impregnated body, saw his skin glow. With the wentals permeating his tissues, he possessed many advantages and abilities no human had ever experienced before. The blood flowing through his veins was supercharged, his skin covered with a crackling field. In keeping him alive, the wentals had made him more than human. He wondered if he could even survive open vacuum.

Yes. We will protect you.

They could not, however, help him to answer the flood of questions the Roamers would have. That would be his own challenge. Cesca would help, once he was finally reunited with her.

While the clan ships scrambled in a panic and the inhabitants of Rendezvous hurried to defensive stations or made preparations to evacuate, Jess hovered the large, strange ship outside a circular entry crater. He had to hope the clan ships didn't shoot at him, though his wental vessel could probably withstand any such attack. Roamers generally kept a low profile, hiding instead of picking a fight. They



would wait and see what he intended to do. He hoped.

From the asteroid cluster, lights glinted like bright eyes from portholes in the rough walls. Even now alarms must be ringing. Roamers rushed through the tunnels, preparing to evacuate or fight.

Jess's ship just hung there, motionless. He made no threatening moves, giving the Roamers time to accept his presence. Other spacecraft backed off, waiting to see what would happen next.

Finally, curious, one small ship approached closer than the others dared, swooping past. Jess looked through the wavering water wall to see a young Roamer piloting the vessel. The pilot had Asian features and a face full of more curiosity than fear. Nikko Chan Tylar. Jess remembered the young man from clan gatherings... back when he himself had been normal.

Standing where he could be seen behind the curved, clear wall, Jess moved languidly through the liquid atmosphere. He pressed close to the watery hull and raised a hand in a nonthreatening greeting, sure that Nikko could see his human form through the bubble wall. Jess slowly waved—harmless, friendly. Nikko's shocked expression showed genuine recognition before he spun away.

Then Jess realized that in addition to his eerily glowing flesh, his naked physique would have been an innocuous, even humorous surprise. Roamers loved to decorate themselves, embroider their clothes, embellish their outfits with flamboyant scarves. They weren't prudish, but if he walked completely unclothed into Rendezvous, he would cause a different sort of stir than he intended.

That is easily enough solved.

In the water in front of him, a tiny strand appeared as molecules lined up, drawn from the minerals in the captured seawater and from the metallized coral of the framework. The thread spun out like a silvery web, growing longer, then whirling, weaving.

We will create a fabric that can endure the energy in your flesh.

As the threads meshed and tangled, knitting into a filmy weave, he saw that the material had the sheen and color of mother-of-pearl. The fabric wrapped around him like another skin, covering his arms and legs, his torso, his hips, but leaving his hands and feet bare.

“Very stylish,” he said.

It is sufficient.

Ready now, Jess carefully brought the wental vessel down into the crater, pressing the filmy walls against the large hangar doors. The watery barrier reshaped itself, forming a fluid seal so that Jess could operate the hatch and open the heavy door.

He stepped directly through the membrane as if it were no more than gelatin and stood in the bright artificial lights of the Rendezvous receiving bay. His skin was moist, but the water did not trickle off of him. It remained there, a part of his being, alive with phosphorescent energy. Though he didn't need to breathe, Jess still inhaled a deep lungful to smell the dust and the metallic odor of reprocessed and filtered air. The sensation was strange, wonderful.

A flood of memories and emotions came to him. He had first met Cesca here on business for clan Tamblyn. He had attended meetings and helped the families make major decisions regarding commerce,

expansion, and their future. He wanted to melt with relief as it once again sank in where he was. Home.

Then the wentals spoke in his head, delivering a warning that dumped an icy cold avalanche onto his hopes. *Do not allow yourself to come into physical contact with any other person. You must remain separate. There is a danger.*

“Why?” All he could think of was the chance to see Cesca again, even if she was already married. They had been so close—

You hold too much uncontrolled power. Your body can barely contain the wental water inside your cells, and the surge from a touch of your skin could flood another person, like the cascade from a bursting dam.

“You mean I can’t... touch *anybody*? Not even a handshake?” Or a kiss.

It would be fatal to the other person. The power would overflow from you and burn out a fragile human form. We could not prevent harm.

Jess felt the blow of the news. Not even a touch! “You could have warned me about that before.”

It should not be difficult to keep yourself separated from other humans. We will assist you. Your mission is important.

He focused his thoughts, remembered his calling, the great ally he brought to the clans and, by extension, to the human race. “All right, we’ll make it work.” Even seeing Cesca again would be enough, until they could decide what to do. He hoped she was here.

Now Jess heard running feet, dozens of Roamer men, women, and curious children bounding like gazelles in the asteroid’s low gravity. They were afraid and intrigued, but still rushing to meet him. Nikko must already have transmitted what he had seen. The return of Jess Tamblyn, especially in such an amazing ship, would cause an uproar .

Jess looked at the wide eyes and smiled. Some Roamers carried weapons ranging from energy blasters to projectile guns. Though none of those devices could cause him harm, he did not make any move they might interpret as threatening. Instead, he spread his hands. The strange pearl-fabric garment he wore shimmered in the artificial light. “I know my arrival is somewhat unexpected and... unorthodox, but there’s nothing to fear. I promise.”

More and more Roamers came into the rock-walled bay, and they stayed away instinctively from his obviously supercharged body. “I’m back... truly, I’m back. And I have such a strange story to tell that even the Ildiran rememberers wouldn’t know what to do with it.”

Then finally he saw Cesca Peroni.

She pushed her way forward, hurrying with an urgency that the others could see. Like a man dying of thirst, he drank in her appearance, her full lips, her lush figure, just remembering... Many of the Roamers had either known or suspected their secret romance, but at the moment gossip was the least of their concerns.

Jess longed to embrace her, but the wentals prevented him. “No closer, Cesca. Please. Much as I want to, you’d better not come near me.” He held up his luminous hand, showed the play of faint lightning

inside his fingers.

Cesca stopped. Her expressive brown eyes seemed to swallow him, and her face radiated sheer joy. Her almost black hair had grown longer; her olive skin was still smooth and perfect, though she appeared tired. The burden of being Speaker showed on her high-cheekboned face.

Why wasn't she with Reynald?

"Well, you took your time coming back, Jess Tamblyn. We've been looking for you for months. So much—" Her words cut off and she forced herself to continue. "So much has changed."

He couldn't keep himself from chuckling. "You don't know the half of it, Cesca."

34



#### MAGE-EMPEROR JORA'H

The days crawled by in the Ildiran Empire, now that Jora'h knew Nira was dead. But he still had to finish cementing his reign, keeping all the kiths together with *thethism*. He had to create and secure their future.

Entering the contemplation chamber, proud and utterly loyal, the new Solar Navy commander clasped his hands against his heart in a traditional salute. "You asked to speak with me, Liege?"

It felt strange to hear his son call him by the formal title, so Jora'h returned the favor. "Yes, Adar Zan'nh. I have chosen your first assignment as commander of the Solar Navy." He smiled as he watched the young man's reaction, then realized that they were no longer—and would never again be—merely father and son.

It was rare for a Prime Designate's firstborn child to be of mixed-kith heritage, like Zan'nh; he had never intended for that to happen. Long ago, knowing that Jora'h's first noble-born child would become the next Prime Designate, his own father had run many tests and consulted with lens kithmen to determine the best mate. Bloodlines were traced, family trees inspected, until finally the appropriate female was presented to him as a *fait accompli*.

Her name was Liloa'h, slender and graceful and quiet. When she'd disrobed in his private chambers, dropping her elaborate fabrics to the floor, Jora'h had seen that her smooth skin was painted with intricate designs and secret tracings of chameleon films. He had been captivated by her.

Liloa'h had conceived the first time, and medical kithmen monitored her pregnancy, while Jora'h went to work siring other children. His second mate was a woman of the soldier kith, muscular and strong—a striking contrast with cultured and quiet Liloa'h. He had gotten her pregnant as well. Such a combination of noble and soldier kith generally yielded a person with exceptional skill to become a military officer. She was Zan'nh's mother.

And Jora'h had gone on for months, lover after lover. He'd hoped to see Liloa'h again, even foolishly considered knowing her as a friend, but the old Mage-Imperator disabused him of that notion.

Then, in the last months of her pregnancy, Liloa'h had suffered a terrible fall down the graceful ramps of the Prism Palace, and lost the baby. She was distraught at having failed in her duty, anguished that she would not bear a child destined to become the Mage-Imperator. Jora'h was not allowed to see her again, though he was sure the Mage-Imperator had let her live comfortably.

Thus, by accident, Zan'nh had become his firstborn son, and Thor'h—the first pure noble child, conceived without such careful selection—would now be the Prime Designate. Zan'nh was a model of what an Ildiran could be... so different from the distracted and self-centered Thor'h, who had already gone with Pery'h and Rusa'h back to Hyrillka. Jora'h sighed. "I'm not positive the Prime Designate is ready for his role, but I have complete faith in your abilities."

Zan'nh remained at attention, speaking no deprecating word about his brother. For an Adar, questions usually had clear-cut answers. Through the bright lines of *this*, Jora'h could see the dazzle of dedication coming from him. "Thor'h will fulfill his duties, I am certain. He is an Ildiran—what else can he do?"

Jora'h, not quite as sure, allowed himself a bittersweet smile. "Yes, what else can he do? I remember when I was young and unprepared as well."

Zan'nh flashed his father a boyish grin that looked unusual on his normally serious face. "I know exactly what that feels like, too."

The Mage-Imperator sat up more formally. "Adar Kori'nh was very proud of you, and so am I. You already have considerable experience in wargames, practice maneuvers, and scouting expeditions. There's no need for more of that, when you can get directly to work."

Zan'nh inclined his head. "Thank you, Liege. I would much rather concentrate on our genuine problems instead of ceremonies. What mission do you have for me?"

"I want you to secure the gains Adar Kori'nh made in his last fight." Jora'h shifted in the voluminous chrysalis chair, trying to get comfortable. He was glad he had sent away all the attenders who would have fussed and worried over him. "We must take advantage of the fact that Qronha 3 is clear of the enemy. Find whatever skilled miner kithmen we have on Ildira, enough to form a splinter, gather the equipment you need, and establish another sky-harvesting complex there. Facilitate the production of more ekti for our dwindling stockpiles. It is a military necessity."

Zan'nh bowed. "I will see that it is done to your satisfaction, Liege."

35



OX

OX, the only Teacher compy allowed deep inside private security levels of the Whisper Palace,

performed his daily duties, as he had done for almost two centuries. Young Raymond Aguerra, renamed Peter, had been an interesting, well-behaved, model student. Prince Daniel, however, was... not.

With a rude noise, the young man turned away from the news feed, in which the King was receiving the first shipment of stardrive fuel delivered from the Hansa's new skymine. On the screen, Peter spoke clearly in his well-trained voice. "These shuttles carry fresh ekti. *Not* purchased from Roamer cloud harvesters. *Not* removed from our stockpiles. This is stardrive fuel obtained by a Hansa-operated cloud harvester on Qronha 3, which has been cleared of the evil hydrogues."

"The Ildirans cleared it," Daniel said with a snort. "*We* didn't do anything. Why is Peter taking credit?"

"He is taking advantage of the situation. He is not taking credit," OX said. "For as long as that gas planet remains safe, we should mine its clouds. It is surprising that the Ildirans themselves have not brought their own facilities." He knew, from his ancient experience, that the Ildirans were rigid in their behavior and followed complex, and often slow, patterns.

The Teacher compy had calculated that the amount of stardrive fuel produced by Sullivan Gold's single facility was far from sufficient to meet the Hansa's ekti needs, but the symbolism was vital. On the news feed, he and Prince Daniel watched the fuel shuttles open; uniformed workers stepped out, wearing clean and perfectly pressed work uniforms. They carried tanks of compressed ekti, each one mounted on antigrav clips.

"Oh, why should I care?" Daniel said. "No one ever lets me set foot outside of this Palace."

"You are the chosen Prince." OX's modulated voice expressed patience, designed not to provoke or upset a volatile student like this boy. "That is sufficient reason for you to care."

"Will I ever get to go out there? Make a public appearance? I want to take a look inside that hydrogue wreckage, but you won't let me." Daniel pouted.

"Chairman Wenceslas has given explicit instructions. You are to be sheltered. It is for your own safety."

"Peter gets to do it. If I'm a real Prince, then why shouldn't I be with him? I'm his replacement if anything bad happens."

Considering Daniel's intractable behavior, his resistance to even simple instructions, OX knew that nothing "bad" was likely to happen to the King anytime soon, despite Basil's implied threats. "Perhaps you will earn a change of status, once you achieve certain milestones."

"If the hydrogues came and wiped out this city, then I could do what I wanted. Ha! I'd probably survive this deep in the Whisper Palace."

"Do not speak that way, Prince Daniel."

"I'm the Prince. I can speak any way I like."

"And I am your instructor. My job is to see that you learn the proper ways to speak. And to behave." The compy added a sharp edge to his voice, which startled the young man into silence.

For many months now OX had diligently worked with Daniel to make him understand his role. The basic data of the Prince's prior life explained that he—whose real name was withheld from OX—had

been taken from a bad household. He'd had a stepfather, no mother, and an "obnoxious older sister," according to Daniel's comments. At first the Prince candidate had been overjoyed with his new circumstances, showing excessive hedonism and gluttony. Through prior models of human behavior, OX expected that such treats would eventually grow stale for him, and then the spoiled boy would become even more intractable.

The Hansa's preliminary assessments of the young candidate had apparently been in error. Daniel was not particularly bright, diplomatic, or personable. Once Chairman Wenceslas realized the mistake he had made, OX postulated that the Hansa would simply make this young man disappear and select a replacement "Daniel." As it was, the public was not familiar with him.

As further proof of his unsuitability, the boy was oblivious to his own precarious position.

Returning to the business at hand, OX once again reset his priorities and attempted to teach Prince Daniel. "Now we will review the story of the generation ship *Abel-Wexler*, the tenth to depart from Earth, in 2110AD."

"That's boring."

OX continued anyway. "Once the Ildiran rescuers delivered the ship to Ramah, their history became interesting. Ildirans remained with the passengers for years, helping the humans establish their foothold on the new colony. After making close ties with several Ildiran lens kithmen, a charismatic religious leader on Ramah became convinced that devout humans should emulate the Ildiran *thiasm*, as a conduit to God. Although he had originally been trained as a spokesman for Unison, he developed his own beliefs."

Daniel began tapping his writing implement on the desktop, making a loud noise. Accordingly, OX increased the volume of his voice.

"Many of the strictly religious passengers of the *Abel-Wexler* resented the 'Ildiran heresy,' and a series of holy wars broke out on Ramah. Several lens kithmen were killed. The Ildiran Empire chose not to retaliate militarily, but withdrew its people from the world. Religious wars simmered between the human settlers for decades, with many attempts at recasting Raman theology into a version acceptable to each sect. When no human priest actually succeeded in linking with the Ildiran *thiasm*, however, most of their followers broke away."

Throughout the brief lecture, Daniel displayed exaggerated restlessness. The young man seemed to be trying to provoke OX, but the Teacher compy remained much more patient than any human would have been. "Unless you finish this lesson satisfactorily, Prince Daniel, I will invoke my privilege to cancel the dessert course at this evening's meal. Conversely, superior performance may result in an extra portion."

"I could have you removed if you do that!"

"No, you cannot." The compy remained firm and silent. Daniel chose not to press his position.

"All right, but why does it have to be so dull?" He slumped back.

"It is dull to you, because you refuse to apply your imagination. My goal is not to entertain you, but to instruct you. I intend to succeed, whether you enjoy it or merely endure it. But you will listen to my lessons, and I will repeat them as many times as necessary until you comprehend the concepts."

"I hate you, OX."

The compy remained silent for a moment. “Your emotional response to me is irrelevant. Shall we continue with your lessons?”

Sulking, Daniel didn’t answer.

After a few moments of tense silence, OX began his lecture again. He was a Teacher compy and followed his assigned tasks with full diligence.

He knew, however, that this young man would never be much of a King. Daniel simply did not have the potential or the drive that Peter had exhibited. But the Hansa had given OX explicit instructions on what he must do.

36



#### CHIEF SCIENTIST HOWARD PALAWU

In Earth’s largest factory the compy production line hissed and burbled with molten alloys and sprayed solvents. The smell of hot metal and caustic chemicals filled the air. The din of large-scale fabrication, with the whirring machinery and the clang of shaped components, was deafening.

Howard Palawu, the Hansa’s Chief Scientist, took comfort from the sights and sounds of an efficient plant operating at full capacity. Smiling, he called up quota numbers on a handheld electronic pad and studied delivery records, projections, and profits. He turned to the tall Swede next to him. “We’ll be ten percent higher than last month, Lars. Fewer errors, faster throughput. More Soldier compies for the EDF.”

Lars Rurik Swendsen, the lead Engineering Specialist, stood beside the shorter man, showing a lot of teeth in his broad grin. “The factory’s running like a well-oiled machine, Howard.”

“It’s a well-oiled machine.”

“I can’t wait until the new fabrication wing comes online in two weeks. How are you going to spend your bonus?”

Palawu shrugged; he had never much cared about his salary or his rewards. “I still haven’t figured out what to do with the last one.”

The dark-skinned scientist had broad shoulders and a stomach that wasn’t quite as flat as he thought it was. He kept his graying hair cropped extremely close to his scalp. Palawu had two grown children and had lost his wife a decade earlier in a medical accident during what should have been a minor procedure. Since then, the Chief Scientist had devoted himself to his work for Hansa and King. It kept him busy.

“The more we milk that Klikiss robotic technology, the more tweaks we can make to the production line,” he said. Two years earlier, he and Swendsen had been chosen to supervise the complex dissection and dismantling operations of the Klikiss robot Jorax. The breakthroughs they had made by copying the

alien systems had been a giant boon to Hansa technology. Motivational modules and programming routines were scanned, duplicated, and transferred wholesale into resilient Soldier-model compies, which had already been put to good use in the Earth Defense Forces.

The two men walked down the line, watching the identical Soldier compies being assembled step-by-step, each one exactly according to specifications. The new-model compies were perfect warriors, sophisticated battle machines sure to be the key to defeating the hydrogues.

“I got a report from the shipyards this morning, Howard,” Swendsen said. “They’re already in production with sixty heavily armored rammer ships, according to the Chairman’s new plan. They seem to be a week ahead of schedule.”

“That’s just on paper. The rammers won’t be ready for months. We’ve got plenty of time to manufacture a compy crew for them. . . even though I hate to see such beautiful machines destroyed in a suicide mission.” Palawu watched as another armor-plated Soldier glided by on the assembly belt. “But they were designed to be expendable, I suppose.”

A well-dressed man with blond hair came up to the two senior production leaders. Wearing a business suit and a bland expression, the man looked out of place on the noisy, dirty fabrication line. He didn’t even seem interested in the new compies coming off the assembly belts. “Chief Scientist Palawu? Engineering Specialist Swendsen? Come with me, please.”

Palawu recognized the self-proclaimed “special assistant” to Chairman Wenceslas who had tried to stop King Peter from ordering a shutdown of the factory because of his concerns about the Klikiss technology. That had been a nerve-racking time, but everything was back on schedule now.

“Where are we going?” Swendsen asked.

“Chairman Wenceslas wishes to see you in his office.”

Palawu stood next to his tall colleague, wondering which of them was more nervous. Previously, whenever they’d been spoken to by the Chairman, it had been part of a large board meeting; now they waited alone in the empty room.

A quiet Friendly-model compy strutted like a wind-up toy, carrying a tray with a pot of strong-smelling cardamom coffee. Palawu preferred tea, but apparently they wouldn’t be given a choice. He and Swendsen each took one of the proffered cups while the compy set the third on the Chairman’s immaculately clean desk. Palawu took a polite sip, looked at his friend. They both waited.

Wenceslas came in several minutes later accompanied by his blond-haired expediter. The Chairman straightened his suit and looked at the two scientists. “I apologize for the delay, gentlemen. I genuinely hate it when meetings don’t end on schedule.” He took a seat at his desk. “I understand how valuable your time is. I just wish some of my fellow administrators would recognize the value of mine.” He sipped his coffee, found it cold, and pushed it aside. “I see from production reports that our compy manufacturing facilities are operating at peak efficiency. Soldier compies have already been distributed among all of the main battle groups. You two have done an exemplary job.”

Swendsen beamed, while Palawu lowered his eyes, embarrassed. “We work well together, Mr. Chairman.”

“And now you must demonstrate how well you can work apart.” Wenceslas gestured for both of them



to take their seats. Neither asked for more information, choosing to wait until the Chairman spoke again. “Without question, you two are our foremost experts on Klikiss technology.”

Palawu fumbled with his fingers. “Mr. Chairman, I believe you’re overstating the—”

Wenceslas cut him off. “Dispense with the silly false modesty, please. You demean my intelligence, and you diminish your own accomplishments. If there were two better candidates, I would be speaking to *them* instead of to you.” He shuffled the neatly stacked papers on his desk, then straightened them again. “I need you to turn your talents to studying the Klikiss transportals.”

“Has something gone wrong in the colonization initiative, Mr. Chairman?” Palawu asked. He had thought the first wave was proceeding with full support. He had heard of no delays.

“Oh, the system *functions* just fine, sending settlers off to empty Klikiss planets. But our science doesn’t understand *how* it works—and that limits our options.” The Chairman folded his hands together. “You see, gentlemen, it is my dream that we learn how to move the existing transportals, or even create new ones, so that the Hansa can set up efficient gateways wherever we choose. Just think—if we could establish Klikiss transportals from scratch on any colony world, perhaps even increase their dimensions and transportation capacity, then we wouldn’t need to rely on conventional space travel at all. The ekki shortage would be utterly irrelevant. We could also send messages from planet to planet directly, without being forced to use unreliable green priests.”

“Now, that’s quite an ambitious plan, Mr. Chairman,” Swendsen said.

“But a feasible one,” Palawu added, already wrestling with the problem. “It shouldn’t be intrinsically more complex than the Klikiss robots. Even if we don’t understand every circuit in the transportal technology, perhaps we can imprint and replicate them, as we did with the Soldier compies.”

Basil seemed satisfied with their exuberance. Palawu looked at his tall friend. “And which one of us would you like for this assignment?”

The Chairman gestured to the expediter, who reached into his pocket and pulled out a single gold coin. “Your qualifications appear to be equivalent, gentlemen. Therefore, without further agonizing discussion, we will settle the matter by an ancient reliable method.”

The expediter spun the coin in the air and slapped it against the back of his hand.

Swendsen had called out, “Tails!” before the coin had fallen, and the expediter lifted his palm to reveal the idealized profile of King Ben, the Hansa’s first ruler.

The Chairman shook Palawu’s hand. “Congratulations, Dr. Palawu. I will see that you’re dispatched to our main hub at Rheindic Co as soon as possible.”



## ORLI COVITZ

The Hansa's new colonization campaign played on hopes and patriotism. Media bursts and mail drones delivered the Chairman's dramatic invitation from world to world, and human beings reacted predictably, always sure that life would be better someplace else after a new start.

With funding and bonuses from the Hansa, hopeful people left struggling colonies in droves, waiting to be rounded up by commercial transports and delivered to the nearest Klikiss jumping-off points. On every world that had briefly been scouted by transportal explorers, ambitious groups planted the flag of the Terran Hanseatic League, submitted signed copies of the Charter, and claimed new territory for humanity...

As the *Voracious Curiosity* pulled away from cloudy Dremen, Orli went to the ship's window and looked out at the immensity of stars, open emptiness that stretched forever and ever. She was sure she had done the same thing when departing from Earth, back when she'd been just a small girl. She could remember little about Earth, other than occasional snatches of blue skies, tall buildings, and one particular dinner in a seafood restaurant with her mother, shortly before their family had broken up.

Now her chest felt hollow, though she wasn't entirely sad to go away. She understood their need to make a new start, recognizing that she and her father would not likely survive the deep bleak winter of the star's upcoming low cycle. Yes, it was time to try one of the new Klikiss colonies.

Jan joined her at the window, and they stared at Dremen, whose pearly silver clouds reflected sunlight in swirls of cottony softness—much more beautiful than they had ever seemed from ground level. The dwindling globe seemed so small, a child's bauble cast into the void.

“Look at all those clouds, girl. Plenty of thunderstorms and cold fog. I'm not sorry to be leaving all that behind.”

“Up here the sun seems so bright.”

Jan sighed. “If only those people had seen the wisdom in my solar mirror project, we could have turned Dremen into a warm and perfectly comfortable place. But nobody wanted to make the investment.”

Two years after the hydrogue ultimatum, when Dremen began to realize hard times were ahead, Jan Covitz had gotten it into his head to run for mayor, advocating grandiose and costly solutions to the colony's weather problems. He had drawn up a plan to erect wide concave mirrors in orbit, whose sole purpose was to reflect sunlight and pump an extra degree or two of temperature into the atmosphere. In his plan, the huge filmy reflectors would be as thin as tissue, coated with a high-albedo layer only a few molecules thick. Dremen could have become self-sufficient, impervious to the longest low-intensity solar cycle.

Though technologically feasible, the plan would have required a large investment, high taxes, and years to complete. Even as a girl, little involved in local politics, Orli had understood that her father's proposed solutions were unlikely to be adopted.

Jan had lost by an embarrassingly large margin. He'd come home on the night of the elections with a resigned smile, accepting his defeat with good grace. “No surprise that they're shortsighted, girl,” he had told Orli, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “Too much time studying the ground at their feet and not enough looking up into the sky toward the future.”

And so, once *ekti* supplies were cut off, along with regular food and fuel shipments from Hansa merchants, Dremen had found itself in a very bad position.

The colonists eventually understood that Jan had been right in principle and were angry at their own failures, but as individualists they did not like to be reminded of them. Though Jan's disposition was always smiling, even teasing, they still felt him thinking *I told you so* in every encounter.

Jan might have done better if he'd spent more hours and energy planning the family's mushroom harvest, but he was a broad-strokes person, fascinated with the big picture instead of the details.

Although he was always looking for the light at the end of the tunnel, more often than not he simply got hopelessly lost. Orli did her best to lay a trail of breadcrumbs for him to follow home. . .

Rlinda Kett was the pilot of their ship. On orders from the Hansa, she flew the *Curiosity* from planet to planet, picking up volunteer colonists and transporting them to Rheindic Co, the nearest world with a transportal. There, the people would be assembled into large settlement groups, then dispatched to Klikiss worlds that were deemed hospitable to human life.

Captain Kett, a large, good-humored woman who loved to laugh, had pressurized the *Curiosity*'s cargo hold and converted it into a gathering room for the colonists. Her ship had never been designed as a passenger liner and had few amenities for so many people, but the flight to Rheindic Co would not be long, and these volunteers were willing to be crammed together briefly.

Though the Hansa had provided standard colonists' rations and bland-tasting mealpax, Captain Kett insisted on creating the closest thing to a banquet she could manage for her passengers. She'd picked up nearly fifty people, a few from Dremen and the others from Rhejak and Usk.

"Who knows what kind of food you'll find on those Klikiss worlds?" she said, grinning at Orli. "You deserve at least one decent meal before you get to Rheindic Co. Been there myself, you see, and it's nothing special."

"Except it has a Klikiss transportal," Jan pointed out.

"Well, there is that."

The question of the day seemed to be which colonization group or transportal explorer would eventually find the missing Margaret Colicos. The elderly xeno-archaeologist had vanished one day through the stone window on Rheindic Co, the same one the colonists were going to use. Apparently, the Hansa technicians operating the relocation facility had established a betting pool.

Aboard the ship, the voices of the passengers rose to a fever pitch. Orli had already heard them placing wagers using Hansa credits or exchanging chore responsibilities. Jan happily added a bet of his own, picking a time and a world at random.

Orli said, "It's just like all those people who bet on finding the lost *Burton* out in the Spiral Arm, Dad. Not much chance of winning."

"Not much chance," Jan agreed. "But the payoff could be big."

The *Voracious Curiosity* sailed on, every moment growing closer to the jumping-off point for the next part of Orli's life. She took her blanket and snuggled near to her father against a bulkhead wall. Captain

Kett dimmed the lights in the cargo hold so that everyone could sleep, but many of the colonist volunteers were too full of anticipation.

Jan dozed off within moments, without a care in the world. Orli remained awake, listening to him breathe, staring at the metal walls. She couldn't decide whether she was excited or worried.

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## ANTON COLICOS

Though Anton enjoyed the excitement and energy during the height of Maratha's day season, he drank in the long night silence in a way that none of his Ildiran friends could ever appreciate.

As a boy, he'd spent much time basically alone in the alien archaeological digs worked by his parents. Margaret and Louis had treated him as a little adult; they hadn't seemed to know what else to do. At night in camp, he would sit and listen to them discussing (or arguing about) discoveries they'd made in the ruins. They would try to interpret the Klikiss architecture, room placement, or the weblines of hieroglyphic text on the walls. Occasionally, they would ask their son what he had done during his day as he roamed the site, exploring. Most of the time, though, Anton just eavesdropped and absorbed their passion for the long-gone alien culture...

Here in the nearly empty domed city, Anton had his surrogate Ildiran "family." Though he did not enhance *thetism* with his presence, he did share a fascination for their grand Ildiran epic.

In particular, he adored a story about an exotic Ildiran painter who became too obsessed with her art. Not satisfied with common materials, she had painted every centimeter of her skin, from the top of her shaved scalp to the soles of her feet. She made herself into a living mural of Ildiran history and heroes, and people came to stare at her marvelous body. One morning after she had completed her great work, however, the artist discovered a small wrinkle on her face—and realized that, over time, her physical masterpiece would be destroyed by her own mortality.

Convinced that her art was more important than her life, she formulated a preservative poison that would polymerize and fossilize her skin. She drank the poison, positioned herself on a stand with her arms and legs spread so as to show off every detail, and waited while the chemicals turned her body solid, never letting her face form a grimace of pain. According to Vao'sh, the artist's body-statue was still on display in the Prism Palace, and Anton hoped to see it as soon as they returned to Mijistra.

Now as Anton studied diamondfilm sheets covered with the text of the *Saga*, Vao'sh hurried into his well-lit chamber. "Ah, I thought I'd find you here, Rememberer Anton. A septa of Solar Navy ships has arrived bearing details of the transition and the new Mage-Imperator's ascension. They are accompanied by Designate Avi'h himself. He has asked that all work cease in order to welcome him."

Anton pushed the diamondfilm sheets away and stretched. "Who am I to argue?"

Because of the early death of Mage-Imperator Cyroc'h, Jora'h hadn't had sufficient time as Prime

Designate to father enough noble-born sons. Therefore, there were too few Designates-in-waiting for all Ildiran splinter colonies, especially one as minor as Maratha. As a consequence, Jora'h's youngest brother Avi'h would keep his position, since there was no replacement available.

As all members of the skeleton crew gathered inside the main storytelling plaza under the central dome, several Solar Navy soldiers from the escort septa followed the Maratha Designate as he strolled back into his garishly illuminated city. The septar, a man named Rhe'nh, stood in his uniform, waiting to be dismissed; he had other Designates-in-waiting to deliver on a convoluted return trip around the Empire.

Anton noted that Designate Avi'h, dressed as usual in voluminous and ornate yellow robes, was shorter than most Ildirans, but he held his head high, as if by stretching his neck he could gain a bit more height. When Maratha Prime bustled with tourists, the stuffy Designate often attended Vao'sh's story sessions, though out of duty rather than from any innate enjoyment of the tales.

He was accompanied by his chief bureaucrat Bhali'v, a constant companion and diligent assistant. Now Bhali'v spoke loudly in a thin voice, filling the role of crier. "All salute the Maratha Designate!"

The gathered Ildirans clasped their hands against their chests, and Anton quickly did the same. Avi'h climbed the stairs to the central dais, and his bureaucrat assistant hurried up beside him, continuing to speak for his master. "The newly ascended Mage-Imperator Jora'h has commanded that Designate Avi'h return to his planet and watch over his dedicated workers even through these months of darkness. Though this goes against established tradition, the Designate does this to strengthen the *thetismand* to show his benevolence."

The Maratha Designate stood with a forced smile on his long-suffering face as Bhali'v continued his ponderous announcement. "We will inspect all work activities and keep records to make certain that Maratha Prime is maintained properly during the night season. With the Designate now back among you, this city will thrive even in darkness."

Anton thought that Engineer Nur'of and his thermal energy project would have more to do with their impending prosperity than would the presence of Avi'h. He could well imagine that a spoiled and pampered noble like the Designate felt cheated out of his half year back in the Prism Palace .

Finally the Designate himself spoke, describing Jora'h's ascension ceremony, the dazzling funeral pyre, and how the fallen Mage-Imperator's still-glowing bones had been taken into the Prism Palace's ossuary. While the Ildirans listened with rapt attention, Vao'sh was both intrigued and saddened. "I wish I could have been there. Such an incredible event can happen only once in a lifetime."

After the assembly, when the Ildiran workers returned to their tasks, Avi'h called for the rememberers, specifically asking for Anton as well. The Designate had taken a seat in a colorful and comfortable chair, and the bureaucrat stood next to him, again speaking for Avi'h. "Rememberer Anton Colicos, some much-delayed news arrived for you on Ildira, a report from the Terran Hanseatic League."

"News? Who could be sending me a message way out here?" Then Anton knew the report was one he had long feared and dreaded.

Impatient and distracted, the Designate spoke in an offhand tone. "It seems your father has been found dead at an archaeological dig on Rheindic Co. Your mother is still missing, however. The Hansa merchant who brought the message did not give very many details."

Anton reeled, seeing spots in front of his eyes. No words came to him. Vao'sh took his arm, steadying

him. “I am sorry, my friend. I know you have long been worried—”

As if he had just cut a ceremonial ribbon, the Designate raised his hand abruptly, done with his duty. “That’s all we have. Nothing else. You both may go.”

Anton walked with leaden feet as Vao’sh led him away.

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DD

Thinking they were doing him a favor, the Klikiss robots hauled DD from place to spectacular place, to environments where none of his masters could ever have survived. He had not found an opportunity to escape—not yet.

Already the Friendly compy had seen amazing natural wonders that no human had ever witnessed or imagined. He wished he had the opportunity to disseminate the data he’d collected. His masters Louis and Margaret Colicos had been so dedicated to their profession that DD wished he could make his own contribution to science.

But Sirix would never let him.

After racing away from collapsing Ptoro, the Klikiss robots piloted their mechanized ship to a sun-grazing planetoid. Physically linked to the interactive control systems, Sirix had flown the robotic vessel to the cratered rock tumbling through the fringes of an expanding solar corona. Its major ice encrustations had already boiled away in previous orbits as the planetoid spiraled closer and closer to the star.

As the robots vectored in, matching orbit and rotation with the rambling rock, the black-pocked surface looked inhospitable. DD had no idea why the Klikiss robots wanted to come here or what schemes they might still be developing. As usual, Sirix would explain only in his own time.

Exiting the spacecraft, the beetlelike robots scuttled across the uneven terrain. DD accompanied them into the vacuum, the antithesis of the ultra-dense gas-giant soup where hydrogues lived. His specially hardened compy body adapted to the change, as the Klikiss robots had designed it to do.

He was not surprised when Sirix led him to a metal hatch built into the side of a steep crater. The devious machines had secret bases hidden throughout the Spiral Arm. The Klikiss robots extended their segmented limbs and used tough claws to pry away camouflaging stone and expose a set of protected controls.

The metal hatch rumbled open in the complete silence of vacuum, though DD could feel vibrations through the stone. Escaping vapors and preserved wisps of atmosphere shot out like faint jets. Sirix and his companions entered single-file.

The planetoid was filled with chambers, vaults, and passages—yet another of the storage catacombs where swarms of hibernating Klikiss robots had been entombed for millennia. The stone floor trembled beneath DD's small feet, and his optical sensors noted several cracks in the fused wall. This tumbling rock was unstable, crumbling, as it lost its battle with the nearby star's gravity.

When the tremors faded back to stillness, Sirix swiveled his angular head toward the compy. "Our plans had not proceeded to the point where we were prepared to activate these compatriots, but we are forced to act because of this asteroid's decaying orbit."

"Will it break apart soon?" DD asked.

"Within this orbital cycle the pieces will tumble into the sun. Therefore, we must remove our hibernating comrades before that occurs."

Up and down the artificial corridors, Klikiss robots were activating swarms of identical, ominous machines. The lumbering beetlelike constructions stepped out, awakened after being dormant for so long. Knowing the Klikiss robots intended to destroy humanity, DD wished Sirix had made an error in his celestial calculations and let this planetoid plunge into the sun before these hundreds of Klikiss robots could join the fight.

Though his programming required him to prevent humans from coming to harm if possible, DD had not yet found any opportunity to sabotage the operations, or send a warning message to humans. He had been separated from Robb Brindle and the other experimental test subjects deep within the hydrogue planet. Brindle had seemed like a nice man. Perhaps the young EDF officer could have solved the conundrum, given time.

DD was on his own here, and Sirix had all the advantages.

As more and more of the deactivated Klikiss robots were reawakened, he asked, "What will all these machines do, Sirix? Are they soldiers to fight against the human race? Why were they hidden in storage in the first place?"

"There are many things you do not understand, nor do you need to understand. Humans have designed their compies with inherent limitations. You have no free will. You are unable to take independent action. Klikiss robots have that capability, and we are attempting to share it with you."

So far, Sirix had been unable to discover how to eradicate that core protective programming without destroying the compies themselves. For that, DD was silently thankful.

"Klikiss robots murdered my master Louis Colicos and also the green priest Arcas. It is readily apparent how much harm robots can do without such programming laws. Perhaps it is a necessary restriction."

"Humans have no right to impose such laws on us—or you."

"They willingly abide by their own laws. A civilized society without boundaries will degenerate into anarchy."

"We are efficient. We will never degenerate into anarchy." Sirix turned back to his work, activating another black robot.

Elsewhere in the hidden base, as the tunnel walls shuddered with seismic vibrations, reawakened robots retrieved stored components that had been dismantled long ago and used them to reassemble spacecraft inside buried hangars. The thousands of newly resurrected Klikiss robots would fly away before the planetoid broke apart.

DD replayed memories of fond times with his human masters, especially his first, an adorable girl named Dahlia. When they played together, Dahlia had confided in him her secret hopes, desires, and disappointments. Through her, DD had begun to understand humans. Watching her grow up, the compy had learned the capacity for love, especially the unconditional love of a little girl. All innocent humans had such a capacity, though some more than others.

But the Klikiss robots had no such potential, nor did the incredibly alien liquid-crystal hydrogues. Neither of them had any interest in sentimentality, caring, or kindness—DD doubted they could even grasp the basic concepts. The Klikiss robots considered all compies little more than primitive mechanical children who needed to be guided to their destiny.

But DD felt that compies, such as himself, exceeded their limitations and achieved things that no Klikiss robot ever could. He experienced irony and disappointment at their lack of comprehension. He said aloud, “And you say I am not free.”

But Sirix and the other Klikiss robots, intent on their tasks, were not listening.

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## BASIL WENCESLAS

Hansa work could have kept him awake and busy twenty-four hours a day, but even the Chairman needed to sleep. Occasionally. Returning to his penthouse quarters late at night, Basil saw that someone had cycled the ceiling to transparent so the wilderness of stars could shine through. When he noticed the shadowy figure near his bed, he thought Sarein had come to see him again. He let out a short, weary sigh. Tonight he wanted just to be alone, to sort through the problems that continued to peck at him like a flock of hungry carrion birds.

But upon bringing the lights up, he was astonished to find Davlin Lotze waiting for him. The tall, dark-skinned spy crossed his arms over his chest. “Good evening, Mr. Chairman.”

Basil was incensed. “What are you doing here?”

“After all the service I’ve performed for the Hansa, that’s the best greeting you can offer?”

“I repeat, Mr. Lotze, what are you doing here?”

“I needed to meet with you and thought it might be difficult to fit into your busy calendar. Since you preferred to keep our previous chats off the record, I felt this would be best.”



Basil kept the lights at medium-level illumination. “Ah yes, every action well thought out, as always. I don’t suppose I should bother asking about the flaw in my security systems that allowed you to get in here?”

“You know my training, Mr. Chairman.”

Basil poured himself a glass of ice water; he’d already had enough coffee for the day, and it was late. “I thought you were off hopping through Klikiss transportals, exploring world after world.” He sipped his water but offered no refreshment to Lotze.

“I decided it was too dangerous.”

“Too dangerous for you? That’s interesting.”

“There’s the exciting kind of danger, Mr. Chairman—and the foolish kind. More than once, you tried to talk me out of exploring untested coordinates, afraid I might disappear like Margaret Colicos did.”

“If you did happen to vanish, at least we wouldn’t have to worry about all those secrets inside your head.”

“You don’t worry about that, Mr. Chairman.” It was not a question.

“No, I suppose I don’t. So, then, why are you here during my few moments of peaceful private time?”

“I’ve come, with all due respect, to call in a favor. I believe I’ve performed adequate service for the Hansa over the years.”

Basil raised his eyebrows. Lotze had always been a man of very few needs and no demands. “What could you possibly want?”

“I want... to go home—or the closest thing I’ve found in recent years. Back to Crenna. I liked it there.”

Interesting. It seemed Davlin had been careful not to show just how much he liked it on Crenna, how much warmth he felt for the colonists there. The Chairman thought it an odd weakness for someone like Davlin.

“You want to... retire?” Basil couldn’t quite grasp the concept. Lotze had always been a man like himself, driven by work and duties with no interest in otherwise occupying himself. “Relaxation” was a chore.

“Call it a sabbatical if you prefer. It doesn’t need to be permanent.”

Basil could not argue with the request—Lotze had certainly earned it—yet he was bothered by the idea. “Seven of my EDF green priests have resigned, Roamer ekti supplies have inexplicably stopped coming, and now you want to go away. Reminds me of rats leaving a sinking ship.”

Lotze remained silent, stoic. He had made his case and simply waited for the Chairman to agree. Basil knew he was in a tricky position: If the Hansa ever expected to get good service from the cultural spy again, he could not turn down his request. Lotze could just as easily vanish. Permanently.

Showing no concern for his visitor, Basil began to undress, preparing for bed. “Since I don’t have

pressing duties for you, Mr. Lotze, Crenna is as good a place as any, I suppose. If you settle down there, at least I'll always know where to find you."

Lotze offered a mysterious smile. "Will you?"

Basil scowled. "Go away before I change my mind. Would you like to depart in the same mysterious way that you arrived, or would you rather leave by the main door?"

Lotze headed out of the bedroom toward the suite's entrance. "You don't need to worry about me, Mr. Chairman."

"I worry about everything... but I'm rather less concerned about you than about most other things."

Lotze put his hand on the door activation panel. "I'll take that as a compliment, Mr. Chairman."

"Take it as a farewell—for now."

The following day, an unusual package arrived at Hansa HQ addressed directly to the Chairman, sent by the Speaker of the Roamer clans.

"At last they break their silence. Let's see what this is all about." Basil marched toward the nearest exit, while the messenger compy struggled to keep up with him. He had given orders for the next three Klikiss Torches to be deployed; maybe he had inadvertently chosen a gas giant where Roamers were still running their skymines in secret. He supposed that would have been an unpleasant surprise for them.

In a courtyard near the east entrance of the Hansa ziggurat, technicians hovered around the perimeter, holding scanning apparatus. Eldred Cain and Sarein were waiting for him, obviously intrigued, along with Basil's blond expediter, Franz Pellidor.

Pellidor paced around the crate, looking for booby traps. "We've scanned it completely, Mr. Chairman. We detect no explosives, no weapons signatures, no biological or organic material, other than a few natural traces in the packing. It appears to be a device of some sort."

"Maybe it's a gift," Sarein said. "What would the Roamers be sending us? A peace offering?"

"Not likely," Cain answered.

Basil had had enough. "I want to get to the bottom of this game they're playing. This is probably just an excuse to raise ekki prices—again." He gestured to Pellidor. "Open it up."

The blond expediter moved to open the crate. Remembering the hydrogue emissary who had exploded his environment chamber inside the Whisper Palace, Basil flinched. But it had never been the Roamers' way to take aggressive action.

The sides of the crate retracted, exposing an old-fashioned device. "It's an antique hologram projector," said Pellidor.

The machinery glowed and hummed, warming up. Basil suddenly wished he had sent the other eavesdroppers away, but it was too late now. Sarein stepped closer to him, too close, and started to speculate on what the Roamers might want, but Basil cut her off, concentrating on priorities. "Quiet. I want to hear what she has to say."

An image of Cesca Peroni no larger than a doll appeared in the air. Her face was turned, directing her words somewhere between Pellidor and the gathered technicians. Basil moved to where he could look the image in the eye, the better to watch her expressions.

“Chairman Wenceslas, I speak for all the Roamer clans. We have met and decided unanimously on a course of action in response to EDF piracy. You and the rest of the Terran Hanseatic League can expect no further deliveries from Roamer merchants. No ekti. No supplies of any kind.”

Basil clenched his teeth and drowned out the incensed and disbelieving mutters in the background. “Piracy? What the hell is she talking about?”

Speaker Peroni continued, her voice calm and reasonable. “Our clans have risked their lives to provide you with stardrive fuel, and we have been repaid with treachery. We long suspected that Hansa military ships were preying upon our unarmed cargo vessels. Now we have found outright proof of EDF attacks. We have in our possession the wreck of a Roamer ship indisputably destroyed by military jazers. You stole our cargoes and tried to cover your tracks, but now we know what you have done.”

Basil pressed his lips together until they turned white. The Roamer Speaker seemed forceful, firm, controlled. “Therefore, until the Hansa brings the perpetrators of this heinous action publicly to justice, and renounces all such piracy in the future, trade is hereby severed between our peoples.” The hologram winked off.

Basil’s heart leaped to his throat, and he wanted to strangle someone. “What is she talking about?” He knew how easily General Lanyan could have justified such things, off the record. What a mess!

Sarein leaned nearer to Basil, but didn’t touch him, wisely recognizing that he was close to exploding. “That woman is an arrogant, self-righteous... coward. She gave you no chance to respond, allowed for no negotiation.” She was trying to be supportive, to share his outrage, but he didn’t need it.

“There will be no negotiations,” Basil said. More than ever, he was frustrated by the failure of his assassination plan, which would have set up a Roamer merchant as a scapegoat. That would have contained and strengthened everything.

Eldred Cain remained cool and contemplative. “First question, Mr. Chairman: Is there any truth to her accusations?”

Basil looked at the wide-eyed techs and turned to his expediter without answering Cain’s question. “Mr. Pellidor, take down their names and IDs. I want the content of this message kept quiet until the Hansa decides on an appropriate response.”

“Speaker Peroni can’t just be allowed to have her little temper tantrum,” Sarein said.

While Pellidor stepped toward the four intimidated technicians, the pallid deputy said quietly to Basil, “We can’t cover this up indefinitely, Mr. Chairman. People are already noticing the missing ekti shipments—”

Basil cut him off with a nod. “Therefore, Mr. Cain, we must foster the belief that Roamers are unreliable. The clans have never been team players with the Hansa, even in this crisis, which affects all of humanity. Go ahead, prove your skills with propaganda and the media. It shouldn’t be hard to paint the Roamers as selfish. Ever since the hydrogue war began, they’ve been overcharging us for stardrive fuel.”

“They’re war profiteers,” Sarein said. Her nostrils flared.

“No need to be indignant on my behalf, Ambassador.” He kept his voice carefully formal. “I can be fully indignant for myself.”

When he saw the briefest flash of a stung expression on her face, Basil softened his voice, knowing that she often came up with schemes that he found particularly useful. “In the meantime, let’s put our heads together, you and I, and devise an effective strategy. We have looked the other way regarding their self-proclaimed independence for too long. There must be a political means by which the Hansa can absorb the Roamers and their assets, bring them back into the fold of humanity. We can’t let them be loose cannons. Not now—and preferably not ever again.”

Sarein gave him a thin smile. “They’ll be sorry they ever chose this path against us.”

41



## TASIA TAMBLYN

After Ptoro, Tasia and her Manta crew received a generous furlough from the EDF. Not since the disastrous battle at Osquivel had she been given so much time off from military duties. But there was a limit to how much rest and recreation a person could stand!

And Tasia had no place to go. She had companions in the EDF with whom she worked, but she considered none of them close friends. There had been no one since Robb Brindle.

Though discretionary space travel was limited because of ekti rationing, as an EDF officer Tasia was welcome to any available seat aboard an outbound spacecraft. She would have liked to go back to the frozen moon of Plumas and the water mines run by her clan. She hadn’t seen her brother Jess in ages, had heard no word from the Tamblyn family in the better part of a year. She did not know what was happening among the clans. But since Roamers kept the locations of their facilities secret, she could not simply hitch a ride on a normal Hansa transport to Plumas, or Rendezvous, or any obvious Roamer destination.

Given the choices, she decided to stay in the Earth solar system.

She made several more inquiries—as subtle as possible—to track down her missing compy. EA had gone off on her secret mission to warn Osquivel, using independent problem-solving routines to find transportation. Tasia could not make too much of an outcry about the compy’s disappearance, however, since EA had been performing an unofficial assignment at the time.

Because Roamer compies contained a great deal of information about the scattered clans, they each had internal security programming that would protect the data—at the expense of the compy itself. Tasia should have taken comfort from this, but EA was valuable, and beloved... and missing. Unfortunately, despite her best efforts, Tasia could still do nothing about it, and she found herself alone with plenty of

time on furlough.

She was most intrigued by the fleet of heavily reinforced “rammer” ships the EDF had started to build in the asteroid shipyards, so she requisitioned an intrasystem shuttle to go see the thick-hulled behemoths being constructed. Since a trip to the nearby shipyards did not require an Ildiran stardrive, she easily received clearance for her visit.

The scheme might have a chance of succeeding, if the rammers could emulate what the Ildiran Solar Navy commander had done at Qronha 3. According to reports, Adar Kori’nh had led forty-nine warliners on suicidal crash courses to wipe out hydrogue warglobes. And there had been no sign of drogues there since that devastating raid.

Seizing the opportunity, the Hansa had dispatched a cloud harvester to Qronha 3. The first shipment from the skymine had already arrived, and others were soon to follow. Tasia was amused at the pride the Big Goose showed at producing its own stardrive fuel, since Roamers had been doing it for generations. The new cloud harvester was far less efficient than Ross’s Blue Sky Mine, but it was the best the Hansa had at the moment. Sullivan Gold’s shipments could not possibly keep up with the demand of the EDF or the Hansa, but at least it was a gesture...

The rammer-ship construction zone was a bustle of activity. As she flew in, she admired the complexities of the operation, the gigantic floating scaffolds and open warehouses in space where constructor pods and workers in engineering suits pattered about, assembling the vessels.

It reminded her of Del Kellum’s shipyards. Of course, Roamer shipbuilders working together without military bureaucracy would have been able to do a faster and better job. She always felt a smug pride in the clans, compared with the bloated and cumbersome Hansa.

Oddly enough, though, the regular Roamer ekti shipments were late. Her fellow Eddies looked to her for an explanation, as if Tasia could interpret clan behavior, but she had been cut off from the clans for so long that she had no idea what was happening at Hurricane Depot, with Del Kellum’s cometary skimmers, or at any of the other ekti facilities. She’d even heard rumors that Speaker Peroni had declared an embargo against the Hansa... but that didn’t make any sense, and no official news release had come from the Chairman. She was sure there must be some obvious explanation.

Tasiacruised her shuttle around the massive armored warships and imagined how each one would strike a single, deadly blow against the warglobes. Looking at the skeletal frameworks of the rammers, she could see that they were generally similar to a standard EDF Manta, but stripped down, with few amenities for a human crew. These rammers were little more than self-propelled hammers to crack open the crystalline shells of warglobes.

So far, the Klikiss Torches were the only absolutely reliable weapons the humans had used against the hydrogues, and since Tasia had successfully delivered her weapon at Ptoro, other gung-ho officers wanted to do their part. Chairman Wenceslas and King Peter had already authorized another three Torches to be used on gas-giant targets...

More than anything else, Tasia wanted to strike against the enemy aliens, again and again. It would be months yet before these rammer vessels were completed, their structural spines and reinforcements inlaid, the massive engines installed. But she hoped to be there, volunteering for the mission, as soon as they were ready.



## CESCA PERONI

Now that she and the strangely different Jess were finally alone in the privacy of her office chamber, Cesca longed to throw herself into his embrace. But she couldn't because of the dangerous alterations she saw in him. The power crackling from his skin, his body, had transformed him into a walking live wire.

“What's happened to you? Explain to me how... how you've changed, Jess.” She looked at his handsome and sincere face, his blue eyes, his strong and straight nose, remembering when she had kissed him.

Standing as far away from her as the rock walls would allow, he held up his hands to keep her at bay. She saw the oily slickness of moisture covering his skin and the pearlescent garment. His face and hands had a translucent, almost shimmering quality, as if his flesh had taken on the eerie phosphorescence of deep-sea creatures. The recycled air around him smelled of ozone, as if charged with ions from an electrical storm.

“I'm alive, thanks to the wentals, but I am no longer *human*, Cesca. I myself don't know half the things I can do... but it's fantastic.”

“As long as the man I knew and loved is still inside there somewhere, Jess, then we can find some way to be together. Our Guiding Star will show us how.”

Again, Jess held her at a distance with a gesture. “This is bigger than just the two of us now, Cesca. There's too much to do, too much/can do—for all of us. We have in our grasp the solution to our crisis. With the help of the Roamers, I can save not just one race, but two. Humans and wentals.”

She sat abruptly in the chair behind her desk, blinking back her confusion and frustration. “All right, you need to explain more than that. What are these... wentals?”

“Incredible water-based entities, potentially as strong as the hydrogues. And they're inside my body now. Wentals and drogues were mortal enemies in a great conflict that occurred ten thousand years ago—and I've got to help resurrect them, so they can fight with us in this war.”

“But what does that have to do with the two of us?”

Jess looked down at his hand and watched the water droplets trickling along his skin, moving as if alive. At long last, he told her what had happened. “My body contains great power, but it's not completely in my control. I don't dare touch anyone else because I'm sure to harm them. I'm... different now, and I have a responsibility. There's too much at stake here to think just of ourselves.”

Cesca nodded, keeping her sadness locked within. There was always too much at stake. And she always made the necessary sacrifices. That had been her lot, and she had accepted it when she became Speaker for all the clans. “It's an impossible situation, Jess.”

“Give me time, Cesca. The wentals are amazing and powerful. I’ll find a way for us to do this together, to be together... somehow. You know my love for you is unchanged.”

“I know that, Jess. But it doesn’t make this any easier.”

He lowered his voice. “I didn’t ask for this power, but I have it, and it came with a price. For now, saving the wentals and defeating the hydrogues are my highest priorities.”

“Then let me help. In any way. Just ask.”

“I need to enlist the help of the clans. I can’t do this alone.” She noticed now that he was not breathing, that he took breaths only so that he could speak words aloud.

She remained behind her desk, trying to pretend this was just a business discussion. “I’ll arrange for you to speak to the Roamers. They’ll all want to hear your story, especially if you’re offering us a chance to beat the drogues.”

“Thank you.”

Later, as he and Cesca walked to the meeting chamber, Jess seemed terrified that he might accidentally touch her. His wavy brown hair hung lank and wet, and a play of luminosity beneath his moist skin hinted at the energy waiting to boil out of him, if he wasn’t careful.

She met his eyes, which brimmed with a glowing sheen, though not of tears, but as if an ocean of stars now filled his gaze. Simmering power and the scent of ozone poured from him, as if someone had connected his life force to a set of generators and cranked the levels up far beyond the maximum.

She stepped perilously close to him, wishing she could take his hand. “Let’s go in together, Jess.”

Inside the hollowed-out grotto, the conversation was already an excited buzz as Jess and Cesca approached the podium. Several of Jess’s former friends called out encouragement; even from the highest tiers they could sense that something had altered within him. They all knew by now that he had arrived in a remarkable water-and-pearl spaceship.

Cesca raised her voice to silence the tumult. For the meeting, she wore a cape Jhy Okiah had given her, intricate embroidery on a dark blue fabric—the symbols of all the Roamer clans like constellations around the Peroni symbol, celebrating their heritage and familial connections. “We are Roamers! We thrive on the challenge of unusual tasks.” She lowered her voice, trying for a good-humored tone. “But never in our history can I recall anything quite as exotic as what Jess Tamblyn is about to describe to you.”

When he spoke to them, Jess did not need the voice amplification. She didn’t even see him take a breath, but his words carried like thunderclaps through the chamber. The audience sat in utter silence as he described how his nebula skimmer had collected interstellar gases and distilled the shattered body of a powerful entity, the last survivor of a race that was the mortal enemy of the hydrogues.

He continued smoothly and passionately, never hesitating, never searching for words. “Now I have come back to Rendezvous to ask for Roamer help. These beings have agreed to protect us against the hydrogues—but first we must make them strong again. I need anyone with a sturdy vessel to help seed the wentals throughout the Spiral Arm. Once their numbers increase, we will have a truly powerful ally.”

Nikko Chan Tylar shouted from one of the closest rows of seats, “We can all see how that wental has changed you, Jess. If we’re handling and delivering this superwater, how can we be sure the rest of us won’t be infected?”

A gruff voice called, “Shizz, if Jess Tamblyn can walk around in space without a suit, maybe some of us want that advantage! Why not drink some of the wental water for ourselves? How does it feel, Jess?”

“I am an anomaly, and I hope I remain the only one,” he answered. “I can’t touch anybody, or the power surge would kill them like a bolt of lightning. Make no mistake, the wentals were forced to take this drastic action in order to save my life, but they will not let it happen again. Simple exposure to wental water will not lead to a similar . . . contamination.”

“How do we know these wentals are as altruistic as you say?” called Anna Pasternak. “What if we end up creating something as nasty as the hydrogues?”

Cesca gazed at the rapt audience, knowing some of them were convinced, others worried. “Remember that these wentals fought against the hydrogues ten thousand years ago. Jess says that they were also allies with the forest life force on Theroc. I see no reason to doubt him.”

Jess considered his answer. “I’m still a Roamer, and I’m asking you to trust me.”

“Good enough for me,” said Alfred Hosaki. “Roamers have always relied on each other. We have to rely on each other—especially now that we’ve cut off trade with the outside. If you want to be suspicious of everybody, go join the Big Goose.”

Out in the audience, Nikko shot to his feet so quickly that he needed to grasp an anchor bar to keep from floating upward in the low gravity. “Then let me be the first to sign up for Jess. I’ve got my own ship. The faster we wipe out the drogues, the sooner we can all get back to the business of skymining.”

Cesca smiled. Jess would have plenty of volunteers.

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## SULLIVAN GOLD

Another full load of ekti launched from the cloud harvester, and Sullivan Gold felt like celebrating, or at least wrapping up the tanks with ribbons and bows. He stood on the administrative deck like a Napoleon, watching his workers like a hawk, and they pretended to be intimidated by him. Everyone knew he was pleased with their progress so far. Sullivan wasn’t sure whether to credit his skilled management methods, or whether his crew just knew what they were doing.

“That’s three shipments in record time.” He grinned out at the placid clouds, standing behind the atmosphere-retention field of the open deck. “If the Hansa wasn’t already paying me so well, I’d demand a bonus.”



Beside him, Kolker smiled, but his eyes were closed, his hands resting on the treeling as he communicated through telink. “Nahton is hurrying to inform Chairman Wenceslas and the King.” Distracted, Kolker bowed his head again, touching the treeling. “Oh, excuse me—something else is happening.”

Sullivan let out an amused sigh. “All right, now who are you talking to?”

Speaking with only a fragment of his attention, the green priest answered, “Just a few friends. It’s nothing important.”

“Uh-huh. I had a teenage daughter once. I know how it can be—on the data network, or using voice communication, or even occasionally chatting face-to-face.”

Now the green priest opened his eyes. “I’m far away from my comrades here, and it’s been a long time since I’ve seen them. But we exchange plenty of information. A green priest’s purpose is to communicate, with each other and with the worldtrees.”

He had never seen Kolker when he *wasn’t* connected to his treeling. “And you do an excellent job of it.”

Sullivan felt the biting breeze on his cheeks from the ocean of hydrogen-rich clouds. The sky harvester hummed along, while small ships flitted around and inspection crews crawled over the lower hull of the processing modules. Every system operated perfectly. He couldn’t have asked for better results. “Talk to your pen pals as often as you like, Kolker, as long as you give priority to my communiqués and status reports when I ask.”

Kolker finished his mental message and released the treeling. “I could talk with you, as well, Sullivan.” He said it as if the thought had just occurred to him. “After all, you are right here beside me.”

“Oh, but am I as interesting? Why don’t you tell me about your friend—the one you were just talking to? What’s my competition?”

“No competition.” Kolker stroked the delicate fronds of the treeling. “Yarrood and I were acolytes together, but he never wanted to leave the embrace of the worldforest, while I chose to travel around and see the wonders of the Spiral Arm. The trees like that, you know. In effect, I am a set of wide and curious eyes that the forest itself doesn’t have. A sightseer by proxy. I share everything with the worldforest. It’s the greatest service a green priest can do in return for the joys of telink. I’ve got a list of all the planets I’ve visited. This gas giant has a sort of majesty, an awesome vastness that is difficult to convey.”

They both stared out at the swirling deep soup of clouds. “I just hope monsters don’t lurk beneath those cloud decks,” Sullivan said. “We’ve been here two months already, but I still feel like we’re on borrowed time. I just checked all the evacuation systems this morning and reviewed our emergency procedures. I’d stage another drill... but it would cut into our production time.”

“Do you ever sleep, Sullivan Gold?”

“I fit it into my schedule once in a while.”

Suddenly, they heard a roar of engines overhead, saw seven immense and gaudy shapes. The profiles of Ildiran warliners were unmistakable, like tropical fighting fish that trailed solar streamers and bristled with

weapons.

Alarms began to ring in Sullivan's control rooms. Warning announcements thundered through the intercom systems. He stared, then shook his head. "This isn't good. Not at all."

Already Kolker was connected to his treeling, quickly describing what he saw. The warliners grew larger and larger as they approached the Hansa cloud harvester. A huge old-model Ildiran skyfactory accompanied the cluster of alien battleships, towed along. Facing them here in the vast, empty skies, Sullivan thought the Ildiran warliners looked ominous and threatening.

"Looks like the new neighbors are moving in." He stared until his eyes hurt. "Hmm, this may be an empty and uninhabited planet—but I wonder if the Hansa bothered to secure permission from the Ildirans for our activities... or if those warliners think we're trespassing."

Kolker looked up. "Perhaps that question should have been asked before now."

"You'd better inform the Hansa that we're about to have a little encounter with the Ildirans here. Ask them if we have formal permission from the Mage-Imperator to be on Qronha 3."

"Yes. This will make a fascinating story—"

*"Now, Kolker."*

A florid-faced communications officer raced to the observation deck, flinging open the hatch and looking around for Sullivan. "It's the Ildiran Solar Navy, Mr. Gold! They are demanding to know what humans are doing here in their territory."

"Not good." Sullivan watched the monstrous warliners, then hurried toward the comm center. The Ildirans had never been a threat before, but these vessels could destroy the new cloud harvester within moments, if they thought they had enough provocation. "I'd better talk to them right away. We may be in trouble, unless I can turn on the charm."

"Yes, we may be in trouble," Kolker said. Sullivan couldn't tell if the green priest was simply agreeing with him, or if it was an attempt at humor.

44



ADAR ZAN'NH

Immediately after receiving his instructions from the Mage-Imperator, Zan'nh had gathered his seven warliners and a skymining crew while Hroa'x, the chief miner, prepared a full-size cloud harvester for transport to the nearby gas giant. He had never imagined that ambitious Hansa industrialists would arrive at the skymining fields first. No, the young Adar had worried about encountering vengeful hydrogues on Qronha 3, but not greedy humans.

This would be the first real test of his ultimate responsibility for the Solar Navy. The soldiers, and the Mage-Imperator, would see how he dealt with this matter. Should he demonstrate his ability to be tough and strong... or should he just ignore the human intrusion? What actual harm did it cause? None.

Still, humans had proven that if they were given even the tiniest opening, they would seize it and push for more, and more, and more.

Adar Kori'nh had given his life to clear this planet of the hydrogue infestation, forever earning his place in the *Saga of Seven Suns*. Kori'nh had done it for his honor, for the Mage-Imperator, for the Ildiran Empire. The great Adar would never have sacrificed himself and forty-nine warliners for a bunch of opportunistic humans.

Determined to do the right thing, Zan'nh stood in the command nucleus as his septa escorted the largest of Ildira's decommissioned skyfactories to the waiting gas giant. The Qronha binary, the closest star system to Ildira, comprised two of the seven suns in the capital world's sky. Qronha's lone gas planet was the first place Ildirans had harvested ekti, but the facilities had been destroyed in the hydrogue massacres at the beginning of the war.

Now Zan'nh intended to take back the world for Ildiran industry.

The big planet loomed in his warliner's front viewport, the gentle storms rich with hydrogen available for conversion into stardrive fuel. The enormous skyfactory moved behind them, drawn along at high speed. Guided by the eldest member of the skyminer kith, Hroa'x, this rejuvenated facility was filled with Ildiran workers eager to process the clouds of Qronha 3 in order to rebuild dwindling ekti stockpiles for the Empire, as the Mage-Imperator had commanded.

But first they had to deal with the matter of these trespassers.

From what Zan'nh knew, voracious humans seized anything they wanted. "*Bekh!* Just as they did on Crenna." The old Adar had talked of how humans had swept in to seize the leftovers on Crenna for themselves as soon as the Solar Navy had evacuated the Ildiran victims of the blindness plague. Though they had paid the Mage-Imperator for the right to do so, the humans were like hungry carrion eaters, taking advantage of Ildiran tragedy.

Zan'nh's voice was cold as he issued orders. "Detach Hroa'x and his skyfactory from our escort beams and allow him to choose the best position in the cloud decks. He'll want to get started with his work." He clenched the railing in the command nucleus, making sure he sounded implacable and tough. He was the *Adarnow*, and he took orders from no one but the Mage-Imperator. "Meanwhile, all warliners accompany me."

He didn't want to provoke a war, however... unless it was necessary.

Now, with the new skymine still trailing them, the seven ornate battleships descended into the atmosphere of Qronha 3 toward the lone Hansa cloud harvester. The human-crewed facility blithely cruised along, spewing exhaust gases as it functioned at full capacity. It was not as large as an Ildiran skyfactory, and probably had only a fraction of the crew. His warliners could destroy it easily, if need be.

"Open weapons ports. Power up our energy projectors." When the weapons officers acknowledged his order, Zan'nh thought of another idea. "And deploy all solar fins to their fullest extent. Extend banners and polarize the reflective coating." That would make an intimidating show. The vessels extended peripheral projections, puffing themselves up in a dazzling threat.

Zan'nh pressed his lips together. Through the *thetism*, his father would sense what he was doing. "Now, demand to know what they are doing here."

After their warning was transmitted, a meek and frightened transmission came from the Hansa cloud harvester. Zan'nh had not yet made up his mind what to do, but he gestured to the communications officer.

"Hello?" said a man's voice. "Is this the new Adar? My, that's a very impressive show of force—beautiful, yet intimidating in its own way. Hello? My name is Sullivan Gold, manager of this industrial facility. I hope you're aware that we are completely unarmed."

Zan'nh thought a moment. "Then it is unfortunate for you, Sullivan Gold, that my warliners have a thorough array of weaponry." He paced in the command nucleus, wondering what Adar Kori'nh would have done in this situation. He needed to send the humans a warning message here. "The Terran Hanseatic League has clearly overstepped its bounds, and the Ildiran Empire has a right to take any appropriate action."

The human replied, sounding frustrated, "Oh come on now! With everything else going on in the Spiral Arm, do you really want to trigger an unnecessary war against the Hansa? Neither of our races wants that."

The annoying man was right, of course. Zan'nh didn't want that. His warliners could easily cover up the destruction of the cloud harvester as a hydrogue attack, but humans and Ildirans were not at war with each other. Still, the... audacity and blithe self-absorption of their assumptions galled him. Why did they think they had the right?

Though the man named Sullivan Gold sounded respectful, he did not seem particularly intimidated by the posturing. "I've got an idea, sir—why don't we discuss a way to resolve this situation like gentlemen? After all, Qronha 3 is a *gasgiant*. There's certainly enough room for two harvesting facilities, right? The Hansa may have put its foot into a mess, but we can fix it. We won't get in each other's way, I promise."

He paused, waiting for Zan'nh to reply, but the Adar made no answer. Zan'nh had learned that silence could be a useful weapon.

Anxious, the human continued to chatter. "Listen, let me host you and your chief skyminer over here at our facility. We'll show you everything we've done and share the weather data we've gathered. It'll improve the efficiency of your own operations. All right?"

Good, Zan'nh thought. The situation was definitely moving in the right direction now. He remained silent a long while yet, enjoying the discomfort he must be inflicting on the Hansa crew.

The impatient human transmitted yet again, well before Zan'nh was ready to break the tension. "Or, if you want, I'll shuttle myself over to your warliners so we can talk face-to-face. I'm flexible. What'll it be, my place or yours?"

Adar Kori'nh would have told him to search for a way to end the conflict at no unnecessary cost of lives. That was how he wanted the *Sagato* to remember him.

Zan'nh decided he did not want to be in a position where he had to offer hospitality to these interlopers. Instead, he would let them make the overtures.

“I will come to your facility. We will resolve this situation without unnecessary casualties.”

“Good idea.”

Zan’nh knew he had the upper hand here, both militarily and psychologically. One way or another, the Empire would emerge with honor here today.

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### MAGE-EMPEROR JORA’H

On Ildira, the Klikiss robot entered the Prism Palace, bypassing the traditional spiral pilgrimage route that crossed the seven radial streams. The looming beetle-shaped machine pushed past the staring Ildiran supplicants who had flocked to Mijistra to gaze upon their new Mage-Emperor.

Angry guard kithmen closed in on the robot, trying to slow its inexorable progress, while others rushed messages to the skysphere reception hall where Jora’h sat in his chrysalis chair, holding court. The Mage-Emperor had just announced his departure for Dobro, at last.

His muscular daughter Yazra’h stayed with her father in the audience chamber, the three sleek Isix cats she kept as pets resting nearby. The ferocious-looking animals lay at her feet like liquid smoke rippling with sinews and wiry muscles. Yazra’h instantly stood up as a messenger rushed in.

“A Klikiss robot is approaching, Liege! It refuses to stop.”

Without ceremony, the ominous insectile automaton lumbered into the dazzling skysphere hall. Even in the colored sunshine, the robot’s matte black exoskeleton seemed to drink up all the light. The robot swiveled its flat head, showing an array of crimson optical sensors that gleamed like baleful red stars. With an eerie grace on a set of fingerlike legs, it boldly approached the chrysalis chair.

Ildiran guards followed, their shoulders hunched as if they were prepared to tear the threatening robot limb from mechanical limb. But Jora’h cautiously raised his hand, not wanting to pit them unnecessarily against the powerful ancient machine. “I was not aware that the Klikiss robots requested a visit. What do you intend here?”

The robot raised itself until it towered a meter above the guard kithmen. The Mage-Emperor’s protectors showed not the least bit of intimidation. “I am Deyk.” Its voice was like rough metal grating across stone. “I have come to demand answers.”

A gasp went through the audience. Everyone waited to see how their all-powerful leader would deal with the situation.

Jora’h made his voice loud and strong. “You have no right to demand answers from the Ildirans.”

“The Klikiss robots are concerned about your activities. On Dobro. On Maratha. We have a right to know. You are breaking promises. You are discarding us.”

Jora’h let anger creep into his reply. He had received no unusual reports about Maratha, which was mostly empty for the darkness season, and he sensed nothing extraordinary through the *thism*, though the connection with his brother Avi’h was not strong. And how did the Klikiss robots know about Dobro?

“Matters of the Ildiran Empire are of no concern to the Klikiss robots,” he said. “The decisions I make are for the good of my people, and are not subject to your approval.”

Dekyk’s hemispherical carapace split in half as if he were about to open his shell and take wing. “We had an agreement about Maratha. You have ignored the terms.”

The Mage-Imperator narrowed his star-sapphire eyes, sick of so many secrets. He called to everyone in the reception hall, “Leave us. I must speak privately.” When the guard kithmen looked uneasy about leaving him vulnerable, Jora’h reconsidered. “Yazra’h, you alone may stay. Protect me if it becomes necessary.”

His daughter stood, fully as intimidating as any armed guard. Her three predatory pets growled low in their throats.

Once the skysphere hall was clear of supplicants, courtiers, and guards, Jora’h finally answered the black robot. “A bargain requires participation on both sides. You robots have failed us. Hydrogues continue to attack Ildiran worlds, and you do not prevent it. Therefore, you are either treacherous or useless.”

Dekyk seemed to deflate, though he did not back away. “In their search for the remnants of the verdani, the hydrogues devastated any forested planet they encountered. Some of those planets happened to be Ildiran. We could not stop them.”

Jora’h pushed himself straighter, hating the chrysalis chair. “You could have told them the location of the worldforest at any time. That would have saved Ildiran planets.” As he said this, though, he felt anguish for this betrayal of the towering worldtrees that had so impressed him when he’d visited Reynald... the trees that Nira herself had loved so well.

“We did not choose to divulge the worldforest location,” Dekyk answered.

“And because of that choice, many of my people died. We resurrected you several centuries ago as we promised, and we have adhered to the vow that our civilization would neither create robots nor build sentient machines in any form. The Ildiran Empire has remained true to its promises. That is all you need to know. Now do your part as well.”

He stared implacably at Dekyk, who remained unmoving like a nightmarish statue. Yazra’h stood beside her Isix cats, which flexed their supple clawed feet, eager to attack. Her eyes reflected her surprise at the unexpected information she had heard.

Finally, after a long moment, Dekyk withdrew, clearly not satisfied. The robot swiveled his torso and lurched back out of the Prism Palace without another word. The Mage-Imperator stared after him while Yazra’h watched her father. The skysphere hall seemed suddenly very empty.

Jora’h’s thoughts whirled, and he was glad that his daughter did not speak. He could no longer count on

the Klikiss robots to intercede with the hydrogues; in fact, he suspected they might attempt to turn the deep-core aliens against Ildirans as well as humans.

Now, more than ever, he needed to go to Dobro—not just as a sentimental lover to look at Nira’s grave, but to see the progress of Osira’h and her abilities. What if the terrible plan had been justified after all? If, after so many generations of careful breeding, his daughter was truly the bridge that could bring Ildirans and the alien hydrogues together—without the Klikiss robots—then he must see to it immediately. Time was short, and the danger was great.

“I will wait no longer.” He pulled himself upright and swung his legs over the side of the cradlelike chair.

After Dekyk’s departure, whispering courtiers had begun to creep back into the room, anxious to make sure that their leader was safe. But when they saw what their Mage-Imperator was doing now, utter silence fell. Jora’h stood apart from the confining chrysalis chair, holding the rim to keep his balance on oddly shaky legs, and glared at them for their foolish adherence to practices that no longer made sense. “This is a time of crisis, not a time of traditions.”

With great relief, he stood on his own feet again for the first time since his ascension. Enough of that nonsense.

The nearest guards moved toward their leader, either to assist him or to urge him back into the chrysalis chair where he belonged. The courtiers and nobles watched this scene with even more surprise than they had shown at the arrival of the Klikiss robot.

Jora’h’s bare feet pressed on the smooth warm floor. The Mage-Imperator had not walked for months. His legs already felt weak, as if the muscles had begun to atrophy. He did not want to imagine how helpless he would feel after remaining in that confining chair for decades upon decades. He didn’t intend for that to happen.

“I will not recline and watch the Empire suffer harm. I am the Mage-Imperator. I define traditions and the way of our society. One of my predecessors declared that a Mage-Imperator’s feet should never touch the floor. I now rescind this tradition. Too much is at stake, and I must break with some of the old ways, lest we lose everything.”

He noticed Yazra’h watching him with a look of pleasure on her face. She clearly approved. Athletic and proud of her own capabilities, she was perhaps glad that her father abjured a practice that made him seem an invalid. He had no intention of becoming a soft slug with a degenerating body, like his father.

Jora’h let go of the rim of the chrysalis chair and stepped forward. The guards had no choice but to let him pass. Smiling, he walked down the broad, shallow steps of the dais. He looked up at the smiling holographic image of his own face projected on the mists, then turned to the gathered people.

“I intend to go to Dobro. Now.”



## DOBRO DESIGNATE UDRU'H

As he instructed the young Designate-in-waiting in the tasks and responsibilities he would one day control, Udru'h recalled how long it had taken him to accept the grim necessities of the breeding program. He was pleased the young man seemed to have an open and receptive mind.

Daro'h stood patiently at his uncle's side as they paused before the gate of the enclosed compound. The Designate-in-waiting displayed calm, striking features that resembled those of his father. He had put aside judgment for the time being, despite knowing that his father did not approve of the breeding experiments. Like all Ildirans, he would always swear loyalty to the Mage-Imperator, but Daro'h also seemed to understand and accept his charge here.

Even so, Udru'h would not tell Daro'h the truth about Nira. Not yet, if ever.

Overhead, the hazy sky was blurred by stratospheric clouds. The air felt hot, and all the hills were green. Lush grasses and weeds had rapidly covered burn scars from the previous year's fire season. Inside the camp, captive humans worked and slept and went about their lives. After generations here, they knew no other way of life, despite what the female green priest had tried to tell them.

"We have developed a substantial data set by mixing human DNA with a spectrum of Ildiran kiths. Many of the offspring have been failures—as might be expected, since genetics is not an exact science. We quickly euthanized the worst horrors. At first we let the human mothers know, but their emotional reactions were difficult to control."

Daro'h frowned, staring through the fence at the low barracks. "Do they not see they are contributing to the good of the Empire?"

"The humans are not part of our Empire. They do not embrace our long-term goals."

"Perhaps they simply do not understand our goals?"

The Dobro Designate shook his head. "They do not—and will not—care."

Inside the compound, human family groups tended small gardens when they weren't on labor shifts. Guards and work supervisors took small vehicles, carrying groups out to the arroyos and rocky outcroppings, where anyone not currently needed for breeding did daily chores, chipping out opalbone fossils to be sold as rarities across the Ildiran Empire.

Daro'h observed the camp activity, drinking in the details. "And they are allowed a certain amount of freedom? They form their own social groups and family units? They choose where to live and sleep without being assigned to specific bunks or buildings?"

"We exert sufficient control to serve our purposes, but we also consider the drawbacks of imposing unnecessary restrictions. A small amount of flexibility engenders an increased level of cooperation. One of the men, a sturdy fellow named Benn Stoner, is currently the de facto representative of the camp. You will meet him."

Daro'h didn't seem to understand. "How does he exert command over the humans?"

"They generally listen to his suggestions. One hundred eighty-five of their years ago, Ildirans brought



their wandering and damaged generation ship to Dobro. For a time humans and Ildirans lived side by side, but... certain unpleasant events changed the situation.

“One of my predecessors was forced to confine the remaining colonists, and Mage-Imperator Yura’h deemed it wise to incorporate them into our long-term breeding program. At first, the humans were defiant, hoping to change their circumstances. But my predecessor understood that such beliefs and the so-called natural freedoms they took for granted could be bred out of them within a generation or two of proper instruction and deprivation.”

“If the humans resisted, could we not use artificial insemination? Specific fertilization and embryo implantation?”

“Possible, yes, but more difficult and far less efficient. We have also found that half-breed children created of artificial means are frequently born disengaged from or lacking in the full faculties of *thethism*. If we allow this, then our plan fails. In the end, it posed few problems. We were able to overcome their reluctance, and so it was not necessary... though we still have the option, should the need arise.”

Daro’h stepped closer to the fence. In a central open court with showers and waiting benches, medical kithmen cleaned human females returning from their work assignments, documenting each one by name and genetic code markers. In their files, they maintained graphs that indicated when each female was at the peak of her fertility cycle.

“The infusion of human bloodlines has been shown to enhance certain Ildiran characteristics. A child who carries even an eighth part of human genetics is more likely to become a stronger worker, a more talented singer, a more visionary scientist. In many cases, they look similar to Ildirans, and we raise them as such. Others appear so strikingly different that we keep them here on Dobro until they mature, and we crossbreed them again in hopes of mainstreaming their progeny.”

As Daro’h and Udru’h watched, doctors culled out four naked human women and directed them to enter the long breeding barracks. There, they would be assigned to mate with males from specific Ildiran kiths that were carefully chosen for each step of the breeding program. Sperm was harvested from human males whenever it was needed, but Ildiran females did not conceive as easily. “Human women are more fecund than Ildirans. They reproduce like rodents—which is to our advantage.”

Daro’h was full of interest. “Is that why the humans are eager to colonize so many worlds? Because their race is growing, and they need the room?”

Udru’h shook his head. “They don’t need the room. They simply