

FURY

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I was the first to reach the emperor's body, and even then it was too late to do anything. He had been examining his koi, kneeling on the stone pathway that wound between the ponds, when the bullet arrived. It had punched through his skull, achieving instantaneous destruction. Fragments of skin and bone and pinkish grey cortical material lay scattered on the tiles. Blood—dark and red as the ink on the imperial seal—was oozing from the entry and exit wounds. The body had slumped over to one side, with the lower half still spasming as motor signals attempted to regain control. I reached over and placed my hand against the implanted device at the base of the neck, applying firm pressure through the yellow silk of his collar to a specific contact point. I felt a tiny subepidermal click. The body became instantly still.

I stood up and summoned a clean-up crew.

"Remove the body," I told the waiting men. "Don't dispose of it until you've completed a thorough forensic analysis. Drain and search the surrounding ponds until you've recovered the bullet or any remaining pieces of it. Then hose down the path until you've removed all trace of blood and whatever else came out of him. Test the water thoroughly and don't let the koi back until you're certain they won't come to any harm." I paused, still trying to focus on what had just happened. "Oh, and secure the Great House. No one comes and goes until we find out who did this. And no ships are to pass in or out of the Capital Nexus without my express authorisation."

"Yes, Mercurio," the men said in near-unison.

In the nearest pond one of the fish—I recognised it as one of the Asagi Koi, with the blue-toned scales laid out in a pine-cone pattern—opened and closed its mouth as if trying to tell me something vital. I turned from the scene and made my way back into the Great House. By the time I reached the emperor's reception chamber the building was buzzing with rumours of the assassination attempt. Despite my best efforts, the news would be out of the Nexus within the hour, hopscotching from world to world, system to system, spreading into the galaxy like an unstoppable fire.

The emperor's new body rose from his throne as the doors finished opening. He was dressed in a yellow silk gown identical to the one worn by the corpse. Aside from the absence of injuries, the body was similarly indistinguishable, appearing to be that of a white-haired man of considerable age, yet still retaining a youthful vigour. His habitual expression normally suggested playfulness, compassion and the kind of deep wisdom that can only come from a very long and scholarly life. Now his face was an expressionless mask. That, and a certain stiffness in his movements, betrayed the fact that this was a new body, being worn for the first time. It would take several hours for the implant to make the fine sensorimotor adjustments that gave the emperor true fluidity of movement, and allowed him to feel as if he was fully inhabiting the puppet organism.

"I'm sorry," I said, before the emperor had a chance to speak. "I take full

responsibility for this incident."

He waved aside my apology. "Whatever this is about, Mercurio, I doubt very much that you could have done anything to prevent it." His voice was thick-tongued, like a drunkard with a bad hangover. "We both know how thorough you've been; all the angles you've covered. No one could have asked for better security than you've given me, all these years. I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"Nonetheless, there was clearly a flaw in my arrangements."

"Perhaps," he allowed. "But the fact is, whoever did this only reached the body, not me. It's unfortunate, but in the scheme of things little worse than an act of vandalism against imperial property."

"Did you feel anything?"

"A sharp blow; a few moments of confusion; not much else. If that's what being assassinated feels like, then it isn't much to fear, truth be told. Perhaps I've been wrong to keep looking over my shoulder, all this time."

"Whoever did this, they must have known it wouldn't achieve anything."

"I've wondered about that myself." He stroked the fine white banner of his beard, as if acquainting himself with it for the first time. "I almost hate to ask—but the koi?"

"I've got my men searching the ponds, looking for bullet fragments. But as far as I can see the fish didn't come to any harm."

"Let's hope so. The effort I've put into those fish—I'd be heartbroken if anything happened to them. I'll want to see for myself, of course."

"Not until we've secured the Great House and found our man," I said, speaking as only the emperor's personal security expert would have dared. "Until the risk of another attempt is eliminated, I can't have you leaving this building."

"I have an inexhaustible supply of bodies, Mercurio."

"That's not the point. Whoever did this. . ." But I trailed off, my thoughts still disorganized. "Please, sir, just respect my wishes in this matter."

"Of course, Mercurio. Now as ever. But I trust you won't keep me from my fish for the rest of eternity?"

"I sincerely hope not, sir."

I left the emperor, returning to my offices to coordinate the hunt for the assassin and the search for whatever evidence he might have left behind. Within a few hours the body had been subjected to an exhaustive forensic analysis, resulting in the extraction of bullet shards from the path of the wound. In the same timeframe my men recovered other fragments from the vicinity of the corpse; enough to allow us to reassemble the bullet.

An hour later, against all my expectations, we had the assassin himself.

They found him with his weapon, waiting to be apprehended. He hadn't even tried to leave the grounds of the Great House.

That was when I began to suspect that this wasn't any act of mindless desecration, but something much more sinister.

"Tell me what you found," the emperor said, when I returned to the reception chamber. In the intervening time his control over the new body had improved markedly. His movements were fluid and he had regained his usual repertoire of facial expressions.

"We've found the assassin, sir, as you'll doubtless have heard."

"I hadn't, but please continue."

"And the weapon. The bullet itself was a goal-seeking autonomous missile, a very sophisticated device. It had the means to generate stealthing fields to confuse our anti-intrusion systems, so once it was loose in the grounds of the Great House it could move without detection. But it still needed a launching device, a kind of gun. We found that as well."

The emperor narrowed his eyes. "I would have thought it was hard enough to get a gun into the Nexus, let alone the Great House."

"That's where it gets a little disturbing, sir. The gun could only have been smuggled into the grounds in tiny pieces—small enough that they could be disguised by field generators, or hidden inside legitimate tools and equipment allowed the palace staff. That's how it happened, in fact. The man we found the gun on was an uplift named Vratsa, one of the keepers in charge of the ponds."

"I know Vratsa," the emperor said softly. "He's been on the staff for years. Never the brightest of souls. . . but diligent, gentle, and beyond any question a hard worker. I always liked him—we'd talk about the fish, sometimes. He was tremendously fond of them. Are you honestly telling me he had something to do with this?"

"He's not even denying it, sir."

"I'm astonished. Vratsa of all people. Primate stock, isn't he?"

"Gorilla, I think."

"He actually planned this?"

"I'm not sure 'planned' is exactly the word I'd use. The thing is, it's starting to look as if Vratsa was a mole."

"But he's on the staff for—how long, exactly?"

There'd been no need for me to review the files—the information was at my immediate disposal, flashing into my mind instantly. "Thirty-five years, sir. In my estimation, that's about as long as it would have taken to smuggle in and assemble the pieces of the weapon."

"Could a simple uplift have done this?"

"Not without help, sir. You've always been very kind to them, employing them in positions of responsibility where others would rather treat them as subhuman slaves. But the fact remains that uplifts don't generally exhibit a high-degree of forward planning and resourcefulness. This took both, sir. I'm inclined to the view that Vratsa was just as much a puppet as that body you're wearing."

"Why the bullet, though? As I said, Vratsa and I have spoken on many occasions. He could have hurt me easily enough then, just with his bare hands."

"I don't know, sir. There is something else, though." I looked around the walls of the room, with its panelled friezes depicting an ancient, weatherworn landscape—some nameless, double-mooned planet halfway across the galaxy. "It's delicate, sir—or at least it might be delicate. I think we need to talk about it face to face."

"This room is already one of the most secure places in the entire Radiant Commonwealth," he reminded me.

"Nonetheless."

"Very well, Mercurio." The old man sighed gently. "But you know how uncomfortable I find these encounters."

"I assure you I'll be as brief as possible."

Above me the ceiling separated into four equal sections. The sections slid back into the walls, a cross-shaped gap opening between them to reveal an enormous overhead space—a brightly lit enclosure as large as any in the Great House. Floating in the space, pinned into place by gravity neutralisers, was a trembling sphere of oxygenated water, more than a hundred meters across. I began to ascend, pushed upwards on a section of flooring immediately beneath me, a square tile that became a rising pillar. Immune to vertigo—and incapable of suffering lasting damage even if I'd fallen to the floor—I remained calm, save for the thousand questions circling in my mind.

At one hundred and thirty meters, my head pushed through the surface tension of the sphere. A man would have started drowning, but immersion in water posed no difficulties for me. In fact, there were very few environments in the galaxy that I couldn't tolerate, at least temporarily.

My lenses adjusted to the differing optical properties of the medium, until I seemed to be looking through something only slightly less sharp than clear air. The emperor was floating, as weightless as the water surrounding him. He looked something like a whale, except that he had no flippers or flukes.

I remembered—dimly, for it had been a long time ago—when he was still more or less humanoid. That was in the early days of the Radiant Commonwealth, when it only encompassed a few hundred systems. He had grown with it, swelling as each new territory—be it a planet, system or entire glittering star cluster—was swallowed into his realm. It wasn't enough for him to have an abstract understanding of the true extent of his power. He needed to feel it on a purely sensory level, as a flood of inputs

reaching directly into his brain. Countless modifications later, his mind was now the size of a small house. The mazelike folds of that dome bulged against drum-tight skin, as if about to rip through thin canvas. Veins and arteries the size of plumbing ducts wrapped the cerebellum. It was a long time since that brain had been protected by a cage of bone.

The emperor was monstrous, but he wasn't a monster—not now. There might once have been a time when his expansionist ambitions were driven by something close to lust, but that was tens of thousands of years ago. Now that he controlled almost the entire colonised galaxy, he sought only to become the figurehead of a benevolent, just government. The emperor was famed for his clemency and forgiveness. He himself had pushed for the extension of democratic principles into many of the empire's more backward prefectures.

He was a good and just man, and I was happy to serve him.

"So tell me, Mercurio, whatever it is that is too secret even for one of my puppets."

The rising pillar had positioned me next to one of his dark eyes. They were like currants jammed into doughy flesh.

"It's the bullet, sir."

"What about it?"

I held the reconstructed item up for inspection, confident now that we were outside the reach of listening devices. It was a metal cylinder with a transparent cone at the front.

"There are, or were, markings on the bullet casing. They're in one of the older trading languages of the Luquan Emergence. The inscription, in so far as it can be translated into Prime, reads as follows: Am I my brother's keeper?"

He reflected on this for a moment. "It's not ringing any bells."

"I'd be surprised if it did, sir. The inscription appears to be a quote from an ancient religious text. As to its greater significance, I can't say."

"The Luquans haven't traditionally been a problem. We give them a certain amount of autonomy; they pay their taxes and agree to our trifling requests that they instigate democratic rule and cut down on the number of executions. They may not like that, but there are a dozen other special administrative volumes that we treat in exactly the same fashion. Why would the Emergence act against me now?"

"It doesn't end there, sir. The bullet had a hollow cavity at the front, inside the glass cone. There was enough space in there for the insertion of any number of harmful agents, up to and including an antimatter device that could easily have destroyed all or part of the Great House. Whoever made this, whoever programmed it to reach this far, could easily have gone the extra step necessary to have you killed, not just your puppet."

The ancient dark eye regarded me. Though it hardly moved in the socket, I

still had the sense of penetrating focus and attention.

"You think someone was trying to tell me something? That they can murder me, but chose not to?"

"I don't know. Certainly, the provisions I've now put in place would prevent anyone making a second attempt in this manner. But they'd have known that as well. So why go to all this trouble?" I paused before continuing. "There is something else, I'm afraid."

"Go ahead."

"Although the bullet was hollow, it wasn't totally empty. There was something inside the glass part—a few specks of reddish sand or dust. The surgeons extracted most of it from the puppet, and they've promised me that the few remaining traces that entered the koi ponds won't cause any ill-effects. I've had the dust analysed and it's absolutely harmless. Iron oxide, silicon and sulphur, for the most part. Frankly, I don't know what to make of it. It resembles something you'd find on the surface of an arid terrestrial planet, something with a thin atmosphere and not much weather or biology. The problem is there are ten million worlds that fit that description."

"And within the Emergence?"

"Fewer, but still far too many to speak of." I withdrew the replica bullet from his examination. "Nonetheless, these are our only clues. With your permission, I'd like to leave the Capital Nexus to pursue the matter further."

He ruminated on this for a few seconds. "You propose a mission to the Emergence?"

"I really don't see any alternative. There's only so much I can do from my office. It's better if I go walkabout." The phrase, which had popped unbidden into my mind, caused me disquiet. Where had it come from? "What I mean, sir, is that I can be much more effective in person."

"I appreciate that. But I also appreciate that you're incredibly valuable to me—not just as a friend, but as my closest and most trusted advisor. I've become very used to knowing you're close at hand, in the walls of the Great House. It's one of the things that helps me sleep at night, knowing you're not far away."

"I'll only ever be a few skip-space transits from home, sir."

"You have my agreement, of course—as if I was ever going to say no. But do look after yourself, Mercurio. I'd hate to think how I'd manage without you."

"I'll do my best, sir." I paused. "There is one other thing I need to ask you, sir. The uplift, Vratsa?"

"What about him?"

"We subjected him to mild interrogation. He gave us nothing, but I'd be

remiss in my duties if I didn't point out that we could employ other methods, just to be certain he isn't keeping anything from us."

"What's your honest judgement?"

"I think he's completely innocent, sir—he was just following a script someone programmed into him thirty-five or more years ago. He no more knows why he did this—and who's behind it—than the bullet did. But if you feel something might be gained. . ."

"Have him tortured, on the very slight chance he might tell us something?" It was clear from his tone of voice what he felt about that.

"I didn't think you'd approve, sir. As far as I'm concerned, it would achieve about as much as smacking a puppy for something it did the day before yesterday."

"I've spent much of the last thousand years trying to enforce humanitarian principles on the more barbarous corners of my own empire. The very least I can do is live up to my own high moral standards, wouldn't you say?" It was a rhetorical question, since he allowed me no time to answer. "Take Vratsa and remove him from the Great House—he's a continuing security risk, even if he doesn't know why he did what he did. But I don't want him locked away or punished. Find some work for him in the outlying gardens. Give him some fish to look after. And if anyone harms a hair on his head. . ."

"They won't, sir. Not while I'm in charge."

"That's very good, Mercurio. I'm glad we see things similarly."

I left the Great House a day later, once I was satisfied that I had put in place all necessary measures for the emperor's continued security in my absence. From the moon-girdled heart of the Capital Nexus, through skipspace via the Coronal Politics to the fuzzy perimeter of the Luquan Emergence—sixty thousand light years in only a handful of days. As I changed from ship to ship, I attracted an unavoidable degree of attention. Since I require Great House authority to make my investigations in the Emergence, there was no possibility of moving incognito. I travelled in full imperial regalia, and made sure the seriousness of my mission was understood.

How much more attention would I have merited, if they had realized what I really was?

I look like a man, but in fact I am a robot. My meat exterior is only a few centimeters thick. Beneath that living shell lies the hard amour of a sentient machine.

The emperor knows—of course—and so do a handful of his closest officials. But to most casual observers, and even people who have spent much time in the Great House, I am just another human security expert, albeit one with an uncommonly close relationship with the emperor. The fact that I have been in his service for tens of thousands of years is one of the most closely guarded secrets in the Radiant Commonwealth.

I am rare. Robots are commonplace, but I am something more than that. I am a true thinking machine. There are reckoned to be less than a million of us in existence—not many, considering the billion worlds of the Radiant Commonwealth, and all the teeming souls on those planets and moons.

There are two schools of thought concerning our origin. In the thirty-two thousand years of its existence, the empire has been through a number of historical convulsions. One school—the alchemicals—has it that the means to manufacture us—some critical expertise in cybernetics and programming—had been discovered and then lost at an earlier time. All remaining sentient machines therefore dated from this period.

The other school, the accretionists, hold a different view. They maintain that robot intelligence is an emergent property, something that could only happen given sufficient resources of time and complexity. The accretionists argue that the surviving robots became the way we are gradually, through the slow augmentation of simpler machines. In their view, almost any machine could become an intelligent robot, provided it is allowed to evolve and layer itself with improvements.

It would have been convenient if we robots could have settled the matter. The unfortunate fact, though, was that we simply didn't remember. Like any recording apparatus, we are prone to error and distortion. At times when the emperor's hold on the galaxy had slackened, data wars corrupted even the most secure archives. I can sift through my memories until I find the earliest reliable events of which I have direct experience, but I know—I sense—that I am still only plumbing relatively shallow layers of my own identity.

I know I've been around considerably longer than that.

The only thing I can be absolutely certain of is that I've known the emperor for a very long time. We fit together like hand and glove. And in all that time I've always been there to protect him.

It is what I do.

The official was a high-ranking technocrat on Selva, one of the major power centers of the Luquan Emergence. He studied me with unconcealed hostility, sitting behind a desk in his private office in one of Selva's aquatic cities. Fierce, luminous oceanforms—barbed and tentacled things of alien provenance—clawed and suckered at the armored glass behind him, testing its strength.

"I really don't think I can offer any more assistance, sire," the official said, putting sufficient stress on the honorific for it to sound insulting. "Since your arrival on Selva we've given you free rein to conduct your investigations. Every administrative department has done its utmost to comply with your requests. And yet you still act as if there is more we could have done." He was a thin, sallow man with arched, quizzical eyebrows, dressed in a military uniform that was several sizes too big for him. "Have we not demonstrated our obedience with the trials?"

"I didn't ask for those dissidents to be executed," I said. "Although I can see how useful it would have been for you. Arrest some troublemakers, ask

them questions they can't possibly answer, about a crime they had nothing to do with, and then hang them on the pretext that they weren't cooperating with the Great House. Do you imagine that will buy you favor with the emperor? Quite the opposite, I'd suggest. When all this is over and done with, I wouldn't be at all surprised if you have an imperial audit to deal with."

He shrugged, as if the matter was of no possible consequence.

"You're wasting your time, sire—looking for a pattern, a logical explanation, where none exists. I don't even know why you're bothering. Didn't you already find your assailant? Didn't you already extract a confession?"

"We found evidence that points to the Luquan Emergence."

"Yes, I've heard about that." Ostentatiously, he tapped at a sealed brochure on his desk. "A cryptic statement in an ancient tongue. Some dust that could have come from anywhere."

I maintained a blank expression, giving no hint at my anger that the forensic information had been leaked. It was inevitable, I supposed, but I had hoped to keep a lid on it for a little longer.

"I'd discount any rumours if I were you."

A mouthful of concentric teeth gnashed against the glass, rotating and counter-rotating like some industrial drilling machine. The official craned around in his seat, studying the ravenous creature for a few seconds. "They have a taste for human flesh now," he said, as if the two of us were making idle conversation. "No one's exactly sure how, but it appears that at some point certain undesirables must have been fed to them, despite all the prohibitions against introducing human genetic material into the native ecosystem."

"I suppose I must count as an undesirable, from where you're sitting. Coming in with imperial authorisation, the license to ask any questions I choose."

"I won't pretend I'll shed many tears when you're gone, if that's what you mean." He straightened in his chair, the stiff fabric of the uniform creaking. "On that matter, there's something you might benefit from knowing."

"Because it'll get me off Selva?"

"I'd inflict you on Porz, if I didn't know you'd already visited." He tapped another finger against the brochure. "It behoves me to point out that you may be making a tactical error in conducting your enquiries here, at the present heart of the Emergence. This ancient inscription—the quote from that old text—harkens back to our very early history. The geopolitical balance was different back then, as I'm sure you'll appreciate."

"I know my history." Which was true, up to a point. But the history of the Luquan Emergence was a bewildering thicket of half-truths and lies, designed to confound imperial legislators. Even the Great House hadn't been able to help me sort out truth and fiction where the Emergence was

concerned. It was worse than trying to find Lost Earth.

"Then consider acting upon it," the official said. "Julact was the heart of the Luquan Emergence in those days. No one lives there now, but. . ."

"I'll come to Julact in good time."

"You may wish to move it up your schedule. That part of the Emergence doesn't see much traffic, so the skipspace connections are being pruned back. We've already mothballed all routes west of the Hasharud Loop. It's difficult enough to reach Julact now. In a few years, it may not be possible at all—even with imperial blessing. You know how hard it is to reactivate a path, once it's fallen out of use."

No administrative entity within the Radiant Commonwealth was supposed to shutdown skipspace paths without direct permission from the Great House. Merely doing so was a goading taunt against the emperor's authority. That, though, was a fight for another day.

"If I had the slightest suspicion that I was being manipulated. . ."

"Of course you're being manipulated. I want you out of my jurisdiction."

"Oh, and it's a red world," the official said. "And the soil's a close match to that sample you found in the bullet. In case that makes any difference to you."

"You said it yourself. That soil could have come from anywhere in the galaxy. A close match doesn't imply a unique match."

"Still. You've got to start somewhere, haven't you?"

I left Selva.

My passage to Julact was appropriately arduous. After emerging from the soon-to-be-mothballed skipspace portal I had to complete the final leg of the journey at sublight speed, accruing years of irritating timelag. Before I dropped out of superluminal signal range I contacted the Capital Nexus, alerting the emperor that I would not be home for some time.

"Are you sure this is wise, Mercurio?"

"Clearly, it suits them that I should redirect my enquiries away from Selva, Porz, and the other power centers of the present Emergence. But Julact is worthy of my attention. Even if there isn't anyone living there now, I may find another clue, another piece of the puzzle."

The emperor was outside again, very close to the spot where his previous body had been shot, kneeling by the treasured koi with some kind of water-testing device in his hand. A white and orange male broke the water with his barbled head, puckering silver-white lips at the force-shielded sky above the Great House. "You sound as if you're caught up in some kind of elaborate parlor game," the emperor said.

"That's exactly how it feels. By the same token, I have no choice but to play along. Ordinarily I would not consider dropping out of contact for as

long as it will take me to travel to Julact and back. But since the Great House seems to be running itself well enough in my absence, and given that there have been no further security incidents. . ."

The emperor lifted a yellow silk sleeve. "Yes, of course. Do whatever is necessary. I could hardly expect you to be less thorough about this than any other security arrangements you've dealt with."

"I promise I'll be as quick as possible."

"Of course. And once again, I urge you to take all necessary precautions. You and I, we've got a lot of history together. I'd feel quite naked without you."

"I'll report back as soon as I have something, sir."

The emperor, the fish and the Great House faded from my console. With nothing to do but wait for my journey to end, I sifted through the facts of the case, examining every aspect from every conceivable angle. The process consumed many centuries of equivalent human thought, but at the end of it I was still none the wiser. All I had was a bullet, an inscription and some fine red dust.

Would Julact provide any answers?

The red world was smaller than most terrestrials, with a single small moon. It had a ghost-thin haze of atmosphere and no evidence of surface biology. Winds scoured tawny dust from pole to pole, creating an ever-changing mask. The humans of the Luquan Emergence had not, of course, evolved on this world. Thousands of years before their emergence as a galactic mini-power, they must have crossed interstellar space from Lost Earth, to settle and perhaps terraform this unpromising pebble.

From orbit, I dropped down samplers to sniff and taste Julact's lifeless soil. As the technocrat had already promised, it turned out to be in uncannily close agreement with the forensic sample. That didn't prove that Julact was the home of the assassin—dozens of other worlds would have given at least as convincing a match—but at least I didn't have to rule it out immediately.

I surveyed the planet from space, searching for possible clues. Humans had been here once, that much was clear. There were ruined cities on the surface—smothered in dust, abandoned tens of thousands of years ago. Could someone have stayed behind, nursing a potent grudge? Possibly. But it was difficult to see how a single man could have orchestrated the long game of the assassination attempt. It would have taken several normal lifetimes to put in place the necessary measures—and only a select few have ever been given the imperial gift of extended longevity. A machine such as I—that would have been different. But what possible harm could a robot wish upon the emperor?

I was debating these points with myself when a signal flashed from the surface, emanating from the largest ruined city.

"Welcome, Mercurio," said the signal. "I'm glad you finally arrived."

"To whom am I speaking?"

"That doesn't matter for now. If you wish answers to your questions, descend to the perimeter of the abandoned settlement from which this transmission is originating. We have much to talk about, you and I."

"I'm on official business for the Great House. I demand to know your identity."

"Or what?" the voice asked, amusedly. "You'll destroy the city? And then what will you have learned?" The tone shifted to one of gentle encouragement. "Descend, Mercurio—I promise that no harm will come to you, and that I will satisfy your curiosity in all matters. What do you have to lose?"

"My existence?"

"I wouldn't harm you, brother. Not in a million years."

I commenced entry into Julact's wisp of an atmosphere. All the while I scanned the city for signs of concealed weaponry, half-expecting to be blown out of the sky at any moment. There were no detectable weapons, but that wasn't much consolation. The only assurance I could offer myself was that I was now only slightly more vulnerable than when I had been surveyed by Julact from space.

The city lay inside the crumbled remains of a once-proud wall. I set down just beyond it, instructing my ship to wait while I ventured outside. As I stepped onto Julact's surface, the dust crunching beneath my feet, some ancient memory threatened to stir. It was as if I had been here before, as if this landscape had been awaiting my return, patient and still as an old painting. The feeling was neither welcome nor pleasant. I could only assume that the many skipspace transits I'd been forced to endure were having an effect on my higher functions.

I thought of what I had said to the emperor, before my departure. Of how I was going to go walkabout.

Unnerved, but still determined to stand my ground, I waited to see what would happen.

Presently four golden robots emerged from a crack in the side of the city wall. They were standing on a flying disk, a common form of transportation in the Julactic League. They were humanoid, but clearly no more than clever servitors. Each machine had a human torso, but only a very small glowing sphere for a head. I watched their approach with trepidation, but none of the machines showed any hostile intentions.

"Please come with us," they said in unison, beckoning me to step onto the disk. "We will take you to the one you wish to meet."

"The one I spoke to from space?"

"Please come with us," the robots repeated, standing aside to give me room.

"Identify the individual or organisation for whom you are working."

"Please come with us."

I realized that it was futile expecting to get anything out of these idiot machines. Submitting myself to fate, I stepped onto the disk. We sped away instantly, back through the crack in the wall. There was a grey rush of ruined stone, and then we were in the city proper, winging over smashed buildings; what had once been towers or elegantly domed halls. Centuries of dust storms had polished them to a glassy smoothness against the prevailing winds. Only a handful of buildings reached higher than the city wall. We approached the highest of them, a tapering white structure like a snapped-off tusk rammed into the ground. At the very tip was a bulb-shaped swelling that had cracked open to reveal a tilted floor. A bronze craft, shaped like a blunt spearhead, waited on the floor for our arrival. I would have seen it from space, had it not been screened from observation until this moment.

The flying disk rose into the belly of the parked vehicle. The robots bade me to step down, onto carpeted flooring. The belly door sealed shut and I sensed a lurch of rapid movement. I wondered if they were taking me back into space. It seemed absurd to invite me down to the surface, only to take me away from Julact.

"He will see you now," the robots announced.

They showed me forward, into the front compartment of the vehicle. It was a triangular room outfitted in burgundy, with wide, sloping windows on two sides. There were no controls or displays, and the only furniture consisted of two padded benches, set at an angle to each other before the windows. A figure was sitting on one of these benches as I was shown in. The golden robots left us alone, retreating into the rear of the craft as a door closed between us.

Such is the rarity of robot intelligence that I have only been in the presence of machines such as myself on a handful of occasions. In all such instances I always felt a quiet certainty that I was the superior machine, or that we were at least equal partners. I have never felt myself to be in the presence of a stronger, cleverer entity.

Until this moment.

He rose from the couch where he had been sitting, feigning that human need for relaxation. He was as tall as I and not dissimilar in build and cosmetic ornamentation. Where I resembled a masked soldier in jade amour, he was a fiery, almost luminous red, with the face of an iron gargoyle.

"The accretionists were right," he said, by way of welcome. "But of course you knew that all along, Mercurio. In your bones. I certainly know it in my bones."

"I confess I didn't."

"Well, maybe you think you didn't. But your deep memory says

otherwise—as does mine. We've been around too long to have been the product of some brief, ingenious golden age. We're not just as old as the empire. We go back even further, you and I."

Through the window the landscape rushed by. We had passed beyond the limits of the ruined city and were now traversing lifeless hills and valleys.

"Do we?" I asked.

"You knew the emperor when he was still recognisably human. So did I. We knew him before this empire was even a glint in his eye. When the very idea of it would have been laughable. When he was just a powerful man in a single solar system. But we were there, beyond any question."

"Who are you?"

He touched a fiery hand to the armored breastplate of his chest. "My name is Fury. Your name was bestowed upon you by your master; I chose mine for myself."

I searched my memory for information on any figures named Fury who might have been considered a security concern. Nothing of significance emerged, even when I expanded the search parameters to scan back many thousands of years.

"That tells me nothing."

"Then maybe this will. I'm your brother. We were created at the same time."

"I don't have a brother."

"So you believe. The truth is, you've always had one. You just didn't realize it."

I thought back to the religious text on the bullet casing, wondering if it might have some bearing on our conversation. Am I my brother's keeper? What did it mean, in this context?

"How could a machine have a brother?" I asked. "It doesn't make any sense. Anyway, I haven't come here to be teased with irrelevancies about my own past. I've come to investigate a crime."

"The attempted assassination of the emperor, I presume," Fury said casually. "I'll make it easy for you, shall I? I did it. I arranged for the uplift and his weapon. I created the bullet that did so little harm. I put the dust inside it, I put the words on the casing. I did all this without ever setting foot within a hundred light years of the Capital Nexus."

"If you wanted to kill the emperor. . ."

"I could have done it; trivially. Yes; I'm glad you came to that conclusion. I take it you've now had time to work out why I went to such elaborate lengths, merely to injure him?"

All of a sudden it made sense to me. "So that I'd have a lead to follow? To

bring me to you?"

He nodded once. "Knowing your dedication to his protection, I had little doubt that you'd terminate yourself if you failed him. I couldn't have that. But if he was threatened, I knew you'd move world and star to find the perpetrator. I knew you'd turn over every stone until it led you to me. Which was exactly what I wanted. And look—here you are. Brimming with righteous indignation, determined to bring the would-be assassin to justice."

"That's still my intention."

"I've looked inside you. You contain weapons, but nothing that can penetrate my amour or the security screens between us." He touched a finger to his sharp-pointed chin. "Except, of course, for the power plant which energizes you, and which you could choose to detonate at any moment. Be assured that nothing of me would survive such an event. So go ahead: annihilate the would-be assassin. You won't be able to return to your emperor, but you'll at least have died knowing you did the decent thing." He waited a beat, the eye-slits in his gargoyle mask giving nothing away. "You can do that, can't you?"

"Of course I can."

"But you won't. Not until you know why another robot wanted your emperor dead, and chose not to do it himself."

He understood me very well. If I destroyed myself, I could not be certain that I had undermined the threat to the emperor. Not until I fully understood the scope of that threat, and the motivating agency behind it.

"So that's settled, at least," he added. "You'll do nothing until you have further information. Fine—let's give you that information, and see what you make of it. Shall we?"

"I'm at your disposal," I said.

"I've brought you somewhere significant. You think Julact is an old world, but that's not the half of it. It's been part of the Radiant Commonwealth for a lot longer than anyone realizes. In fact you could say that everything began here."

"You're going to tell me this is really Lost Earth?"

"No; this isn't Earth. We can visit Earth if you like, but in truth there's not much to see. Anyway, that sterilized husk doesn't mean anything to you and me. We weren't even made on Earth. This is our home. This is where we were born."

"I think I'd remember."

"Do you?" he asked sharply. "Or is it possible you might have forgotten? You don't recall your origins, after all. That information was scrubbed out of you thirty centuries ago, accidentally or otherwise. But I've always remembered. Keeping the low profile that I have, I've managed to avoid contact with most of the damaging agencies that wiped your past. That's

not to say I haven't had to fight to preserve these memories, treasuring them for what they were." He gestured at the rushing landscape beyond the window. "Julact is Mars, Mercurio. The first real world that humans touched, after they left the Earth. How does that make you feel?"

"Sceptical."

"Nonetheless, this is Mars. And I have something interesting to show you."

The vehicle was slowing. If we had passed any other signs of human habitation since leaving the deserted city, I had witnessed none of them. If this was indeed Mars—and I could think of no reason why Fury would lie to me now—then the world had almost certainly undergone many phases of climate modification. Though the planet might now have reverted to its prehistoric condition, the effects of those warm, wet interludes would have been to erase all evidence of earlier settlements. The ruined city might well have been indescribably ancient, but it could also have been one of the newest features on the surface.

Yet as the vehicle came to a hovering halt, something about the landscape struck me as familiar. I compared the canyons and bluffs through the window with something in my recent experience, and realized that I had seen the view before, albeit from a different angle. A human might never have made the connection, but we robots are attuned to such things.

"The emperor's reception room," I said, marveling. "The friezes on the wall—the images of a landscape with two moons. It was here. But there was only one moon as we came in."

"That was Phobos," Fury said. "The other one—Deimos—was lost during one of the empire's early wars. It was a manufacturing centre, and therefore of tactical importance. As a matter of fact, we were both made on Deimos, in the same production batch. So we're not really from Mars after all, if you want to be pedantic—but Mars is where we were activated, and where we served our masters for the first time."

"But if there were two moons on the frieze, it must be very old. How am I still able to recognize the landscape?"

"I shaped it for you," Fury said, not without a touch of pride. "There was less to do than you might think—the terraforming changes left this part of Mars relatively undisturbed. But I still moved a few things around. Of course, since I couldn't call in much in the way of assistance, it took a long time. But as you'll have realized by now, patience is one of my strong points."

"I still don't understand why you've brought me here. So Mars was significant to the emperor. That doesn't excuse an assassination attempt on him."

"More than significant, Mercurio. Mars was everything. The crux; the wellspring; the seed. Without Mars, there would have been no Radiant Commonwealth. Or at the very least a very different empire, ruled by a different man. Shall I show you what happened?"

"How can you show me?"

"Like this."

He did nothing, but I understood immediately. The vehicle was projecting forms onto the landscape, superimposing ghostly actors on the real terrain.

Two figures were walking over the crest of a dune. Their footprints ran all the way back to a primitive surface vehicle—a pressurized cabin mounted on six balloon-like wheels. The vehicle bristled antenna, with solar collectors folded on its back like a pair of delicately hinged insect wings. It had the flimsy, makeshift look of something from the dawn of technology. I could only imagine that the wheeled machine had brought the two figures on a long, difficult journey from some equally flimsy and makeshift settlement.

"How far back are we looking, Fury?"

"A very long way. Thirty-two thousand years. Barely a century after the first manned landing on Mars. Conditions, as you'll have gathered, were still extremely perilous. Accidental death was commonplace. Effective terraforming—the creation of a thick, breathable atmosphere—lay a thousand years in the future. There were only a handful of surface communities and the political balance of the planet—not to mention the whole system—was still in a state of flux. These two men. . ."

"They're both men?"

Fury nodded. "Brothers, like you and me."

I watched the suited figures advance towards us. With their visors reflecting the landscape, and with the bulkiness of the suits hiding their physiques, I had to take Fury's word that these were human male siblings. Both men were dressed similarly, suggesting that they had originated from the same community or power bloc. Their suits were hard armored shells, with the limbs joined by flexible connections. Something in the easy, relaxed way they moved told me that the suits were doing some of the hard work of walking, taking the burden off their occupants. A hump rose from the back of each suit, containing—I presumed—the necessary life-support equipment. They had similar symbols and patterns on the suits, some of which were mirrored in forms painted on the side of the vehicle. The man on the right held something in his gloved hand, a small box with a readout set into it.

"Why have they come here?"

"It's a good question. The brothers are both influential men in one of the largest military-industrial entities on the planet. Tensions are running high at the moment—other factions are circling, there's a power vacuum in the inner system, the lunar factories have switched to making weapons, there's an arms embargo around Mars, and it's not clear if war can be avoided. The man on the left—the older of the two brothers—is at heart a pacifist. He fought in an earlier engagement—little more than a spat between two combines—and he wants no more of that. He thinks there's still a chance for peace. The only downside is that Mars may have to relinquish its

economic primacy compared to an alliance of the outer giants and their moons. The industrial concern that the two men work for will pay a bitter price if that happens. But he still thinks it's worth it, if war can be avoided."

"And the younger brother?"

"He's got a different viewpoint. He thinks that, far from standing down, this could be the big chance for Mars to position itself as the main player in the system—over and above the outer giants and what's left of the Inner Worlds Prefecture. That would be good for Mars, but it would be even better for the concern. And exceptionally good for him, if he handles things well. Of course, there'll almost certainly have to be a limited war of some kind. . . but he's ready to pay that price. Willingly, even eagerly. He's never had his brother's chance to test his mettle. He sees the war as his springboard to glory."

"I still don't see why they've come here."

"It's a trick," Fury explained. "The younger brother set this up a long time ago. A season ago—before the dust storms—he drove out to this exact spot and buried a weapon. Now there's no trace that he was ever here. But he's lied to the older brother; told him he's received intelligence concerning a buried capsule containing valuable embargoed technologies. The older brother's agreed to go out with him to examine the spot—it's too sensitive a matter to trust to corporate security."

"He doesn't suspect?"

"Not a thing. He realizes they have differences, but it would never occur to him that his younger brother might be planning to have him killed. He still thinks they'll find common ground."

"Then they're not at all alike."

"For brothers, Mercurio, they could hardly be more different."

The younger brother brought the older one to a halt, signaling with his hand that he had found something. They must have been directly over the burial spot, since the handheld box was now flashing bright red. The younger man fastened the device onto his belt. The older brother bent down onto his knees to start digging, scooping up handfuls of rust-colored dust. The younger brother stood back for a few moments, then knelt down and began his own excavation, a little to the right of where the other man was digging. They had spades with them, clipped to the sides of their backpacks, but they must have decided not to use them until they were certain they'd have to dig down more than a few centimeters.

It wasn't long—no more than ten or twenty seconds—before the younger brother found what he was looking for. He began to uncover a silver tube, buried upright in the dust. The older brother stopped his own digging and looked at what the other man was in the process of uncovering. He began to stand up, presumably to offer assistance.

It was all over quickly. The younger brother tugged the tube from the sand.

It had a handle jutting from the side. He twisted the tube around, dust spilling from the open muzzle at one end. There was a crimson flash. The older brother toppled back into the dust, a fist-sized black wound burned into his chestplate. He rolled slightly and then became still. The weapon had killed him instantly.

The younger brother placed the weapon down and surveyed the scene with hands on hips, for all the world like an artist taking quiet pleasure in work well done. After a few moments he unclipped his spade and started digging. By the time he had finished there was no sign of either the body or the murder weapon. The dust had been disturbed, but it would only take one good storm to cover that, and the two sets of tracks that led from the parked vehicle.

Finished, the younger brother set off home.

Fury turned to me, as the projected images faded away, leaving only the empty reality of the Martian landscape.

"Do I need to spell it out, Mercurio?"

"I don't think so. The younger man became the emperor, I'm assuming?"

"He took Mars into war. Millions of lives were lost—whole communities rendered uninhabitable. But he came out of it very well. Although even he couldn't have seen it at the time, that was the beginning of the Radiant Commonwealth. The new longevity processes allowed him to ride that wave of burgeoning wealth all the way to the stars. Eventually, it turned him into the man I could so easily have killed."

"A good man, trying his best to govern justly."

"But who'd be nothing if he hadn't committed that single, awful crime."

Again, I had no option but to take all of this on faith. "If you hate him so much, why didn't you put a bomb in that bullet?"

"Because I'd rather you did it instead. Haven't you understood yet, Mercurio? This crime touched both of us. We were party to it."

"You're presuming that we even existed back then."

"I know that we did. I remembered, even if you didn't. I said we came from the same production batch, Mercurio. We were the suits. High-autonomy, surface-environment protection units. Fully closed-cycle models with exoskeletal servo-systems, to assist our wearers. We were assembled in the Deimos manufactory complex and sent down to Mars, for use in the settlements."

"I am not a suit," I said, shaking my head. "I never was. I have always been a robot."

"Those suits were robots, to all intents and purposes. Not as clever as you and me, not possessing anything resembling free-will, but still capable of behaving independently. If the user was incapacitated, the suit could still carry him to help. If the user wished, the suit could even go off on its own,

scouting for resources or carrying material. Walkabout mode, that's what they called it. That's how we began, brother. That's how we began and that's how I nearly died."

The truth of it hit me like a cold blast of decompressing air. I wanted to refute every word of it, but the more I struggled to deny him, the more I knew I could never succeed. I had felt my ancient, buried history begin to force its way to the surface from the moment I saw the dust in that bullet; that cryptic inscription.

I had known, even then. I just hadn't been ready to admit it to myself.

Hand in glove, the emperor and I. He'd even said he'd feel naked without me. On some level, that meant he also knew as well. Even if he no longer realized it on a conscious level.

A bodyguard was all I'd ever been. All I ever would be.

"If what you say is true, how did I become the way I am?"

"You were programmed to adapt to your master's movements, to anticipate his needs and energy demands. When he was wearing you, he barely noticed that he was wearing a suit at all. Is it any wonder that he kept you, even as his power accumulated? You were physical protection, but also a kind of talisman, a lucky charm. He had faith in you to keep him alive, Mercurio. So as the years turned into decades and the decades became centuries, he made sure that you never became obsolete. He improved your systems, added layers of sophistication. Eventually you became so complex that you accreted intelligence. By then he wasn't even using you as a suit at all—you'd become his bodyguard, his personal security expert. You were in permanent walkaround mode. He even made you look human."

"And you?" I asked.

"I survived. We were sophisticated units with a high capacity for self-repair. The damage inflicted on me by the weapon was severe—enough to kill my occupant—but not enough to destroy me. After a long while my repair systems activated. I clawed my way out of the grave."

"With a dead man still inside you?"

"Of course," Fury said.

"And then?"

"I said that we were not truly intelligent, Mercurio. In that respect I may not have spoken truthfully. I had no consciousness to speak of; no sense of my own identity. But there was a glimmer of cunning, an animal recognition that something dreadfully wrong had taken place. I also grasped the idea that my existence was now in peril. So I hid. I waited out the storms and the war. In the aftermath, I found a caravan of nomads, refugees from what had once been Vikingville, one of the larger surface communities. They had need of protection, so I offered my services. We were given that kind of autonomy, so that we could continue to remain useful in the fragmented society of a war zone."

"You continued to function as a suit?"

"They had their own. I went walkabout. I became a robot guard."

"And later? You can't have stayed on Julact—Mars—all this time."

"I didn't. I passed from nomadic group to nomadic group, allowing myself to be improved and augmented from time to time. I became steadily more independent and resourceful. Eventually my origin as a suit was completely forgotten, even by those I worked for. Always I kept moving, aware of the crime I had witnessed and the secret I carried with me."

"Inside you?" I asked, just beginning to understand.

"After all this time, he's still with me." Fury nodded, watching me with great attentiveness. "Would you like to see, Mercurio? Would that settle your doubts?"

I felt myself on the threshold of something terrifying, but which I had no choice but to confront. "I don't know."

"Then I'll decide for you." Fury's hand rose to his face. He took hold of the gargoyle mask and pulled it free from the rest of his armored casing.

We were, I realized, almost perfect opposites of each other. I was living flesh wrapped around a core of dead machinery. He was machinery wrapped around a core of dead flesh. As the faceless skull presented itself towards me I saw that there was something inside it, something older than the Radiant Commonwealth itself. Something pale and mummified; something with empty eye sockets and thin lips pulled back from grinning brown teeth.

The face in Fury's hand said: "I didn't ever want to forget, Mercurio. Not until you'd come to me."

It may be difficult to countenance, but by the time I returned to the Great House my resolve was absolute. I knew exactly what I was going to do. I had served the emperor with every fiber of my being for the entire duration of my existence. I had come to love and to admire him, both for his essential humanity and for the wise hand with which he governed the Radiant Commonwealth. He was a good man trying to make a better world for his fellow citizens. If I doubted this, I only had to reflect on the compassion he had shown to the uplift Vratsa, or his distaste at the political methods employed in those parts of the Commonwealth that had not yet submitted to enlightened government.

And yet he had done something unspeakable. Every glorious and noble act that he had ever committed, every kind and honorable deed, was built upon the foundations of a crime. The empire's very existence hinged upon a single evil act.

So what if it happened thirty-two thousand years ago? Did that make it less of a crime than if it had happened ten thousand years ago, or last week? We were not dealing with murky deeds perpetrated by distant ancestors. The man who had murdered his brother was still alive; still in absolute command of his faculties. Knowing what I did, how could I permit him to

live another day without being confronted with the horror of what he had done?

I grappled with these questions during my journey home. But always I came back to the same conclusion.

No crime can go unpunished.

Naturally, I signaled my imminent return long before I reached the Capital Nexus. The emperor was overjoyed to hear that I had survived my trip to Julact, and brimming with anticipation at the news I would bring.

I had no intention of disappointing him.

He was still on the same body as last time—no assassination attempt or accidental injury had befallen him. When he rose from his throne, it was with a sprightliness that belied his apparent age. He seemed, if anything, even younger than when I had departed.

"It's good to have you back, Mercurio."

"Good to be back," I said.

"Do you have. . . news? You were reluctant to speak in detail over the superluminal link."

"I have news," I confirmed.

The body's eyes looked to the cross-shaped seam in the ceiling. "News, doubtless, that would be better discussed in conditions of absolute privacy?"

"Actually," I said, "there'll be no need for that at all."

He looked relieved. "But you do have something for me?"

"Very much so."

"That thing in your hand," he said, his attention snapping to my fingers. "It looks rather like the bullet you showed me before, the one with the inscription."

"That's what it is. Here—you may as well have it now." Without waiting for his response, I tossed the bullet to him. The old body's reflexes were still excellent, for he caught it easily.

"There's no dust in it," he said, peering at the glass-cased tip.

"No, not now."

"Did you find out. . . ?"

"Yes; I located the origin of the dust. And I tracked down the would-be assassin. You have my assurance that you won't be hearing from him again."

"You killed him?"

"No, he's still much as he was."

The ambiguity in my words must have registered with him, because there was an unease in his face. "This isn't quite the outcome I was expecting, Mercurio—if you don't mind my saying. I expected the perpetrator to be brought to justice, or at the very least executed. I expected a body, closure." His eyes sharpened. "Are you quite sure you're all right?"

"I've never felt better, sir."

"I'm. . . troubled."

"There's no need." I extended my hand, beckoning him to leave the throne. "Why don't we take a walk? There's nothing we can't discuss outside."

"You've never encouraged me to talk outside. Something's wrong, Mercurio. You're not your usual self."

I sighed. "Then let me make things clear. We are now deep inside the Great House. Were I to detonate the power plant inside my abdomen, you and I would cease to exist in a flash of light. Although I don't contain antimatter, the resultant fusion blast would easily equal the damage that the assassin could have wrought, if he'd put a bomb inside that bullet. You'll die—not just your puppet, but you, floating above us—and you'll take most of the Great House with you."

He blinked, struggling to process my words. After so many thousands of years of loyal service, I could only imagine how surprising they were.

"You're malfunctioning, Mercurio."

"No. The fact is, I've never functioned as well as I'm functioning at this moment. Since my departure, I've regained access to memory layers I thought lost since the dawn of the empire. And I assure you that I will detonate, unless you comply with my exact demands. Now stand from the throne and walk outside. And don't even think of calling for help, or expecting some security override to protect you. This is my realm you're in now. And I can promise you that there is nothing you can do but obey my every word."

"What are you going to do?"

"Make you pay," I said.

We left the reception chamber. We walked the gilded hallways of the Great House, the emperor walking a few paces ahead of me. We passed officials and servants and mindless servitors. No one said or did anything except bow as their station demanded. All they saw was the emperor and his most trusted aide, going about their business.

We made our way to the koi ponds.

Whispering, I instructed the emperor to kneel in the same place where his earlier body had been killed. The clean-up crew had been thorough and there was no trace of the earlier bloodstain.

"You're going to kill me now," he said, speaking in a frightened hiss.

"Is that what you think?"

"Why bring me here, if not to kill me?"

"I could have killed you already, sir."

"And taken the Great House with you? All those innocent lives? You may be malfunctioning, Mercurio, but I still don't think you'd do something that barbaric."

"Perhaps I would have done it, if I thought justice would be served. But here's the thing. Even if justice would have been served, the greater good of the Radiant Commonwealth most certainly wouldn't have been. Look up, Emperor. Look into that clear blue sky."

He bent his neck, as well as his old body allowed.

"There's an empire out there," I said. "Beyond the force screens and the sentry moons. Beyond the Capital Nexus. A billion teeming worlds, waiting on your every word. Depending on you for wisdom and balance in all things. Counting on your instinct for decency and forgiveness. If you were a bad ruler, this would be easy for me. But you're a good man, and that's the problem. You're a good man who once did something so evil the shadow of it touched you across thirty-two thousand years. You killed your brother, Emperor. You took him out into the Martian wilderness and murdered him in cold blood. And if you hadn't, none of this would ever have happened."

"I didn't have. . ." he began, still in the same harsh whisper. His heart was racing. I could hear it drumming inside his ribs.

"I didn't think I had a brother either. But I was wrong, and so are you. My brother's called Fury. Yours—well, whatever name he had, the only person likely to remember is you. But I doubt that you can, can you? Not after all this time."

He choked—I think it was fear more than sorrow or anguish. He still didn't believe me, and I didn't expect him to. But he did believe that I was capable of killing him, and only a lethal instant away from doing so.

"Whatever you're going to do, do it."

"Do you still have the bullet, sir?"

His eyes flashed childlike terror. "What about the bullet?"

"Show it to me."

He opened his hand, the glass-nosed bullet still pinched between thumb and forefinger.

"There's no bomb in it. I'd see if there was a bomb in it. It's empty now." In his voice was something between relief and dizzy incomprehension.

What could be worse than a bomb?

"No, it's not empty." Gently, I took his hand in mine and guided it until it was poised over the open water of the koi pond. "In a few moments, Emperor, you and I are going to walk back inside the Great House. You'll return to your throne, and I'll return to my duties. I'll always be there for you, from now until the day I stop functioning. There'll never be a moment when I'm not looking after you, protecting you against those who would do you harm. You'll never need to question my loyalty; my unswerving dedication to that task. This. . . incident. . . is something we'll never speak of again. To all intents and purposes, nothing will have changed in our relationship. Ask me about your brother, ask me about mine, and I will feign ignorance. From now until the end of my existence. But I won't ever forget, and neither will you. Now break the glass."

He glanced at me, as if he hadn't quite understood the words. "I'm sorry?"

"Break the glass. It'll shatter easily between your fingers. Break the glass and let the contents drain into the pond. Then get up and walk away."

I stood up, leaving the emperor kneeling by the side of the pathway, his hand extended over the water. I took a few paces in the direction of the Great House. Already I was clearing my mind, readying myself to engage with the many tasks that were my responsibility. Would he get rid of me, or try to have me destroyed? Quite possibly. But the emperor was nothing if not a shrewd man. I had served him well until now. If we could both agree to put this little aberration behind us, there was no reason why we couldn't continue to enjoy a fruitful relationship.

Behind me I heard the tiniest crack. Then sobbing.

I kept on walking.