

# Primary Inversion

Skolian Empire, Book 1

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## **I. Delos**

### **1. Island of Sanctuary**

Although I had known about Delos since I was a young woman, this was my first visit to the planet. Delos is a member of the Allied Worlds of Earth, who steadfastly maintain neutrality in the war between the Traders and my people, the Skolians. Despite the fact that all of us are human—Allieds, Traders, and Skolians alike—we have little in common. So Earth declared Delos a neutral zone, sanctuary, a place where Trader and Skolian soldiers could walk together in harmony.

Harmony was their word, not ours. You'd never have caught one of us walking with a Trader soldier, in harmony or otherwise.

But Delos was the planet easiest to reach from the region of space where my squad had been running flight drills to integrate Taas, our newest member, into the group. So Delos was where we came for our

well-earned rest and relaxation.

The evening was warm as the four of us walked along the Arcade. A hodgepodge of stalls and shops stretched the length of the boardwalk, eaves hung with wooden chimes that clacked in the wind, and with streamers dyed green, yellow, blue, and plump-pod red. At the apex of each turreted roof a pole reached toward the sky. Metal plates hung from the poles, clanking heartily as gusts tossed them against one another, their chatter melding with the voices of the people who strolled among the shops and games. It was a place of festival and laughter, a haven for the bright women in their flutter-yellow skirts, and for the strapping young men in billowing trousers who pursued them.

As we strolled along the boardwalk, its nervoplex surface shifted under our feet, making me grit my teeth. I had never understood why most people liked the stuff. No, that wasn't true. I understood, I just didn't share that fondness. Nervoplex supposedly heightened comfort and pleasure. The network of molecular fibers and nanosized computer chips woven into it reacted to the distribution of weight it experienced, letting the boardwalk analyze and interact with the pedestrian traffic almost as if it sensed their moods.

In an open area on our right, people clustered around a pair of wrestlers in red and green outfits who were putting on a demonstration. As the crowd milled and stamped, the nervoplex rippled in response, magnifying their enjoyment of the show.

The four of us—Rex, Helda, Taas, and myself—walked alone. The boardwalk around us was stiff and motionless. I wished we had civilian clothes. We weren't on duty, after all. But all we had were our Jagernaut uniforms: black pants tucked into black boots, black vests, black jackets. In the bright crowds, our unrelieved black drew attention like rocks falling into water. The river of pedestrians split around us as if they were a waterway parted by boulders. They were mostly Earth citizens, people not likely to have seen even one Jagernaut in person before, let alone four of us.

Rex glanced at me, his handsome face flashing with a wicked grin. "You should start yelling and foaming at the mouth, Soz. That would clear this place out fast."

I glared at him. The "Jagernaut runs amok" plot was a favorite in the holomovies. We were bioengineered fighter pilots, elite officers in the Space Command of Skolia. The prospect that one of us would go crazy and attack everyone in sight had made a lot of holomovie producers annoyingly rich.

"I'll foam your mouth," I grumbled.

Rex smiled. "That sounds interesting."

Helda spoke in her throaty accent. "You remember Garth Byler?"

Rex glanced at her. "He entered the Dieshan Military Academy as a cadet the year I graduated."

Helda nodded. She was as big as Rex, towering over both Taas and me. Her hair hung around her face like honeycorn straw. "He went to a heartbender."

The nervoplex under my feet stiffened. I slowed down, trying to relax. There was no need to tense up; "heartbender" was just the slang we used for the psychiatrists who treated Jagernauts who broke under the strain of a war that had gone beyond the capabilities of normal humans to fight it. But if one of us did snap, and it happened more often than Space Command admitted, we usually did it quietly. Any violence was almost always directed inward, not at other people.

"What happened to him?" Taas asked.

"Went to the hospital," Helda said. "Then he retired."

I rubbed the back of my hand across my forehead, unable to concentrate on the conversation. My pulse and breathing had speeded up, and sweat gathered on my temples, dampening curls of my hair. What was the matter with me?

Then I saw it. Across the Arcade, two people were watching us, a young man and woman dressed in imported jeans and glittery hotshirts. They looked like students, maybe lovers out for a stroll. Neither of them was smiling. They just stood staring at us, their snack-sticks dangling forgotten in their hands.

Tightness constricted around my chest like a metal band. I stopped walking and took a deep breath. *Block*, I thought.

I didn't get the response I expected. All I should have seen when I gave the Block command was a psicon, a small picture similar to the icons on a computer, except that psicons appeared in the mind. It

should have flashed and disappeared. Instead, the image of a computer menu formed in my mind. I closed my eyes and the menu wavered like the afterimage of a bright light on my eyelids. When I opened my eyes, my perception shifted so that I saw the menu hanging in the air in front of me like a holographic image. It showed me three commands:

Transfer

Block

Exit

The letters were in my personal font, which made them look as if they were carved out of amber. Next to the word Block I saw the picture of a neural synapse with a wall between the axon and dendrite. That picture was the Block psicon I had expected to flash in my mind. Instead it sat here, floating in the air, part of a big menu waiting for my attention. Rex and Helda had stopped next to me and were talking to each other, oblivious to the list of words I saw superimposed on them.

The people from Earth had a good saying for times like this. Frigging rockets. Better yet, flaming frigging rockets. What was this menu doing, hanging in the air? No, that was the wrong question. I knew why it was there. The computer node implanted in my spine had produced it when I sent a command by thinking the word Block. It accessed my optic nerve to make the menu appear in front of me.

Except it shouldn't have happened. I had set up my systems to bypass this procedure. It was far too inefficient—not to mention distracting—to go through the whole process every time I gave a command to my spinal node. The only response I should have seen to my Block command was the flash of the synapse-and-wall psicon letting me know the node was working.

I just thought of the computer in my spine as “the node.” I named most computers I worked with, but not this one. It would have been too much like calling myself by someone else's name, as if I were doubling or splitting my personality.

I formed another thought for the node. *Switch to Brief mode.*

Its response came into my mind as if it were my own thought, but phrased in the node's usual bone-dry verbiage. Recommend Verification mode. Too much time has passed since you last confirmed blocking operations.

So. It wanted to run a check. I knew the routine; the node would show me every step it followed to execute my Block command. Usually the process went at close to the speed of light, which was the limit to how fast signals could travel along the fiberoptic threads in my body. But right now it wanted me to plod through the whole excruciating routine to make sure there were no errors in it.

*All right, I thought. Do the check.*

The menu faded. Then the node produced a new image. This one also hung in the air like a holo, a blue silhouette of the two students who were still staring at us. The node overlaid the silhouette on them so that they looked as if they were glowing with blue light.

Input from these two sources exceeds safety tolerances, the node thought.

*I know that.* For an empath like myself, their “input” was their fear: I felt it so intensely that sweat had formed on my temples and was running down my neck.

Block their input, I thought.

I am releasing a drug that will inhibit the action of psiamine on the neurons in the para centers of your brain, including attachment to P1 receptors. Inhibition will continue until external input drops below your default safety tolerances.

I grimaced. Can't you just say you're blocking them?

I am blocking them, the node obliged.

The onslaught of fear receded. As my shoulders relaxed and my heart beat slowed, I thought, *Procedure verified. Now switch to Brief mode.*

Brief mode entered.

Finally. I glanced around at the others. Taas was standing next to me, staring at the turreted roof of a stall. The students' fear radiated off him like heat off a red-hot ingot.

I laid my hand on his arm. “Shut them out.”

He didn't move. His face was pale under its usual olive color.

“That’s an order,” I said. “Initiate blocking.”

Taas jerked. Then he closed his eyes. After a moment he looked at me, his color returning.

“You all right?” I asked.

“Yes.” He winced. “It was so intense. They caught me off guard.”

“Me too.”

Rex glanced from me to Taas. Then he turned to the students and I felt him block their input. Although I couldn’t pick up Helda as easily, her brief glazed look told me she too had accessed her spinal node. None of them took more than an instant to do the block; apparently their nodes weren’t harassing them with verification procedures today.

Well, maybe harassing wasn’t a fair word. After all, I was the one who had told it to warn me when too long went by without a check.

Taas spoke in a low voice. “I don’t know why I slipped up like that.”

“It’s this damn nervoplex.” I motioned at the boardwalk. “It interacts with the crowd like a mood enhancer.” Taas and I were more sensitive to the effect, he because he was the least experienced member of the squad and I because I was the strongest empath.

Helda motioned toward the students. “Why do those two over there get so upset? What do they think we do to them, anyway?”

Rex turned back to us, speaking in a strangely quiet voice. “I get tired of evoking that reaction.” He pushed his hand through his hair, mussing up the black locks. No, not black. More and more white showed at his temple every day.

But now what was this? Why did Taas have that odd smile? “What’s so funny?” I asked.

He flushed. “Ma’am?”

“Why are you grinning like that?”

He immediately stopped smiling. “Nothing, ma’am.”

I laughed. “Taas, you don’t need to say ma’am.” In a group as tightly knit as ours, it made no sense to be so formal. “What was funny?”

He hesitated, then motioned toward the students. “That boy had a different reaction to you than he did to the rest of us.”

“Different?” I blinked. “How?”

“He thinks you’re—uh ...”

I waited. “Yes?”

Taas reddened. “He thinks you’re sexy.”

I felt my own face flush. “I’m old enough to be his mother.”

Helda laughed. “Ya, but you look like a youngster, Soz.”

I smiled. “I do not.” In truth, she wasn’t the first to tell me that.

Rex grinned, and I felt Taas relax. Our group tension trickled away. As Rex started to speak, his gaze shifted to a point beyond me—and his smile vanished like a door slamming shut. I turned to look.

Traders.

Of course they didn’t call themselves Traders. They were Eubians, members of the euphemistically named Eube Concord. There were five of them, all dressed in gray uniforms with blue piping on the pants and crimson braid on the sleeves. Although it was hard to make out the color of their eyes from this far away, I didn’t think any of them had the red eyes of an Aristo, a member of the highest caste in the rigid hierarchy of the Concord. One of them did have an Aristo’s finely chiseled features, the black hair, even the arrogant stance. And his hair glinted. But it didn’t have that liquid shimmering quality so distinctive of an Aristo.

Perhaps they were an Aristo’s bodyguards. It was one of the more prestigious positions allowed members of the lower Trader castes. My guess was that they were taskmakers, children born from the pairing of an Aristo with a lower caste Trader.

They stood across the Arcade staring at us. The crowds continued about their business, bustling along the boardwalk between our group and the Traders.

An odd fear grabbed me, one with a nurturing intensity that, though appealing, wasn’t familiar. As my

pulse leapt, I looked around and saw a woman hurrying several children away from the area. She glanced at the Traders, then at us, then urged her charges to speed up. The smallest boy balked, trying to head for a stall where sugar candles hung on a wire, the inviting treats dripping sugar instead of wax. The woman pulled him away, ignoring his loud protests as she hurried him through the crowd.

Taas scowled at the Traders. "They can't just come here and walk around."

"What, you want them to get a license?" Helda asked. Then she added, "We're harmonizing, remember?"

"They could be spying," Taas offered.

Rex was watching me. "What's wrong?"

I swallowed. "That tall one. He looks like Tarque."

Rex stiffened. "Tarque is dead."

Long dead. Ten years dead. I had killed him.

"Who is Tarque?" Helda asked. "It sounds Aristo."

Somehow I kept my voice steady. "It is."

Rex nudged my mind. After years of working together he and I were close enough so that I could catch his thoughts if he directed them at me with enough force.

Are you all right? he asked.

I took a breath, struggling to keep my pulse steady. *Yes.*

"Where you know this Tarque?" Helda asked me.

"I went undercover on Tams Station ten years ago."

"Tams?" Taas asked. "You mean the Trader planet?"

I nodded. "I got—caught."

"They broke your cover?" he asked.

"No. I don't mean caught that way." It was a moment before I could continue. "Ten years ago the Traders installed an Aristo governor on Tams, a man called Kryx Tarque. His people were making sweeps through the cities, selecting servers for his estates."

"Server" was the generic term the Aristos used for lower castes, which as far as they were concerned included everyone in the universe who wasn't an Aristo. "I got caught in a sweep."

Taas stared at me. "You've been a Trader *servant!*"

"No." I spoke with a calmness I didn't feel. "A provider."

Taas blanched, and Helda's muscles bunched up along her shoulders, making her jacket shift position. "Provider" was one of the Aristos' euphemisms, one I never wanted to think about again.

Helda rolled her shoulders like a fighter trying to ease out knotted muscles. "How you escape?"

I just shook my head. I couldn't talk about it. Across the Arcade, the Traders were talking among themselves, still watching us.

Taas spoke awkwardly. "I'm sorry, Primary Valdoria. About Tams."

I tried to make my voice light. "Taas, call me Soz, all right?" I had told him that so many times I had lost count.

He reddened. "Yes, ma'am."

Helda's thought brushed my mind, far weaker than I had felt from Rex: *I also am sorry.* Then, more lightly: *Give Taas time. You scare the bejeebs out of him.*

Taas blinked. *Bejeebs?*

Rex sent them a mental grin. *Is that living or inanimate?*

I tried to smile. I knew Rex was trying to defuse the tension. And I should have been pleased; it was the first time Taas had succeeded in linking with us without help from the hardware in our ships. But I couldn't stop staring at the Traders. They started to walk again, keeping watch on us as they moved away into the crowds.

"Looks like we bore them," Helda said.

Taas shifted his feet back and forth like a ball player waiting for his opponent to make a move. "We can't just let them walk away."

"What justification would you give for doing anything else?" I asked.

“They’re Traders,” Taas said. “Isn’t that enough?”

I tilted my head toward the Allied police officers who had gathered in the area, their blue and silver uniforms easy to spot among the crowds. “I doubt they would agree.”

Taas scowled. “If it wasn’t for us, the Traders would have taken over their Allied Worlds a long time ago. They should be grateful we’re here.”

“If it wasn’t for the Traders keeping us occupied,” I said, “we might have taken over their Allied Worlds a long time ago.”

Taas’s forehead creased. “Don’t you hate the Traders?” He hesitated. “Especially after—”

“Brawling in the street won’t serve any purpose,” I said. “It also happens to be illegal here.”

Helda shrugged at Taas. “We have better ways to occupy our time, hoiya. I would like a drink, myself.”

I had never quite figured out what *hoiya* meant in Helda’s language, but I thought it was something like “sweet young one.” Taas had *yet* to realize it was more than a nonsense word she threw into her sentences. It was going to be interesting to see her try to explain herself when he realized she was calling him a sweet boy.

Rex grinned. “Heya, Helda, hoiya, you want to get drunk?”

“Hoiya yourself,” Helda grumbled. But then she smiled. “Maybe a few drinks, heh?”

“I wouldn’t mind a drink,” I said. A strong one, the kind that obliterated memories.

Night had been pressing down on the sunset for over an hour, darkening the reddish-purple streak of sky along the horizon. A day here lasted sixty-two hours, making the sunset go on and on as if it resisted giving up the light. The Arcade was even more crowded now, people taking advantage of the respite from the heat. With thirty hours of sunlight a day, it was usually only cool enough outside for humans to be comfortable during the evening, night and dawn hours.

Overhead the sky was a deep violet. The Delos sun emitted more purple light than average for human habitable planets and the thin atmosphere scattered it less. It gave a purple tinge to the sky as if we were high in the mountains instead of at sea level. Clouds streaked the horizon, their lower edges rimmed with a brilliant pink that deepened as the sunset withdrew behind the Arcade roofs.

We walked through the twilight along a line of bars. Holograms lit up the dusk: a shocking pink flower suspended over a door, gilded insects flying in ellipses, a cluster of blue-green planets orbiting close to a blue giant star that in reality could never have supported such a solar system. Hologram screens also sided most of the bars, spawning holos everywhere, so that poles of light rotated between buildings, swirling with gaudy purple and red stripes, and arches of light spanned the roofs. Scampering animals sparked and popped like firecrackers as they ran up and down the sides of buildings, or morphed into different species.

Music jangled at us, raucous tunes mixing with seductive melodies. Sounds jumped out as we approached and receded into the general buzz after we had passed. Hawkers called out from doorways, using a slew of languages. The ones I understood were trying to entice customers with promises of liquor and smoke-sticks, and seeds of the oilweed plant that could set you to dreaming, or to making love for hours. The smell of cooking meat and spices filled the air.

I couldn’t read most of the holograms. Pulling down a translation menu in my mind, I overlaid it on an elegant sign that said CONSTANTINIDES.

Translate, I thought.

Greek, the node answered. Translation: Constantinides.

“That helps a lot,” I muttered.

“Where you want to go?” Helda asked.

I pointed to a rusty building. One pole topped its roof with a few desultory circles that clanked in the wind. The hologram above the door was in English, which was the only language I had seen among the bars so far that I could read without a translator.

“JACK’S PLACE,” I said.

Rex peered at the bar. “It sounds vintage Earth.”

Helda snorted. “It look vintage wreck.”

“Come on, Helda.” Rex laughed. “Be brave.”

“Why you want to go to this place?” she demanded.

“Because,” Rex said, “it looks like it has authentic old Earth atmosphere.”

“This is good thing to have?” Helda asked.

I smiled. “Let’s give it a try and see.”

So we went in, pushing open the door under the sign. Inside, a counter stretched along one wall, its black top pitted with age. Stools lined the counter, each upholstered in a red material that shone from use. Tables covered by red and white cloths filled the room. A man stood behind the counter polishing a glass, stains showing on his cloth and on the white apron tied across his big stomach.

A band was playing on a raised stage in one corner. The instruments were unfamiliar: gourd-shaped boxes with strings pulled tight across the box, gold horns with handles that moved in and out, fat drums. The music had a compelling rhythm, mixing in a sensual blend of sound that made me want to dance with the young man who was singing. Garish cartoon holos flickered in front of the panels that lined the stage.

A woman in a short skirt was waiting on the tables. Taas watched her with a smile. “I like this place,” he said.

Rex grinned his agreement. “Let’s sit at a table.”

Helda smiled at Taas and tilted her head at the waitress. “Nice, hmm? But we better not fight. Save that for Traders. I’m too much bigger than you anyway.”

Taas blinked at her. “What?”

“She doesn’t want to fight you for the waitress,” I said.

“Why would Helda and I fight over the waitress?”

I shrugged. “Beats me.” I was no judge of beauty in women. Now in men, that was different. But to me the waitress just looked like a too-young girl in a too-tight skirt. The thing had *to* be cutting off her circulation.

Rex laughed. “Maybe the three of us should offer ourselves and let her pick.”

I smiled. “What makes you think she’d pick any of you?”

“The three of us?” Taas asked.

Helda leaned toward him. “Me, you, Rex. Got it?”

Taas turned bright red. “You like women? Not men?”

“Of course,” Helda said.

“Oh.” Taas scratched his chin. “Well, you may be bigger than me, but I have more style.”

The waitress came over and spoke shyly to Rex in English. “Would you like a table?”

Rex answered in Skolian, giving her his wicked grin. “I have no idea what you’re saying, but it sounds beautiful.”

“She wants to know if we like tables,” I said. Whatever that meant. I pulled down my translation menu. It hung superimposed over the waitress, who was looking from me to Taas to Helda. I knew I probably had the same glazed expression I saw on their faces.

Waiting, my spinal node prompted.

Rex smiled at the waitress. “They’re meditating,” he said in Skolian.

She blinked at him, then looked around for someone who could help her.

*Translate ‘We would like to have drinks and food,’ I thought.*

The waitress spoke to Rex. “What can I do for you?” The Skolian translation of her words came into my thoughts, interfering with my attempt to translate what I wanted to say into English. Meanwhile the waitress was turning redder and redder.

“Pah,” I muttered. My spinal node was optimized for combat, not translation. Maybe I should have that diplomacy mod added after all. It would augment my social skills and upgrade my language capability. But my spinal node was loaded to capacity with combat mods and libraries, and I had no intention of removing even one. My life might someday depend on it. I didn’t want to enlarge the node again, either. My biomech system had reached the limit of what was considered safe even with state-of-the-art bioengineering technology.

Besides, it wouldn’t hurt me to practice my English without a computer “whispering” in my ear.

*Program end*, I thought. As the menu vanished, I spoke to the waitress in the best English I could muster without help. “Is okay there we sit?” I motioned at a booth next to the far wall.

“Certainly.” The red color receded from her face, and my own cheeks cooled. She glanced at Helda and Taas, who both looked normal again, and her shoulders lowered slightly. The muscles in my shoulders relaxed as well.

She took some big cards from a nearby table and headed for the booth. When we followed her, she looked back at Rex and blushed again.

Following her glance to Rex, I noticed how tightly the pants of his uniform fit. They clung to his well-muscled legs like supple black leather, menacing and sexy at the same time. And those big hands. How did they feel when they—

“Why are you staring at me?” Rex asked.

“What?” I flushed. “I wasn’t.” *Block*, I thought. As the *Block* psicon flashed in my mind, the waitress’s reaction to Rex receded in my thoughts. His pants looked normal again. Well, almost normal. She was right; it was sexy the way they fit him. I had never noticed it before, at least not consciously.

“Always,” Helda muttered as we walked to the booth. “Always they want him.”

“You mean Rex?” Taas asked.

“Ya. Always.” She tilted her head at me. “The boys always want her.”

I laughed. “I seem to remember a few of them wanted Rex too.”

At the sound of my laugh, the waitress jumped like a skittercolt. She stopped at the booth and fumbled with the cards she had brought, dropping them onto the scratched tabletop. Then she stood blinking at us. So we all stopped and watched her, waiting to see what she would do next. After a moment she turned pink again.

“She wants us to sit down,” Taas decided.

“So let’s sit.” Rex squeezed past her, putting his hand on her tiny waist in the process. Her face went from pink to bright crimson. Then the rest of us sat down.

The waitress spoke to Rex. “Would you like a drink?”

He answered in Skolian. “That voice of yours makes me want to hold you all night.”

“If you get bored with him,” Helda added, “you can have us.” She motioned at Taas, who sat across the table. “Me and him. He’s got style, I’ve got muscles.”

“Excuse me?” the waitress asked in English.

“Leave her alone,” I said. I picked up one of the cards she had put on the table. The heading on it was made from clear tubes filled with a fluorescent yellow gas. *JACK’S PLACE*, it announced. Projection holos floated above speckled patches on the card, each 3D image displaying a dish of food. When I turned the card, the holos showed different views of their offerings.

My translation program gave “synthetic meat sandwich” as the meaning of *Hamburger*. I tried *Hot dog* and got “synthetic meat sandwich.” When *Beef Bliss* came up as “synthetic meat sandwich,” I gave up. Didn’t Jack serve anything else? I looked at the others. “What do you want?”

“Ale is fine,” Rex said. Helda and Taas nodded agreement.

I spoke to the waitress in English. “You ale do?”

She peered at me. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“Ale,” I repeated. “Got any?”

“You mean beer?”

I squinted at her. “I think.”

“Dark or light?”

What did that mean? “Any kind. You prick.” No, that wasn’t right. She was turning red again. I made another try. “You pick.” I waved my hand at the others. “Four beers.”

“All right.” And off she went, but not before she gave Rex another one of her shy smiles.

Across the room, the door opened. A group came into the bar—and this time when my shoulders went rigid it was my own reaction, not anyone else’s.

Traders. There were six of them now, the five we had seen earlier plus a man they were guarding. A man with shimmering black hair and red eyes.



Aristo.

As soon as they saw us, the Traders stopped. We all stared at one another. The bartender quit polishing his glass and set it under the counter.

*Don't you hate them?* Taas had asked. Hate was too mild a word. I saw the Aristo and my brain felt hot with my memories of Tarque, the Aristo governor on Tams. Three weeks of torture. This Aristo stared at me with his perfect ruby eyes, his perfect black hair shimmering and his perfect body relaxed. I wanted to break every perfect bone in his perfect face.

Steady, I told myself. Steady.

One of the Aristo's bodyguards leaned toward him and spoke. I didn't need to be a telepath to know he suggested they find a bar with a higher class of clientele. But the Aristo shook his head. Then he settled down on a stool at the counter.

"I can't just sit here and watch them drink." Taas was crumpling his menu in his hands. "I can't do it."

Rex nodded. "Let's go."

Helda stood up.

"Sit down," I said.

They all stared at me. Then Helda sat.

I felt Rex nudge at my mind, but I kept the door closed. My thoughts about Traders were private, even from Rex. To say I had no desire to stay at the bar now was the understatement of the century. It was also irrelevant. "Aristos don't come to Delos for vacations," I said. "He must be here for a reason. Our job is to find it out."

A muscle in Rex's cheek jerked. He had had that twitch ever since he saw what Tarque did to me on Tams, saw me so rigid with shock and fear that I couldn't speak.

Helda fingered her belt where her holster normally hung. But none of us were armed with more than small hidden knives. Even without a diplomacy mod, I knew how threatening it would have looked for us to stroll along the Delos boardwalk with Jumbler guns on our hips.

Neither had the Traders been armed when we had seen them earlier. But now they had someone to protect, someone apparently high enough in their social hierarchy that it compelled them to carry burn-lasers, complete with powerpacks clipped to their belts.

"Just watch them," I said. "See if you can pick up anything."

The waitress reappeared at our table and set a drink in front of me, a glass filled with amber liquid. I didn't know much about Earth distillation processes, but I knew liquor. What she gave me wasn't ale, it was rum.

My English must have been even worse than I realized. I shook my head at her. "We beer have." I motioned at the others. "Beer. For all."

She swallowed. "It's a—" Her voice squeaked. "The man—he ordered it for you."

"What man?"

She nodded toward the Aristo. "Him."

I stared at her. Then I gave her back the glass of rum. I had to make a conscious effort to keep myself from shoving it back in her hands so fast that it spilled.

Rex stood up and took the glass from her. He slipped his hand under her elbow and walked her to the bar, where he set down the rum. Then he drew her to the back of the room and took her out a door that I guessed led to the kitchen. I understood why he wanted her out of sight; if she was having the same effect on the Aristo that she had made on our group, she could be in trouble.

But the Aristo hadn't even glanced at her. I was the one he was watching. I felt like bugs were crawling on my skin.

Taas was twisting his menu, making the holes distort into weird mishmashes of color. "What do you want us to do?"

"Note everything you can about them," I said. "What they're wearing, how they sit, how they move, how they speak. Store it in your memory and back it up. We'll feed it into the Net later and see what we come up with."

Helda motioned toward some hologames in a corner of the room. "From there I get a different view."

I nodded. "Go."

Across the room, the musicians finished their song. They stood on the stage and looked at the Traders, then at us, then at one another. The drummer said something to a horn player, and a sudden urge to *get out of here* made the muscles in my legs contract as if I were preparing to run. I had to make a conscious effort to sit still.

Then again, maybe sitting wasn't the best choice. The stage had a good view of the Trader group.

"I can keep this side of the room covered," Taas said.

"Good." I smiled slightly. "I think I'll go for some music appreciation."

As I walked across the room, I felt the Aristo watching me. When I reached the stage I spoke to the singer, a man with dark hair. "Can you a song play?"

"What would you like?" he asked.

"You pick."

He nodded, but I had a feeling that what he really wanted was for all of us to leave, both my squad and the Traders. I didn't blame him.

The band started to play again, a slower piece with a sweet melody. The man sang in a well-trained baritone. Had the situation been different, I would have enjoyed it.

I watched the Trader group with my peripheral vision. So I saw it when the Aristo stood up and came toward me. As he neared, I turned to face him.

He stopped in front of me and spoke in perfect, albeit accented, Skolian. "It's pleasant, isn't it?" The accent was Aristo, pure Aristo from the elite Highton caste, the aristocracy of the aristocracy, the overlords in the Aristo hierarchy.

It was all I could do to keep from pulling out the knife hidden in my boot. "What do you want?"

"To meet you."

"Why?"

He hesitated. "I meant no offense."

That didn't fit. I had met many Aristos, usually over long-range communication but also in person during the sporadic and consistently failed attempts at peace we and the Traders had made. They always spoke with arrogance, often outright scorn. This one seemed to have missed his training in how to act superior.

But his guards missed nothing. They stood in formation by the bar with their guns drawn, looking ready to detonate. The Aristo must have ordered them to stay put; otherwise they would have never let a Jagernaut talk to him alone. *Block*, I thought. Their hostility receded, but the Block psicon kept flashing in my mind, warning that my systems couldn't keep out the full onslaught of their emotions. To do so would have required my brain to release so much of the drug that inhibited the psi specific receptors on my neurons that it would have interfered with my ability to think.

Jack's other patrons had either left or moved to the back of the bar. Rex was back, holding a massive knife he must have taken from the kitchen. Taas and Helda also had knives out, smaller ones like the blade I wore in my boot. There were five Traders with lasers and only four of us with knives, but we had an advantage; the Aristo was easily within my reach. His perfect self would make a perfect hostage.

"Why do you want to meet me?" I asked him.

"It's your hair." His expression brightened. "I've never seen anything like it."

I stiffened. Tarque had told me the same thing. My hair was black and curly, a little more than shoulder length. But about two thirds of the way down it shaded into a dark wine color and at the ends it turned gold. It had fascinated Tarque. Was this Aristo also looking for providers? He was young, not much more than twenty, but that was more than old enough. Aristos usually took their first providers when they reached puberty.

But something about him didn't fit. I couldn't figure it. The chiseled features of his face had the look of a Highton. His accent fit perfectly, his stance fit perfectly, his voice fit perfectly. Yet something was *wrong*.

"What do you want with my hair?" I asked.

"It's pretty." He shook his head. "You're so beautiful. Why do you want to be a soldier?"

In my mind I saw that image again, the one that haunted my memories: Tarque raising his long finger to point at me. *That one. I want that one.*

I had to struggle to keep my voice even. “And I suppose you would be happy to show me my other options in life, right?”

He smiled. “Perhaps for this one evening? This is Delos after all. Here we can, at least for one night, meet each other as friends.”

Right, I thought. Aristos socialized only with their own caste. Period. Their only use for the rest of us was as objects for barter. Did he really think I would walk off into the night with him? I’d never see my freedom again.

“No thanks,” I said. “I’m busy tonight.”

He looked disappointed but unsurprised. “Perhaps someday.”

Then he bowed and walked back to his group. As I watched, his guards closed around him and hurried him out the door.

It wasn’t until they were gone that his bow fully registered on me. Aristos only did that with each other, as a sign of respect. None I knew would be caught dead bowing to one of us.

Rex came over to me, still holding his monster knife. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” I said.

“What did he want?”

I spread my hands. “He was trying to pick me up.”

Rex tensed. “Did he threaten you?”

“No. Not at all. I’ve never heard an Aristo like him. He sounded normal. Very polite.”

Helda and Taas came up on my other side. “You think it was a trick?” Helda asked.

“I don’t know.” I exhaled. “But if I hadn’t had experience with Traders, he might have convinced me to go with him.”

“We should warn the Arcade police,” Taas said. “Before he does get someone around here to go off with him.”

I nodded. Taas was right, of course. But somehow I didn’t think the Aristo would talk to anyone else. Something about him didn’t fit, it just didn’t fit at all.

## 2. Tams Station

The city of Athens bordered the north and east sides of the Arcade. I had no idea why the Allies called the place Athens; it was as ugly as its ancient namesake on Earth was reputed to be beautiful. They had laid it out in squares delineated by nervoplex streets and lit by boxy lamp posts. As Rex and I walked along the darkening roads, hovercars hummed by us, their cushions of air exciting the black nervoplex into rippling patterns that bounced back and forth between the curbs. Maybe the people who lived here liked the effect, but it gave me a headache.

The police station was a one-story building chromed with the same blue and silver colors worn by the Arcade police. We entered a lobby with a counter on its far side. As we crossed the room, a holocam tracked our movements from its perch in a corner of the ceiling.

A woman with graying hair greeted us at the counter. “Boro na sas voetheso?” she said.

Translate, I thought.

Greek, my spinal node responded. Translation: May I help you?

The woman looked from Rex to me, her gaze darting over our uniforms, then back to our faces. She repeated her question, her voice higher in pitch this time. What did we want, coming in here dressed like that—

*Block*, I thought. The psicon flashed and I stopped feeling like a criminal.

*Translate ‘We would like to make a report’ into Greek*, I thought. As my spinal node provided the translation, I spoke haltingly, copying the words as exactly as I could manage. But it didn’t sound much like the way the node had pronounced it.

“Ti?” the woman asked. The spinal node translated it: What?

I pushed my hand through my hair. “Skolian?”

She shook her head. “Okhi Skolian.”

No Skolian, the node translated.

“English?” I asked.

“Okhi English.”

How do I say ‘interpreter’ in Greek?, I thought.

Diermeneas, the node answered.

I regarded the woman. “Diermeneas? Skolian. Diermeneas.”

“Epanalabete?” she asked. The spinal node gave that one as Say again?

I gave it another try. “Diermeneas.”

“Ah.” The furrow lines in her forehead smoothed out. She motioned for us to follow her.

She took us to a small room with a table surrounded by nervoplex chairs. Three of the walls were blank, but the fourth had a large pane of opaque glass. I suspected the glass was transparent when viewed from the other side; the place looked like an interrogation room.

After the woman left, Rex scowled at the chairs.

I smiled. You don’t like the decor?

*He grimaced. It’s hard enough muting people’s reactions without having it multiplied by what we sit in.*

I brushed my finger over the nervoplex back of a chair and it stiffened in response. In truth, it could do no more than react to our muscle tension. Empaths tended to interact with nervoplex, stiffening when it tried to relax our muscles, relaxing when it tensed up. It set up a feedback loop that intensified whatever we were feeling. So really it only multiplied our own emotions. But Jagernauts were like sponges; other people’s feelings became ours. Even the most disciplined of us, soldiers who showed no response at all to most observers, experienced minute changes in posture and muscle tension when we picked up emotions.

The door opened and a young man came into the room. He walked over to Rex and smiled, extending his hand. “My pleasure at your company,” he said in perfect Skolian. “I am Tiller Smith.”

Rex blinked at him, then looked at me.

Put your hand in his and move it up and down, I thought.

Rex grasped Tiller’s hand and pumped it vigorously. “Gracias,” he said, using one of the few Earth words he knew.

Tiller winced, and extricated his hand from Rex’s clutch. “Mrs. Karpozilos said you wanted to report a crime.”

*Why is he talking to me? Rex thought. Can’t he tell that you outrank me?*

*Maybe he doesn’t know our military protocol.* Aloud, I said, “Not a crime. We’re hoping to prevent one.”

Tiller glanced at me, reddened, and looked away. He peered at the arms of Rex’s jacket, then at mine, then at Rex’s again. Finally he said, “I’m sorry—I’ve never really worked as an interpreter before. I’m just a handyman here. I—well, I’m not sure how to do this.” He spread his hands. “I can’t even read your identifications.”

Identifications? I looked down at my jacket. The only markings on the black material were a line of silver studs, and of course the gold band around each of my upper arms that denoted my rank. Rex’s jacket was identical except that he had two narrower bands on each of his arms. Did Tiller mean our ranks?

“I’m Sauscony Valdoria, Primary.” I motioned at Rex. “Rex Blackstone, Secondary.”

Tiller gaped at me. “*You’re an Imperial Admiral?*”

“Primary. It’s not the same thing.”

“But isn’t Primary another word for Admiral?”

“The rank is similar,” I said. “But it’s not the same. Primaries are Jagernauts. Only Jagernauts.”

“Cyberfighters.” Excitement leapt in Tiller’s voice. “Telepathic computers, yes? I studied about you in—Ah!” He hit his head with his palm. “I digress. You didn’t come here to be questioned by me. My

apologies.”

“That’s all right,” I said. It was actually rather nice to meet someone who didn’t wish we would go away.

He motioned to the chairs. “Shall we sit?”

Rex and I looked at each other. Neither of us made any move to sit. After a moment Tiller said, “I have a better idea. Why don’t you come to my office? I have some great armchairs there.” He glanced at the nervoplex seats and added, “Mine have cloth upholstery.”

“All right,” I said.

Tiller’s “office” was a cubbyhole between a restroom and a closet. Shelves lined the walls, crammed with holobooks and old-style texts with paper pages. Equipment was everywhere: optical tools, dismantled holoscreens, parts of computer consoles, jacks for human/computer interfaces, pieces of burn-lasers. The clutter covered every available surface and hung from anything that remotely resembled a hook. A faint odor of oil hung in the air. The promised armchairs were buried under boxes of hologram film.

“Here.” Tiller cleared off three chairs, transferring the boxes to his already crowded desk.

I chose a chair with a worn covering that crackled when I sat down. Rex settled into a green chair. When Tiller pulled up his seat, we made a small circle. He pulled a slender rod out of his pocket and tapped it against his knee. The rod hummed, then unrolled into a flexible screen that lay in his lap. Dark letters appeared, suspended about a millimeter above the screen. A holocam icon glowed in one corner, which I guessed meant he was also making a visual recording.

“Okay.” As Tiller spoke, his words formed above the screen. “Tell me what happened.”

“A Trader Aristo is visiting the Arcade,” I said.

Tiller stiffened. “And?”

I considered him for a moment. “Do you know why we call the Eubians by the name Traders?”

He nodded. “I know—knew—someone who was on a ship captured by a Eubian Huntercraft. His family has been trying to find him for six years now. The authorities say he’s probably been sold to an Aristo.”

“I’m sorry.” I knew their chances of rescuing his friend were nil. “We think that may be why the Aristo is here. To find providers.”

As Tiller’s hand tightened on the arm of his chair, my own knuckles started to ache. “You think he’s planning to kidnap someone?” Tiller asked.

Rex rubbed his hands together, massaging the knuckles. “It’s possible.”

“I don’t understand,” Tiller said. “Why would an Aristo come to Delos for that?”

“Providers have to be empaths,” Rex said. “And empaths are rare, particularly among the Traders. He might have thought he had a better chance of finding one here.”

“Empaths?” Tiller spoke carefully. “The official Allied position is that they don’t exist.”

Rex shrugged. “That’s your problem.”

Tiller held up his hands. “I didn’t say we all thought that. Just that the experts aren’t yet officially convinced true empaths exist.”

I wondered how an official conviction differed from an unofficial one. “An entire range exists, from simple empaths all the way up to those who can sometimes pick up the thoughts that go with the emotions.”

A surge of excitement made my stomach feel like shimmerflies danced in it. In the same instant Tiller said, “You mean telepathy, yes? Are you—?” He stopped himself. “I don’t mean to pry. It’s just that I’ve never met telepaths before. I mean, you have to be, right? If you’re Jagernauts?”

I couldn’t help but smile. I liked Tiller. Most people wanted to be as far from us as possible, fearing we would violate their privacy, or worse. I had heard fabulous talents attributed to Jagernauts, everything from moving mountains to adjusting the future. In truth the best we could do was catch unusually intense thoughts, and even that was difficult unless the sender was also a strong enough empath to send thoughts as well as emotions.

“A Jagernaut has to rate five or above on the scale,” Rex said.

“Scale?” Tiller asked.

“The Kyle Empathic Reception and Expression Scale,” I said. “Most people just call it the psi scale. It measures an empath’s strength. The scale is inverse exponential, so higher numbers are rare. Ninety-nine percent of all humans are between zero and two. Only one in every hundred thousand is above five. What most people call telepaths are six or above.”

Tiller looked from Rex to me. “And you’re both sixes?”

Neither Rex nor I answered. After a moment, Tiller said, “What’s wrong?”

“What would you do,” I asked, “if I asked you how many times you made love last night?”

He reddened, and suddenly I felt mortified, as if I had peeked into his bedroom. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t realize it was so private.”

“I rate as a ten,” Rex said.

I stared at him. What had possessed him to reveal that? I knew the ratings for my squad: Taas was seven, Helda six. At ten, Rex was that one-in-ten-billion telepath. But knowing their ratings was part of my job as squad leader. I doubted Rex had told Taas yet, maybe not even Helda.

Tiller looked at me—and I caught it. Feedback. He was feeding my surprise back to me.

*Are you getting it too? Rex thought. I was trying to draw him out.*

You could ask him, I thought.

Too personal.

*I think he wants to know. And he seems more comfortable with you.*

Rex considered that. Then he spoke to Tiller. “How long have you known you were an empath?”

“What?” Tiller turned red. “I never claimed—”

“You’re in a feedback loop with us,” Rex said. “You’re picking up our emotions and sending them back to us.”

Tiller gaped at us. “You’re *kidding*.”

“Not at all,” I said. “Didn’t you know?”

“Of course not.” He paused. “Well, I mean, I’ve always suspected, at least I thought—but you don’t go around saying things like that. People would laugh at you.”

A breathless feeling came over me, like fear and hope mixed up together. It was an odd sensation, pleasant in a way but also foreign. At that exact moment Tiller said, “You really think I could be an empath?”

Rex smiled, the lines around his eyes crinkling. “You ought to get tested.”

“I’ve thought of it. That’s why I spent so much time learning Skolian. But I can’t afford passage to a Skolian world.” He looked from me to Rex. “I’m probably fooling myself, anyway. I mean, I just don’t see any evidence I’m different.”

“It’s not something you see,” Rex said. “It’s your brain.”

“There’s something wrong with my brain?”

“Not wrong,” I said. Though I supposed that depended on your point of view. “It contains two extra organs.”

Tiller laughed. “In my skull? There’s no room.”

I smiled. “They’re microscopic. More people have them than realize it. The Kyle afferent body and the Kyle efferent body. The KAB receives input and the KEB sends it.”

“What input?” Tiller asked.

“When you think, neurons fire in your brain,” Rex said. “My KAB picks that up.”

“Why?” Tiller asked. “How does it know my neurons fired?”

“The molecules in your brain are described by a quantum probability distribution—”

“Wait.” Tiller put up a hand to stop him. “I don’t understand quantum.”

“Imagine an invisible hill centered on your brain,” Rex said. “That’s the probability distribution. Its ‘foothills’ fan out in all directions. They *get* smaller so fast that they’ve dropped to almost nothing a few hundred meters away from you. The closer you are to me, the better they overlap my brain. When you think, it changes the shape of those hills and my KAB picks that up.”

Tiller considered him. “So why doesn’t this quantum hill overlap everyone?”

"It does," Rex said. "But without a KAB, a person has no way to read it. The more intense your feelings the more molecular sites they stimulate on my KAB. The KAB then sends messages to neural structures in my brain called para centers. Only empaths have them. My paras interpret that input as your emotions."

"And the KEB?" Tiller asked.

"Amplifier," I said. "It increases the range and intensity of the signal you send to other empaths, so much so that they may even be able to decode your thoughts from it. KEB sends. KAB receives."

Tiller grinned. "No wonder I'm so slow. With all this extra business going on, I never have time for just thinking."

Rex laughed. "Actually, the increased number of brain cells in your cortex may make you more intelligent than average."

"Not me," Tiller said. "Not compared to my siblings. My sister is a math genius and my brother is a philosopher."

"Don't underestimate yourself," Rex said. "The traits are hereditary."

"That's the strange part." Tiller spread his hands. "My parents are just average types. They're as surprised as everyone else by their children."

"The genes are recessive," I said. "Maybe they carry them unpaired, like a blue-eyed person with brown-eyed parents. With psions, we know now that hundreds of genes determine the traits."

"If you know which do the trick," Tiller said, "why not just engineer a race of super-telepaths?"

"It's been tried." My grandmother had been "born" that way. "But the genes are linked to lethal recessives. Even if the fetus survives, its brain is often abnormal. The Skolian Convention was written to discourage governments from engineering psions."

Tiller tilted his head. "I thought it was written as a protest against the formation of the Trader's Aristo government."

A bead of sweat rolled down my neck. "It was."

"The Aristos were created in the Rhon project," Rex said. "Rhon was trying to engineer humans with a high resistance to pain. The Project's other purpose was to select for empathy."

"Rhon?" Tiller sat up straighter. "You mean like the *Skolian* government?"

"No," Rex said.

"Your government isn't called the Rhon?"

Soz? Rex thought. Do you want me to stop?

I tried to relax. No. *Go ahead.*

"Our government is called the Assembly," Rex said. "It's a council of the heads of state from the leading Skolian worlds."

"Then what's Rhon?"

"He was a geneticist," Rex said. "The word is also used now for the few remaining descendents of a human dynasty that ruled on the planet Raylicon five thousand years ago."

"And that dynasty predates your modern government?" Tiller said.

"That's right," I said. "Six thousand years ago an unknown race took humans from Mesoamerica on Earth, seeded the planet Raylicon with them, and then disappeared."

"Why?" Tiller asked.

I shrugged. "We haven't figured it out yet." I didn't think the Allies had yet recovered from that shock. In Earth's twenty-first century, when she finally sent her emissaries to the stars, they got one hell of a jolt. We were already here. We and the Allies had rapidly absorbed each other's cultures and DNA, until now, less than two centuries later, it was hard to believe we had been separated for millennia. But the differences were still there, running deep under the surface. It would be a long time before we stopped being wary of each other.

Rex leaned forward. "The humans stranded on Raylicon developed space flight and went looking for Earth. But they never found it. Their fragile civilization rose—and fell—during your Stone Age." He paused. "It wasn't until four centuries ago that we finally moved out to the stars again. Rhon began his studies then. He worked with the descendents of the Raylican dynasty trying to bring back the empathic

traits that had made them legendary. That's why people call the few of them living now 'the Rhon.' It refers to their psi rating. When Rhon finished with them, their ratings were too high to quantify."

"I had always assumed Rhon was their name," Tiller said.

Rex shook his head. "Their family name is Skolia. That's why the Imperialate is the Skolian Imperialate." He glanced at me. "Though not all of the Skolias use their name in everyday life."

Tiller considered us. "So Rhon selected for empathy and got Skolians, and he selected for pain resistance and got Aristos? I still don't get it. What do Aristos want with empaths?"

"Aristos have a KAB, but no KEB or paras," I said. "And their KAB is abnormal. It detects only emotions caused by pain. But they can't interpret that input. Their thalamus tries to decrease their sensitivity to it by relaying the data to the pleasure centers of their brain. It triggers an orgasm." I gritted my teeth. "They're a bunch of sadists. They get off on torturing people."

"But why empaths?" Tiller persisted.

A fan in the wall whirred erratically, with a hiccup that grated on my nerves. I was having trouble breathing. "We send stronger signals." I couldn't keep my voice steady any longer. "We—provide for them. The stronger the empath—the stronger the link—and the more the Aristo—enjoys ..." My fists clenched and my words balled up into knots.

Tiller waited. But neither Rex nor I continued. Tiller shifted in his seat. Finally he peered at his screen and traced his finger through a winged icon on it. "I've sent a copy of your report to the chief." He regarded me uneasily. "But unless this Aristo breaks a law, we can't do much."

I nodded. It was up to them what they did with the warning. But we had given it.

We headed to the lobby after we left Tiller's office, but I stopped before we had walked even a few meters. "Rex, I'll meet you at the inn."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just forgot to tell Tiller something."

He touched my cheek. "Soz ..."

"I'm all right. Really."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

He brushed a curl of hair out of my eyes. Then he spoke gently. "I'll see you later, yes?"

Why was he looking at me with that strange, tender look? "Of course." It wasn't like I was going anywhere.

I found Tiller's door still open. He was sitting on the edge of his desk reading a book.

"Tiller?" I said.

He looked up, his pleased surprise lightening my mood like a gust of cool air on a sweltering day. "Did you forget something?"

"No." I came over to him. "I thought you wanted me to come back."

He winced. "Am I that easy to read?"

I smiled. "Only to another empath."

"I was just thinking—" His voice gentled. "It took a lot for you to do what you did, coming here like this."

"All we did was talk."

He spoke softly. "Something hurt you somehow, and our talk stirred it up."

I stiffened. "I'm fine."

"I wanted to say thanks, that's all." Tiller pointed to the notebook on his armchair. "And for that too. With a record of two high-ranking Imperial military officers saying I'm an empath, I may be able to convince a grant committee at the university to take me seriously, maybe even sponsor me to *get* testing."

"Well. Good." I didn't know what else to say. I was used to people going in the other direction when I came around. *Thanks* wasn't a word I'd had much experience dealing with.

"Here." Tiller handed me his book.

I held it awkwardly, wondering what he wanted me to do with it. The book was old style, bound in soft cloth the color of ivory, with parchment pages inside instead of a holocomp screen. My translator



gave the title as *Verses on a Windowpane*, written in English.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

He smiled. “Keep it. As a thank-you gift.”

A gift? This Allied citizen who didn’t know me was giving me a gift simply for talking to him. For some reason my eyes felt wet. *Block*, I thought. But the psicon didn’t flash.

Night was folding its cooling darkness around the city when I headed back to the hotel. I took the speedwalks that bordered the streets, avoiding the nervoplex. I didn’t want to feel what it would tell me about myself. I already knew. I had lied to Rex and Tiller. I wasn’t fine. My mind had started to replay that scene again, the one I so wanted to forget, the one that had lived on in my nightmares for so many years.

I had been walking along a dirt path that day on Tams ten years ago, for all appearances a normal citizen going about my business. The flycar hummed by me, then stopped and backed up. In slow motion, I saw it happen again and again; Kryx Tarque, the Aristo governor of Tams, leaning out to look at me, lifting his long finger while his lips formed words: *That one. I want that one.*

That one. Me. Sauscony Valdoria. He wanted that one.

I ran. But there was no way even a Jagernaut could escape six soldiers plus an armed Aristo in a flycar. When they caught me, I faced a decision that still haunted my memories: *Should I fight?* I wanted to hurt them the way I knew Tarque planned to hurt me. But it would give away my military training. They would know they had someone far more interesting than a simple Tams citizen. They would investigate until they discovered my identity, not only my military rank but also the civilian title I carried. Unless I waited until the odds were better, I would have no chance of escaping.

So I fought like a frightened civilian instead of a Jagernaut. Tarque found it amusing. He took me to his estate in the hills above the city, holding me prisoner for three weeks. It was late into a long Tams night, midway between sunset and dawn, when I finally worked free of the restraints he had used to bind my wrists to the bed.

Then I strangled him.

Rex was the one who found me that night, after I fled the house. He had been searching for me, desperately trying to infiltrate the estate. He caught me when I was running blindly across a field, my mind still screaming from the aftershocks of the pain. He held me tight, so tight, as if he feared I would vanish if his grip loosened even the slightest bit. His voice shook as he told me, over and over *again*, I would be all right, I would be all right, I would be all right.

But I wasn’t all right. Tarque had been the antithesis of an empath, a human being with a mental cavity where his capacity for compassion should have been. Sadist and empath, parasite and host: his mind was the negative of mine. When he concentrated on me, I fell into his emptiness, filling it for him, connecting us in a bond he craved even more than orgasm. He spoke in soft, loving murmurs while I screamed and screamed and screamed ...

We left Tams that night. I spent only a few days in the hospital; Tarnth hadn’t wanted his provider scarred, so my physical wounds were minor. But the doctors told me to see a heartbender. When I didn’t go, my CO ordered it. So I went and told the heartbender what she wanted to hear; I am, after all, an empath. In her report she said I would be all right, that all I needed was time to heal.

As for my true feelings about what happened—those were my business. Not my CO’s, not the heartbender’s, not anyone’s.

### 3. Psibernaut

The hallway outside Rex’s room was carpeted with a rug so thick that it muffled my footfalls like a wine-red cloud. The lustrous red paneling on the walls was real wood. Next to Rex’s door, a pager showed a palm-sized relief of a man with the tail of a fish. He was rising up in a spume of water, huge glistening drops of water spraying about his head and a trident held high in his hand. When I touched the pager, the door chimed softly, like bells heard through the whisper of sea waves lapping on a shore.

Rex’s voice came over a hidden speaker. “Come.”

I laid my palm against the door and it swung open, revealing a room paneled in the same sinfully luxuriant wood as the hallway. A carpet covered the floor like burgundy velvet. The only light came from a lamp with a rose-hued glass shade. Rex sat in the middle of the bed, cross-legged on its wine-red cover, his head bent over his work. He was cleaning his Jumbler. Sections of the gun lay all around him on the bed, the black metal gleaming in the dusky light.

“Planning to shoot someone?” I asked.

He glanced up as I closed the door. “You’re the one who insists we clean the pugging things so often.”

I sat on the bed next to him. “I set up a guest account on the Inn’s system. We can upload our data on the Traders as soon as Taas and Helda get back from dinner.”

Rex nodded, still bent over his weapon. He was polishing the ejector that fit into the accelerator dees inside the main body of the Jumbler.

“I expected you to be out with that girl from the bar,” I said.

He finished the ejector and went to work on the hand grip. “She’s young.”

“I thought you liked your women that way.”

He kept polishing. “I guess I’m just tired tonight.”

I wondered at his mood. He seemed so subdued. Could it have been what happened in the bar? But that made no sense; knowing Rex, seeing an Aristo would have wound him up. Something else was bothering him. I nudged his mind but he blocked me out, keeping his mental doors closed.

“Rex.” I laid my hand on the grip, stopping his movements. “What’s wrong?”

He looked up at me. For a moment he just watched my face. Then he said, “I’m going to retire.”

“What?”

He exhaled. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while now. I’ll be forty-seven soon. All of the other officers who were cadets in *my* class at DMA have retired by now.” Neither of us said what he left out: *or else died*.

“You can’t retire.” I tried not to remember he had been a year behind me at the Dieshan Military Academy. “I need you.”

He pushed his hand through his graying hair. “I’m not like you, Soz. I can’t put off getting old.” He exhaled. “I’ve had enough. I want to go home, have a family, dig in the garden.”

“You can have a family now.” I was talking too fast. “You don’t have to retire to do that. And you can dig holes in the ground wherever you want. I’ll get you a special hole-digging commission.” He wasn’t *old*. He wasn’t any older than me. All right, yes, my genetics gave me a potential lifespan twice the human average. But nowadays most humans lived well into their second century. Rex had plenty of time.

Rex smiled, but it was like this strange mood he had tonight, gentle instead of wild. Then he really went over the cliff. He slid his hand around my neck, drew my head closer to his—and kissed me.

“Hey.” My protest came out muffled around his lips. “What are you doing?”

He pulled back and smiled. “Kissing you.”

“What for?”

“Well, let me see. Maybe it’s a new way of checking the weather.”

“Very funny. Why are you acting so strange?”

He spoke quietly. “Soz, I want you to marry me.”

Flaming rockets. “You drank too much at the bar.”

“I didn’t drink anything. We never got our ale.”

He had gone crazy. I didn’t know how to respond. “I can’t marry you. It’s against regulations.” Good reasons existed for the ban on fraternization. It compromised the ability of the people involved to carry out their duties. It happened anyway, despite regulations, but it often ended in disaster. If I married Rex, there was no way I could send him into battle. I would spend the whole time obsessing on the fact that he might get hurt. Or worse.

Except he wanted to retire.

“I don’t want to retire,” I said. I wasn’t actually sure if that were true, but for the moment it would

do.

"I'm not asking you to," Rex said.

So. He wasn't giving me an out. Did I want an out? I tried to untangle my thoughts. Could I see Rex as a husband? He had been my closest friend for fifteen years, my confidant, someone I could always rely on. He was like a brother. In fact, I was closer to him than to most of my many brothers.

"I don't get it," I said. "What happened to all these women you have pining for you all over the galaxy?"

"You're evading my question."

"What do you want to marry me for?"

He made an exasperated noise. "Because I have a fetish for women with the romantic instincts of a cork."

I couldn't help but smile. "Then I guess we're compatible."

"Sauscony, I'm serious about this."

If he was calling me Sauscony, he had to be serious. No one called me Sauscony but my parents. "I would hate it if you left me."

"Why would I do that?"

Could I say it? Sixteen years had passed, time enough to dull the pain. "My first husband did."

His voice quieted. "I didn't know you had been married more than once."

"Twice." My second husband had died a few years ago, not long after we had married. But I couldn't think about that now. Maybe not ever.

"Why did he leave?" Rex asked.

"It's a boring story. You don't want to hear it."

Rex stroked a curl away from my face. "Tell me."

It was a moment before I spoke. "He hated what I did for a living. He was afraid I would die. He asked me to quit."

"I thought you couldn't quit."

I stiffened. "I'm not indentured. I can retire if I want."

"But if you do, don't you lose your position in the Emperor's line of succession?"

I wanted to say *so what?* I had never asked to be born into the remnant of a dynasty that was three thousand years dead. Right now the title of Emperor belonged to my half brother Kurj. "Technically Kurj has no heirs in his line of succession. He's my mother's only child by her first husband and he has no children of his own." No legitimate children, anyway.

"I thought he chose you to follow him."

I shrugged. "I have seven full brothers and two full sisters. He could have chosen any of us. Hell, he could make my mother his heir if he wanted."

Rex gave me his wicked grin. "No one would fight. They'd all be in love, too busy trying to look at her to think about going to war."

I scowled at him. "Only a man would say that."

He laughed. "I don't know about that. Helda might."

I had to smile. In truth, I couldn't imagine my mother as a war leader either. She was a superb diplomat and a lovely ballet dancer, but the military was a foreign language to her.

Before I married anyone, though, I had to sort out how I felt about my heritage. I brought up my thoughts on it like a game player setting up a board. There were three main pieces: the Emperor, the Assembly Key, and the Web Key. Or, more popularly, the Fist, the Mind, and the Heart of Skolia. The Triad. As Emperor, my half brother Kurj commanded the Skolian military. My aunt presided over the Assembly. For her heir, she had chosen my mother. My father was the third side of the Triad, Key to the Web, a title that for him was primarily ceremonial.

I knew my mother had married my father because he was a Rhon psion, which meant he could provide Rhon heirs. Kurj hated him, this man who had become his stepfather when he was half Kurj's age. If I married Rex, what would it be like for him? The fact that he wasn't Rhon could make his position among *my* family even less comfortable than my father's.

But was that a fair comparison? When my parents met, my father had been living on a primitive world. His people were the remains of a colony established by the ancient Raylican starfarers and then isolated for thousands of years after the decline of that fragile civilization. Over the millennia, his people had backslid so far that they no longer had electricity, steam power, or even a written language. Marriage to my mother had yanked him from that simple culture into the Byzantine morass of Rhon politics.

Rex was far more experienced in Imperial intrigues, perhaps more so even than myself. My parents raised us on my father's world, hoping to spare us the fierce machinations of Skolian politics. They hadn't foreseen the consequences. Only I and a few of my brothers had managed to adapt to life away from the simplicity of our home, and it hadn't been easy for any of us.

In Kurj's unforgiving view of the universe, any children produced by my father were flawed. But we were still his best candidates for an heir.

"Kurj needs a military heir," I finally said. "Someone who understands Space Command."

"You."

"No."

"But I thought—"

"He chose three heirs. Me, and the two of my brothers who became Jagernauts."

"Why three? Only one of you can be Emperor."

I gritted my teeth. "That's right."

Rex stared at me. After a moment he spoke in a quiet voice. "The one who survives."

"Yes. Only two of us are left now." The muscles in my shoulders bunched up under my jacket. "Kurj knows I can't stay on active duty forever. And I've proven myself for over a quarter of a century. But sixteen years ago it was different."

"That was when your husband wanted you to quit?"

I nodded. "If I had quit when Jato asked me to, then yes, you're right, it would have meant abdicating any claim I had to become Emperor."

Rex made an incredulous noise. "What did this Jato expect when he married an Imperial heir?"

I looked down at my hands. "I got pregnant. I didn't know. I was injured in battle and lost the child." I made myself look at Rex. "It was just too much. Jato stayed with me until I recovered. Then he left."

"Soz," Rex murmured. He tried to put his arms around me, but I held back. I'd always wondered if my brother knew how much Jato and I had wanted a child. But that was another item hidden in my mental file of things not to think about.

"You ought to know I wouldn't leave you," Rex said. "I don't expect you to retire."

I turned the idea over in my mind like a child with a newlyminted coin. Kurj couldn't keep me in combat forever. With my rank and experience it made more sense to have me behind a desk now, planning strategy. If he killed off all of his heirs, he wasn't likely to get more any time soon, at least not as adults. None of my other siblings were remotely qualified.

Rex was a good man, I'd known that since I first met him. He was also a potent telepath, probably the strongest I would ever find. He wasn't Rhon, but I couldn't spend the rest of my life looking for that one-in-a-trillion person whose mind matched my own.

The only time I had ever shared my mind with another Rhon psion had been an accident; usually only lovers had close enough ties to make that bond. But once, when my younger brother Kelric was seven and I sixteen, we went hiking. A storm caught us, pale blue sleet raging down from the sky. We took shelter in a spine-cave hidden among the cliffs of the Backbone Mountains. As Kelric and I huddled in the cave, clinging together for warmth, our minds merged.

It lasted only a few hours, the most fulfilling link I had ever made with another human being. And it never happened again; the bond was too intimate to share with a brother. But neither of us forgot. After that day, I knew I would search everywhere to find a Rhon mate.

Except there weren't any. In all the studies trying to engineer a healthy Rhon psion, my grandmother had been the only real success. In the generations since her birth, on a thousand plus worlds and a billion different peoples, we knew of only two people who had been born naturally—and survived—with the full complement of Rhon genes: my father and my grandfather. The rest of us, fourteen in all, were their

descendents.

“Soz?” Rex touched *my* cheek. “Where are you?”

I looked at him, really *looked* at him in a way I had never done before. This was the man who had been at my side for fifteen years, gone into combat with me, laughed with me, mourned with me. We had traveled together across Skolia, both on duty and off, learning to know each other with an intimacy that had nothing to do with sex. Could I lie with him as wife? The answer was easy, now that I considered it. The only surprise was that it had taken me so long to realize it.

I smiled. “Who else would want me inflicted on him for the rest of his life?”

“What were you planning on inflicting?”

“My sense of humor.”

Rex grimaced. “I’ll try to endure it.”

“Yes.”

“Yes?” He tilted his head. “Yes, what?”

“Let’s do it.”

“Do what?”

“You know. The thing.”

“What thing?”

“You know.”

He put his hands on either side of my head and mussed up my hair. “Say it.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Go on.” He was laughing now.

I scowled at him. “Keep this up and I’ll change my mind.”

“I don’t know, Soz. If you can’t say it, how can I believe you’ll do it?”

“All *right*. I’ll marry you. Satisfied?”

He stopped grinning and spoke in that strange gentle voice he had been using tonight. “Yes.”

So. It didn’t feel so strange after all, now that it was said. I touched his chest, sliding my hand across the black sweater he wore under his jacket. He pulled me down with him on the bed, lying on his back as he wrapped his arms around me.

“I can send my Notification of Intent tonight over the Net,” he said. “I’ll give my resignation when we get back to Headquarters City.”

Notification of Intent. It was so odd to hear it from Rex. But his timing made sense. After our rest here we would return to Headquarters to pick up orders for our next mission. Rex had waited until he knew we would no longer be going into combat together. I could love him now. I never had to send him into battle again.

A beep came from the console by the bed. “Damn,” Rex muttered. He stretched his arm across the bed and touched the Respond panel on the console. “What?”

Helda’s voice came out of the speaker. “Ya, Rex. You know where is Soz?”

“I’m right here,” I said. “We’ll meet you at my room.”

Both Helda and Taas were waiting outside my door when we arrived. Helda gave me an odd look. I couldn’t tell what she picked up, but she must have sensed something. It had all changed. I would never see Rex in the same way again.

The pager by my door showed a dark-haired woman standing on the rocky shore of an island. She stood looking out at me, a quiver full of arrows strapped on her back and a beautiful curving bow in her hand.

I put my finger against the waves that lapped up on the beach below the woman. A flash of light came from inside the pager as a laser played over my finger. It only took an instant for it to produce an interference pattern from the ridges of my fingerprint and correlate it with the one made by the inn’s computer. Then my door swung open.

After the sensual ambience in Rex’s room, mine felt much too cool. The walls were a polished blue-green ceramic, with frothy accents as if waves played across them. The computer console was built into a rolltop desk by the bed. Its horizontal surface was a hologram screen and the vertical section

supported the console controls. The labels on the controls were in six languages, including Skolian.

I sat down at the console and touched the panel marked with the picture of a doorway. "Access my guest account. Then connect me to the Skol-Net."

"Hello, Primary Valdoria." The computer spoke in Skolian. "Homer here. Welcome to the Aegean Inn. I am pleased to access your account." After a pause it said, "I'm setting up the Skol-Net link now. Please excuse the delay."

"Hoy, that's a *polite* computer," Helda said.

I smiled. Allied computers tended to be friendlier than nodes on the Skol-Net, Skolia's massive computer network. We had chosen this hotel because it equipped its consoles with psiphons, which few Allied establishments bothered to do. I opened a cubicle in the desk and took the psiphon out of its cradle. It was a simple model, no more than a transparent, double-tipped prong connected to the console by a thread.

When I clicked the prong into the socket on the inside of my wrist, my arm tingled. I knew, logically, that those tingles weren't real. But every time I plugged in a psiphon I imagined I felt them.

The words ATTEMPTING CONNECTION appeared on a small screen set into the desk.

"Looks like it's working," Taas said.

"So far." The fact that Homer responded to the psiphon with written instead of verbal replies made me doubt the Allies had spent much time setting it up.

I rubbed my hand up and down my arm, a habit I had picked up years ago. Many Jagernauts did it. My thoughts of the biomech web in my body worried at my mind like an animal caught in a trap. The web had four parts: fiberoptic threads; sockets in my wrists, spine, neck and ankles; the spinal node; and bio-electrodes.

The fiberoptics had been bioengineered into my body. Homer sent signals to one tip of the psiphon, which passed them to a thread in my wrist. From there, they traveled along threads to my brain or spinal node. Nano-sized electrodes in my brain cells translated the 1's and 0's of that input into thought by making my neurons fire. If an electrode received a 1 it gave the neuron a brief, tiny shock; if it received a 0, it left the neuron alone. Similarly, they translated my thoughts into binary output. Bioshells coated the electrodes, and neurotrophic chemicals kept them from damaging my brain cells. My web sent messages back to Homer via the second tip of the psiphon prong.

Given the complicated nature of the operations to implant a biomech web, and the years it took to learn to use it *if* the host body didn't reject it—not to mention the required security clearances—few people had them.

Another message appeared on the screen: PSIPHON ACTIVATED.

"Slow," Helda muttered.

"Allied equipment," Taas said, as if that explained it.

*Test*, I thought.

The word TEST appeared under Homer's last message.

PARAMETERS? Homer printed. His response showed in red on the screen, mine were blue. The message didn't echo in my mind at all.

Verify spinal node link, I thought.

The words VERIFY SIBLING appeared on the screen.

Rex laughed. "Whose sibling are you verifying?"

"It's not translating right." *Run diagnostic on psiphon*, I thought. The words RUN DIAGONAL DEEPENING glowed on the screen.

please restate command, Homer printed.

I tried verbal. "Run a diagnostic on the psiphon."

"Running," Homer said. Then: "I found no problems."

I swore under my breath. If the psiphon wasn't the problem, it had to be my biomech web. And that was no easy fix. It could mean surgery.

I pulled the prong out of my wrist and peered at it. A thin layer of dust covered the head. I rolled it gently between my fingers, clean-ing off the dust, and plugged it back in.

Verify spinal node connection, I thought.  
verify spinal node connection appeared on the screen.  
VERIFIED, Homer responded.

I exhaled. *Good.*

I have A link to the skol-net NOW, Homer printed, if you  
GIVE ME AN ACCOUNT AND PASSWORDS, I WILL BE PLEASED TO LOG YOU INTO  
THE SYSTEM.

*That isn't necessary.* I pressed a panel on the console marked with the Greek letter.

The words DENIED glowed on the screen.

"Denied?" Taas asked. "What does that mean?"

*Homer, I thought. Why can't I enter the psiber gateway?*

I can't translate "gateway" in this context, Homer printed.

*I want to use the psiber functions of the psiphon.*

THEY AREN'T ENABLED.

Helda snorted. "Why they have psiphons if they don't set them up right?"

"Maybe they don't know how," I said. Homer, can you enable the psiber functions ?

I DON'T KNOW. WHAT DO THEY DO?

*The psiphon should be able to boost my mind into psiberspace.*

THE ONLY TRANSLATION I HAVE FOR PSIBERSPACE IS "HYPO-THETICAL  
COMPUTER NETWORK."

"Pah," Helda muttered.

It's not hypothetical, I thought. It exists.

WHERE?

It's outside of spacetime. Information there is transmitted in wavepackets of thought rather than by photons or matter particles.

IF IT HAS NO SPATIAL LOCATION, HOW CAN I FIND IT?

It exists everywhere, I thought. The other nodes can receive our input immediately no matter where they're located.

Homer paused. ACCORDING TO MY PHYSICS LIBRARY, THIS REQUIRES  
INSTANTANEOUS TRANSMISSION OF DATA ACROSS INTERSTELLAR DISTANCES.

*That's right.*

THAT VIOLATES THE LAWS OF SPACETIME.

*Psiberspace isn't in spacetime.*

I CANNOT ACCESS SOMETHING OUTSIDE OF SPACE AND TIME.

I tried to think of an explanation Homer's Evolving Intelligence would understand. In normal space, if I had two particles and I measured the quantum properties of one, I immediately knew those of the second no matter how far away it was. In psiberspace, the "measured" property was thought; as fast as a telepath could form a thought, every user in the star-spanning Skol-Net could receive it.

Despite the Allies' skepticism about psibernetics, what they called "pseudo-psience," they had to realize the Skol-Net was the sole reason my people survived against the Eubians. The Trader inventories of military personnel and equipment dwarfed ours, but we could outmaneuver, outcommunicate, and outcalculate them. They lumbered; we sailed.

The Aristos had no psiber abilities. Their providers did, but they refused to acknowledge that providers could do anything but provide. Still, I wouldn't have been surprised if either they or the Allies had tried to build a Skol-Net and failed. It needed a Rhon telepath to power it and no member of my family would ever consent to do that for them.

That was why my family still held so much power in an age of modern politics. No machine could connect directly into the Net. The only way to link in hardware was through the minds of its users. And just as one computer needed a central processor, so the Skol-Net with its billions of nodes needed a Rhon psion to maintain it as a coherent web. Only we had the immense mental resources for that job. Without my family there was no Skol-Net and without the Net there was no Skolian Imperiate.

Homer, try this, I thought. Hail node PS42.mil on the Skol-Net. When you get the 'Restricted' message, transfer to me. Perhaps I could find a backdoor our intelligence people had snuck into the Allied systems.

HAILING, Homer printed. Then: transferring link.

A new computer accessed my mind, crisp and cold: Identification.

*Access my spinal node, I thought. Mod 16, path 0001HA9RS.*

Accessed. Clearance verified.

My awareness of the room faded. I floated in a pearly sea, my mind centered at one node of a glimmering mesh that spread out in all directions. Flashes of light sparked on the web as other minds navigated across it.

I was a quantum wavepacket now, a round "hill" surrounded by circular ridges, like the waves made by dropping a rock in a pond. The ripples extended out in the infinite "lake" of psiberspace, becoming smaller and smaller the farther they were from the peak that was the center of my identity.

A spark of light flashed, resolving into another wavepacket. It rippled right through me without a trace of interference.

Security check, I thought.

All lines secured, PS42 thought. You are undetectable to users with clearance lower than Forty-seven: Level B.

*Transfer me to IMIN.*

The mound sank into the net. Then I was in a new section of the grid, the center of my identity shifted to a small ripple. It swelled, forming a hill, and the ripples around it shifted until they were rings concentric with the new center for my identity.

The web here glittered like metal. Sharp clicks accompanied the sparks that jumped into focus around me and then disappeared.

A mound appeared, growing into a cobalt mountain of polished metal. It emanated cold. Imperial Intelligence A5a.mil. Unauthorized access of this node is punishable by execution.

Clearance in M-16, D-30A5a, F-037, I answered.

Clearance verified. State purpose.

To use Comtrace.

This time I shifted to a white net in a sea of painfully bright light. Comtrace, access my optic nerve. Alter my perception display to highlight my physical surroundings.

Comtrace's response came into my mind like ice. Done.

My awareness of psiberspace faded until it was no more than a translucent image overlaid on my view of the room. I saw Rex again, leaning over me to look at the console. Helda stood next to him, waiting with her massive arms crossed, and Taas was sitting on the bed glancing through the book Tiller had given me at the police station. None of my interactions with the Net showed on the screen: the printing had stopped with my last response to Homer.

Activate audio, I thought.

"Audio activated." Although Comtrace spoke using the inn's computer, the icy cadence of its speech made a jarring contrast to Homer's friendly tones.

Taas looked up from the book. "Set up?"

I nodded. "I'm giving it my file on the Aristo." *Comtrace, unload the data in M-86, D-4427, F-1.*

Uploaded.

*I'm going to detach the psiphons. Do not break the link.*

Understood.

I unplugged the prong and handed it to Rex. "You next."

It only took him a few seconds to upload his memory of the Aristo. Helda went next, then Taas. When they finished, I jacked back into Homer. "Comtrace, produce a visual image of the subject based on our memories of him."

"Working," Comtrace said. The holoscreen on the desk lit up, lines and speckled patterns swirling inside of it. An image appeared, a holo about twenty-five centimeters high that showed the Aristo we had



seen in the bar. He stood on the desk in front of me as if he were actually there, watching us.

“He wasn’t that harsh,” Rex said.

The console remained quiet, the holo unchanged.

Comtrace, I thought. Verify and respond to voice input from the three units listed in my Zabo squad security file.

Blackstone, Rex: verifying. Bjorstad, Heldagaard: verifying. Moroto, Taasko-mar: verifying. Responding to Blackstone.

Hearing their names was like seeing a microcosm of Skolia. Rex’s was the modern translation of an ancient name from the planet Raylicon. Like Rex, it was pure Raylican, dark and powerful. Helda’s was the Skolianized version of an Earth name; her parents were an Allied couple who had immigrated to a Skolian colony. Taas’s name was a mix: some of his family came from Raylicon, some from old colonies we found after we rediscovered spaceflight, and some from a place on Earth called Japan. My name—Valdoria Skolia—was also a mix. Although my maternal grandmother had been born in a genetics lab, her lineage went back to the dynasty that had long ago ruled Raylicon. My father and maternal grandfather had come from rediscovered colonies, but since they carried the Rhon genes they too were probably descendants of that dynasty.

Units verified, Comtrace thought. Responding to Blackstone.

The Aristo’s features softened, making him look sixteen years old.

“Too young,” Taas said. Comtrace aged the man about three years.

“Still too young,” Helda said. Comtrace added another three years.

“Longer hair,” Helda said. Comtrace added a few inches.

They studied the image for a while. Finally Rex said, “Looks about right.” Taas and Helda nodded their agreement.

“Comtrace, run an ID check on this image,” I said. “Compare it to every file available on the current Highton Aristo caste.”

“Working.” After a pause Comtrace said, “No record exists that matches this image with sufficient accuracy to provide a verifiable identification.”

I frowned. “You checked every living Highton?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe we don’t have files on all of them,” Taas said.

“We thought we did,” I said. “There are only a few hundred.”

“We maybe guess the wrong class,” Helda said.

Could we have? Although the Hightons were uppermost among the Eubians, there were other Aristo classes as well, enough to bring their combined number into several thousand. “Comtrace, what do you estimate is the probability this man is a Highton?”

“Working.”

I glanced at Rex and motioned at the holo of the Aristo. “Something about him looks familiar. I just can’t place it.”

Rex nodded. “I thought so too.”

But when I looked at Helda and Taas, they both shook their heads. “He has the look of Aristo,” Helda said. “That’s all I see.”

“Run complete,” Comtrace said. “Based on your four reports of appearance, mannerisms, speech and retinue, I estimate a ninety-eight percent probability that the man is Highton. Based on your conversation with him, Primary Valdoria, I estimate an eight percent chance.”

Rex whistled. “That’s bizarre.”

“But that eight percent depends only on my memory of him,” I said. “Maybe my perception was skewed.”

“Given your experiences,” Rex said, “I would hardly think your perception would skew to make him seem *less* threatening.”

Comtrace spoke. “My analysis includes correlations of your reports with all previous reports the four of you have made on Aristos, the consistency of those reports with other files on the same Aristos, all

reports made on Aristos by other officers, the consistency of those reports with one another for the same Aristo, and the consistency of your reports on other matters as compared with the consistency of other officers' reports. Based on my calculations, I estimate a ninety-five percent accuracy to your observations."

I smiled. "You've been a busy computer."

"Can it figure out why the Aristo is here?" Taas asked.

"I estimate a one in two probability that he wants an unusual provider," Comtrace said. "Probability one in three he was curious about Delos, one in eleven he is spying on the Allies, one in sixteen that his ship needed repairs."

"You think he was trying to trick me into going with him?" I asked.

"Probability one in four hundred fifty. Your military status was obvious. To believe you would be deceived by such a trick would require a naivete unlikely to be found in an Aristo."

"What do you think is the chance he told the truth, that he just wanted a date with me?"

"Probability one in seven thousand." Comtrace paused. "If he is searching for providers, I calculate a ninety-three percent probability he was practicing on you."

It sounded plausible, given the data. Except I didn't believe it. I had no justification for my doubt, but it persisted just the same.

Rex leaned over the console. "Why such a low probability for his being a spy?"

"It is considered beneath the station of a Highton to engage in covert operations," Comtrace said. "Unless those operations relate directly to the acquisition of political power. Given the close proximity of Delos to Tams Station and the current crisis on Tams, a Highton might come here to discover if the Allies have any connection to the situation. Such information could prove useful in political maneuvers."

So. It was ironic that Tams, a small mining station, had come to such prominence. Only six hundred million people lived there, descendents of an ancient Raylican colony that had doggedly struggled to keep its independence from all of us, Skolian, Trader, and Allied alike. Fifteen years ago the Eubians had claimed the planet. They managed to manipulate the political situation so that any overt response on our part would put us in violation of our tenuous treaties with them.

"Comtrace, what is your latest information on Tams?" I asked.

"IMIN reports indicate the rebels have captured the planet's ground based defenses."

I had expected as much. We had other ways to offer aid besides overt methods. It wasn't luck that allowed the "untrained" leaders of the Tams rebellion to capture and hold sophisticated Eubian defense installations on their planet.

"How have the Traders responded?" I asked.

"Eubian saboteurs have destroyed the Red Hills factories," Comtrace said. "Also the warehouses in the Sandrise, Docker, and Metalworks districts. They have gutted the drive mechanisms and Evolving Intelligence pilots of all space-worthy ships in both Tams starports."

Rex blew out a gust of air. "Effective."

"Why?" Taas asked. "What are the Red Hills factories?"

I glanced at him. "They are—or were—the only factories on Tams equipped to build replacement parts for starship inversion drives. The warehouses are where any completed parts would have been stored."

"If the rebels control the planetary defenses," Helda said, "they can bring in ships with new EI's and engine parts."

"Not if the Traders control enough of the orbital defenses," Rex said. "They and the rebels may be at a standoff."

"Comtrace," I said, "what is the official Trader position on the situation?"

"That no uprising exists," Comtrace said.

Helda spoke drily. "Why do I have no surprise at this?"

"A recording of Ur Qox's last speech is available," Comtrace said. "Shall I display?"

I grimaced. I had no desire to see Qox give another one of his speeches. Although we spelled his name Ur Qox, or sometimes Ur Kox, the way we pronounced it, the true spelling was U'jir Qox, the

apostrophe indicating he was a Highton. The highest Highton. The Emperor. But regardless of how I felt about the Trader Emperor, we needed to know what he had to say.

“Yes,” I said. “Display the recording.”

The image of the mystery Aristo disappeared, replaced by a lean man speaking at a glass podium. He was in his late forties, with shimmering black hair and red eyes. His Highton accent was chillingly perfect. Tarque had also been a Highton, with that same grating sound of unremitting arrogance in his voice, that same look of it in his perfect face.

Qox spent most of the speech lauding the Trader army. He painted the rebels as less than human and the Trader soldiers as heroes. There wasn't a whit of useful information in the entire speech. He went on and on, invoking the glory of the Eube empire and of the Aristos and of himself and of his father's esteemed name.

“At least his father's dead,” Rex muttered.

At least. The previous emperor had been worse than the current one. Emperor J'briol Qox, the man we called Jaibriol, had during his reign conquered nearly a thousand worlds. And he had hated my family. Gods, he had hated us. Apparently it infuriated him that we, the ultimate providers, not only lived free from his power but had the audacity to build a civilization that rivaled his own.

In English, the name J'briol Qox translated into Gabriel Cox. But the Allies always used our spelling and the soft J of our pronunciation. I once asked a receptionist in an Earth embassy why they avoided their own translation. She told me the name Gabriel came from one of their holy books, that he was an archangel who heralded good news, and that the name meant “God is my strength.” She thought Jaibriol Qox should have been called Lucifer instead, after the fallen angel who had sunk from heaven to hell. It made a lot of sense to me.

“At least this Qox has a redeeming quality,” Taas said.

Helda snorted. “His only redeeming quality would be to fill a coffin.”

“He has no heir,” Taas said. “Twenty-five years of marriage and not one child.”

Rex nodded. “You would think he would divorce the Empress for a more fertile wife.”

“Why?” Taas said. “All the Hightons need is her eggs and his sperm to make a baby. She doesn't have to be naturally fertile.”

“They are not allowed divorce anyway,” Helda said.

“Actually, he could divorce her if she's refusing to give him an heir,” I said. “Deliberate infertility is grounds for dissolving the royal marriage. The only grounds, in fact.”

“You think maybe he actually loves her?” Taas asked.

“Am I wearing a ballet tutu?” Helda asked.

Rex grinned at her. “I'd like to see that. A pink tutu.”

Helda crossed her arms, her bulky muscles rippling under her sweater. “Pah.”

I smiled. “Well, whatever his reason, he has problems.” The Hightons were fanatical about keeping their castes pure, their bloodlines “unpolluted.” No child could be recognized as a Highton unless his parentage was verified by genetic tests from three independent sources. And of course the Qox line had to be the purest of all. If Ur Qox didn't soon produce an heir, he risked losing his claim to the title of Emperor.

“At least we don't have to worry about all that,” Taas said.

“We don't?” I asked.

“The Assembly and the Skol-Net don't depend on heritage.”

“The Assembly, no,” I said. “The Skol-Net, yes.”

Taas blinked. “It does?”

“Imperial heirs have to be Rhon psions,” I said. Why was Rex so pale? He knew it already, that his and my children would never be in the line of succession. Didn't he? Yet I felt sick, as if I had just been punched in the gut.

Rex spoke carefully. “I had never realized the Rhon bloodline was that important to the Imperial family.”

I wanted to kick myself. I had become too comfortable with him, had assumed he knew me better

than he had reason to. Why would he be aware of something so private? My family never advertised our weaknesses. We were almost obsessive about our privacy, and we had the power to make sure it wasn't violated no matter how much our personal lives fascinated the rest of the galaxy.

*Block Moroto and Bjorstad*, I thought. As my awareness of Helda and Taas receded, I tried to reach Rex. But he blocked me.

So I spoke out loud. "It isn't the bloodline that we care about. We *need* to widen our gene pool." The words *Incest destroys us* waited on my tongue. Instead I said, "If we interbreed, the results can be disastrous. Too many lethal recessives are tied to the Rhon genes."

"But if that's true," Taas said, "Then why do—"

Helda interrupted. "I just remember, Taas. We didn't log off of our accounts when we check netmail in my room."

Taas glanced at her. "Yes we did."

"No, I think we forget. We better make sure."

He shrugged. "All right."

After they left the room, I smiled wanly at Rex. "Subtlety was never her strong point."

"We've worked in a psiber link for years," he said. "It's natural she would pick up on tension."

"Rex, I'm sorry." I stood up next to him.

"I presumed." His voice was flat, as if he blocked his words the way he blocked his thoughts. "I aspired to a station above mine."

"I can't think of any man more worthy to be my consort."

Anger leaked in his voice, like water escaping a levee. "But our children aren't worthy of the Skolia name?"

I had made a mess of this. "Of course they are. If it were my choice, they would be in the line of succession. But the Imperial family *must* be Rhon. We have no choice."

His emotions broke through his barriers and washed against me in waves: anger and shame mixed together. "I hadn't realized you put genetics above blood ties."

The room felt so quiet, muted by the insulated walls and thick carpet. "The Skolian Imperialate covers more than a thousand worlds. If the Assembly and the Rhon don't protect them from the Traders, who else is going to do it? The Allies? Ur Qox would eat them for breakfast. If we ever lose the ability or the will to operate the Skol-Net, the Traders will douse us like a bell over a candle."

"No, our children won't be able to power the Net," Rex said. "What the hell does that have to do with their ability to lead?"

"They can join the Assembly."

His voice tightened. "That's not the same."

"Without full Rhon access to the psibernet they couldn't carry out their duties as members of the Triad." I spoke more softly. "Our children won't be Rhon, but they will be empaths, powerful ones. That's all the more reason to make sure the Rhon stays strong." I swallowed. "If Skolia falls to Ur Qox, then you, me, any children we have—we'll all become providers. Permanently."

The muscle under his eye twitched. "That won't happen. We won't let it happen."

"No. We won't."

He was still blocking me, though not as much as before. I didn't push it. I wanted things to be right with him, for it to work out where my other two tries at marriage had failed. "Rex. I'm sorry."

"I need to think." He touched my cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow."

And then he left.

## 4. Lucifer's Legacy

The spectacular sunset had finally cooled into darkness, leaving Athens and the Arcade lit only by lamps and holos. But I still couldn't sleep. The Delos day had no resonance with my internal clock.

I wondered if Rex was in bed. What he would say to me tomorrow, in the early hours of darkness when humans here started their day. I lay naked in my big bed, submerged in its frothy blue blankets and

silk sheets. Then I rolled over. Again. And again. My tossing wound the blanket so tight around my legs I could barely move. I pulled off the covers and turned over again, facing the console, the air cool on my bare skin.

A button the size of a coin was glowing blue on the console. I pushed it. "Yes?"

"Soz." Rex's voice floated out of the speaker.

My shoulder muscles relaxed. "Heya."

"Were you sleeping?"

"No. I've just been lying here."

"Do you remember Jo Santis? That officer you bunked with when we went for retraining a few years ago?"

"Vaguely." Whatever prompted him to ask a question like that? "Why?"

"She told me something about you. I've been thinking about it."

I didn't like the sound of that. What in a spacer's helmet had I done that some woman I barely knew would tell Rex and that he would find thought-provoking after all these years? "What did she say?"

"She told me you sleep naked." I could almost see his wicked grin. "That true?"

Ah. I stretched my arms. "Maybe." I almost added, *Why don't you come and find out?* But for some reason those words stayed in my throat. Instead, I said, "I used to when I was a girl, when it was hot." We hadn't even had fans to cool my father's house.

"Soz ..."

"Yes?"

"I can deal with the succession thing. It just caught me by surprise."

I exhaled. "I should have said something before. I was stupid."

"You're never stupid." He laughed. "Dense as hell sometimes. But never stupid."

"Hey." I smiled. "I'm still your CO, you know."

"I'd rather a wife."

"Me too." After he retired, he would have to get my family's approval before we could marry. But he would pass. Even I could see how well suited he and I were.

"You want a wife too?" Rex asked.

I laughed. "No. You. Husband."

His voice softened. "See you tomorrow, Soz."

"Night."

After we cut the connection, I still couldn't sleep. Now it was because I kept remembering how tightly his pants had fit. I was never going to get any rest now. Finally I sat up and turned on the lamp over the bed. Soft light diffused through its blue glass.

The book Tiller had given me lay on the nightstand by the console. I opened it to the title page. *Verses on a Windowpane*. A pen-and-ink drawing below the title showed a window frosted with snow and ice. An indistinct form was visible on the other side of the pane, someone or something just barely discernible through the icy coating on the glass. The unknown figure was drawing in the frost, tips of fingers showing against the window.

As I flipped through the book, a tag fell out, a ticket stub from the Arcade. It marked a page with a poem on it and another drawing of the frosted window. Whatever had been on the other side of the glass was gone now. The pane had shattered, its broken glass jutting up in shards that glistened with ice on their edges. The poem was written in English, but my spinal node translated it:

A frame of stone. Silvered glass frosted with icy tears.

My fist closes on the mirror; flesh traps ice. Brittle snaps of breaking tears. I see you now standing behind me: always watching, always waiting, never satisfied.

I sheathe *my* heart, its bare softness guarded by ice.

"For pugging sakes." I closed the book. "What kind of poem is that?" I dropped the book on the console and lay down again. What was Rex doing right now? Sleeping? Did *he* sleep with his clothes on? Weird images from the poem mixed in my mind with far more appealing images of Rex minus his uniform.

Finally I got up and got dressed. Then I went for a walk. It was either that or take a cold shower.

The crowds on the Arcade had thinned to almost nothing. I walked through a south corner of Athens, then jogged along a path that crossed the stubbly fields surrounding the Delos starport. When I reached the first terminal, I went in on the upper level, where the arrival and departure gates were located. The place had that late-night feel unique to starports, with their cool lights that never went off and their chrome and glass halls. I paced along its artificially bright corridors like a thug in black boots.

Eventually I came to one of the ubiquitous security checkpoints, a simple arch about two meters tall. Unlike its crude predecessors that predated the interstellar age, this arch made multiple recordings of anyone passing under it, everything from magnetic resonance scans to an analysis of the person's skeletal structure. The computer attached to it analyzed the data, and also the behavior of the travelers as they passed through it.

Two guards staffed the checkpoint, a man and a woman who were checking a line of bored people through the arch. I got into the line for no other reason than the fact that it was someplace to go. Anything was better than returning to the inn, where all I could find to do was read weird poems about sheathing bare hearts, whatever that meant.

As the line moved forward more people queued up behind me, most of them looking half asleep. When my turn came, I stalked through the arch and sent the console into shock. Lights flashed and alarms shrilled loud enough to wake up every person in the entire area.

The guards stepped in front of me. The woman looked at the bands on my jacket, then spoke to me in English. "I'm sorry, Primary. But we can't let you through until we find out the problem."

I nodded. Although Skolian law gave Jagernauts the right to carry weapons in boarding areas of spaceports without a permit, Allied law didn't. So we compromised; they could take my weapons until I left the area.

I pulled the switchblade out of my boot. As I straightened up with it, both guards drew their burn-lasers. I handed it to the woman. She blinked, then reholstered her gun and took my knife. Next I gave her the thorn-tube I had hidden in the sleeve of my jacket, and the tiny dart thrower tucked under my belt. She turned the weapons over in her hands as if she didn't know what to do with them.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

The man indicated the metal studs on my jacket. "Those will still set off the alarms."

I took off the jacket and handed it to him. Underneath I was wearing a Regulation Class Six Garment, Upper Body Issue, Type 3; in other words, a plain black pullover. But when the man glanced at my pants, which also had metal studs on them, I said, "I not give you those."

He reddened. "I didn't mean—of course not."

I tapped my torso, then my head, then my thighs. "Got biomech in here."

He blew out a gust of air. "Well, give it another try and we'll see what happens."

I went around and walked under the arch again. The alarms were just as loud now as the first time. The guards were very polite while they scanned me for more weapons. They were very polite when they asked me to go through three more times and submit to three more scans so that they could verify it was the metal on my uniform and the biomech web in my body that were setting off the alarms. Meanwhile the line of people behind me grew longer and longer.

Finally the woman said, "She's clean."

The man nodded. "All right. You can go on through, Primary."

Someone in the line clapped. I laughed—and half of the waiting people jumped. They must have seen too many Jagernaut-runs-amok movies.

Once I made it through the checkpoint, though, I had no idea where to go. So I walked. And walked. Eventually I stopped near a deserted gate. I stood in front of its door, staring at my reflection in the windowpane that made up its upper half.

"Want to retire?" I asked the woman staring at me. Perhaps it was time to let go, to rest, to give myself the peace I needed to clean out that file of suppressed memories.

Small footsteps sounded nearby. A child's voice spoke in English. "Do you have a motorcycle?"

I looked down to see a girl of about five gazing up at me with her big eyes. I smiled and tried out my

English. "What is 'mutter-psi call'?"

She smiled back. "It's like a big bicycle."

"Oh." I didn't know what a bi-psi call was either. "Have you mutter-psi call?"

She shook her head. "Just a trike. A red one. The wheel had a hole in it."

Wheel? She meant *cycles*. Of course. "I am sorrow about the hole."

"It's okay," she said. "My daddy fixed it. The tire was all empty and he made it full."

Something about what she said was important, but I couldn't figure it out. Then I noticed a man hurrying up the hall. He spoke quickly to the girl. "Kimberly, don't bother the soldier."

I smiled. "Is okay. I enjoy."

He stared at me, and I caught a flash of his thoughts, surprise that I responded like a normal human being.

Kimberly waved. "Bye."

"Bye," I said.

As the girl walked away with her father, it hit me why her words were important. *It's okay. It was empty and he made it full.* That was what was wrong with the Aristo. He wasn't empty. He didn't need anyone to make him full. That cavity, that horrible emptiness *wasn't there.*

After my experience with Tarque I knew too well how an Aristo's mind felt. It was a hollow hull. But the Aristo in the bar hadn't been a hull. There wasn't something wrong with him, there was something right.

"He's not an Aristo," I told the deserted hallway. "I don't care how he looks, how he talks, how he moves. He's not an Aristo."

But that made the whole incident even stranger. His guards, the people in the bar, even my squad mistook him for a Highton. Only a trained psibernaut who had also been a provider would know he was a fake.

How had he done it? As far as I knew, no exceptions existed to the rigid Trader caste system. Aristo babies had their DNA verified to prove it came from Aristo parents. His heredity would have been thoroughly scrutinized before the Hightons acknowledged him as one of their own. The tests were done by Eubian hospitals that supposedly couldn't be corrupted, though I had my doubts that any humans existed where at least one member of the group couldn't be bribed. But it stretched credibility that even a Highton could buy off three independent verification units.

And why would any of them bother? The verification process existed because the Aristos all felt the same way: they didn't want their bloodlines polluted by non-Aristos. More than any other human race, they acted collectively rather than as individuals.

None of this made sense. Something strange was going on, and where Traders were involved I didn't like strange goings-on. It was time to find out why they had come to Delos.

I went back to the security check for my weapons and then left the port. I returned to the inn, but only to get my Jumbler. It fit in a black holster on my hip, with a strap fastened around my upper thigh for support. Jumbler's had to be big; each contained a particle accelerator. Yet despite their size they were extraordinarily light, molded from composite materials that made them easier to lift than far smaller guns made from less expensive alloys.

My Jumbler carried abitons for fuel, antiparticles of the biton, the tiny subatomic building block of matter discovered in the twenty-first century. Bitons, what we liked to call "wimpons," were the most weakly interacting particles yet found that coupled to the electromagnetic field. Their rate of pair-production was miniscule, and like quarks they were rarely found in isolation. Electrons were made up of bitons—hundreds of thousands of bitons.

When I hit the Jumbler's ignition stud, abitons would enter the accelerator and whip around in a widening spiral until they ejected in a beam. Abitons annihilated bitons, creating photons, which meant a Jumbler beam turned electrons into light. If even a mere fraction of the bitons in an electron annihilated, the electron's remains became so unstable that it decayed into other particles.

The collisional cross-section of abitons and bitons was small enough to let the beam travel short distances in air reasonably well. But solids were another story. If the beam started to eat electrons in a

dense substance, Coulomb repulsion and the instability of the mutilated electrons made the material blow itself apart. The gun got its name from the way solids looked after being shot with it.

I had no intention of shooting the Aristo; regardless of what people around here seemed to think, Jagernauts weren't violent by nature. Besides, killing an Aristo, even a fake one, would achieve nothing except damage the shaky truce negotiations we periodically tried to conduct with the Traders. What I wanted was information, and the Jumbler would make an excellent tool to convince him he should give it to me.

Of course after I left he could call the police. But the Allies had no fondness for Aristos. My bet was that if I just asked him a few questions the police would look the other way.

I headed out into the city, this time up into the hills of Athens about ten kilometers north of the Arcade. The houses here were mansions separated by parks that covered more area than the spaceport. An Aristo was far more likely to have rented one of the mansions than a hotel suite. The problem was to find which one.

Lamps lit most of the estates, shedding pearly light across the grounds. The houses were shaped like ships, and made from a green stone with foamy accents that swirled through the rock. The translucent stone used for the roofs evoked colors of sky and clouds, and of the delicate fronds of pale green sealace that drifted in the breakers down by the harbor. The "masts" of the ships were gold metal spires, each adorned with glimmering disks in hues of platinum, silver, green, blue, white, the palest rose, and ocean shades of blue, all chiming together in the stray breezes.

Even the nervoplex streets were beautiful: silver and smooth when still, as they were now when no hover traffic was out; shimmering and rippling like liquid when I walked on them. But I still didn't like the stuff. It made me feel vulnerable.

I entered one of the parks and followed a path that wound through low hills. I was already growing tired. The thinner atmosphere made me feel as if I had been jogging on a high mountain. I stopped in a field of downy clover plants, my chest heaving as I gulped in air. Flowers nestled in the clover—and when the wind blew the flowers *sang*.

I knelt down and peered at the blossoms. Each one was a cluster of pale purple tubes that whistled when the wind blew across them, the notes varying with the size and shape of the tubes. It all blended together to create a soft piping music that floated through the night. It reminded me of the songs my brother Kelric used to play on a flute-reed he had cherished when he was a small boy. Actually, "small" was the wrong word; Kelric had grown into a giant of a man who could hold the entire flute in the palm of his hand. But so often I remembered him as a seven-year-old, from that day during the storm when we had taken refuge in the spine-cave.

I swallowed. I wasn't going to find the Aristo by getting maudlin about my childhood, or wandering through fields, or stalking around the streets like a burglar. I left the field and headed down the path again. As I walked, I schooled my mind into a meditative state. The scenery made it easy to relax, easy to let my sphere of thoughts expand. Without a psiphon to amplify my mind I couldn't do much, but if a strong enough psion were close enough by, I might detect glimmers ...

*Pain!*

His face hung above me, his eyes like rusty flakes from an incinerator. Then the iron, its end glowing red from heat—I looked away—

My body jerked as my skin seared, the smell of its burning mixed with the stench of scorched nervoplex. I heard screams, a youth's ragged voice begging, begging—my voice? I struggled to shut out the pain. Instead I imagined myself back home on Tams, a young man sitting in the Ivory Garden, relaxing, comfortable, happy—NO. My arms jerked above my head, trying to come down and push away the iron. But the harder I fought, the tighter the nervoplex bonds pulled around my wrists. He was coming at me again, and I fell into the hole of his mind, fell, fell—

Something hard slammed into my body. I lay on my stomach, the dull point of a rock pressing into my cheek. My arm lay next to my face, the gold band on my jacket sleeve reflecting the faint light from a distant lamp.

The path. I was lying on a path in the park. I sat up, willing my body to stop shaking. Yes, I was in



the park. Here. And I was Soz. Soz. Not the youth *there*, bound and screaming. But where was there? And whose Aristo face had I seen hanging above me? My mind kept showing me Tarque, but it couldn't be him.

I drew in a deep breath. I had found the Aristo—or at least one of his providers.

*Recall*, I thought.

Memory file degraded, my spinal node thought.

That was no surprise. The human brain couldn't make perfect records of memories even with the aid of processors as advanced as my spinal node, which had been upgraded only a few months ago. But a reasonably good record had to remain for an event as intense as the one I had just experienced.

Play what you have, I thought. But put a filter on it.

Replay activated.

I saw the Aristo's face hanging over me again, felt the iron branding *my* skin. But the filter gave the memory a diffuse quality, its intensity muted so that I could bear it.

*Freeze*, I thought.

The memory stopped, freezing with the Aristo's face. He wasn't Tarque but he wasn't the false Highton from the bar either. It was one of his guards, the tall one whose Aristo blood had shown in his eyes and his hair. Was he the child of an Aristo and a server? I guessed he was at least half Aristo, probably more, but in any case enough to make him want a provider.

*Release*, I thought. The *memory* faded.

I closed my eyes, trying to reach the provider again. He was my clue to the Aristo's mansion. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't force myself back into his mind.

Finally I climbed to my feet and started down the path. Gradually, as I walked through the park, my pulse slowed and my breathing calmed. I called up a status menu and it told me my adrenaline levels had almost returned to normal.

After several minutes I tried reaching out with my mind. This time I searched warily, prepared—there! I jerked back from the provider's mind, but not so completely that I lost the link, just enough so that I didn't submerge into his thoughts again.

Then, gritting my teeth, I probed at the rusty-eyed guard. Under normal circumstances I couldn't have reached him from so far away. But his link to the provider was a bridge. I hung on to the edges of his brain activity like a swimmer hanging onto a strut, fighting a whirlpool. A scream from the provider cut through *my* consciousness, and the guard groaned like a lover in the grip of an orgasm.

I was dimly aware of the park around me, of a tree where I had stopped, leaning against its trunk. How could I make the guard stop? I couldn't change his brain chemistry. But I had to *do something*.

Boring. I hurled the thought with as much strength as I could marshal. Boring! This provider has become immensely, tiresomely, excruciatingly BORING.

Lethargy settled over the guard, dulling his interest and also my link with him. I was losing the image. The echoes of pain from the provider stopped, and his relief flared with so much intensity that I saw not only the guard again, but the room around him as well. There was another provider there, a girl lying bound to a divan by a bodyweb.

As the intensity of the first provider's responses quieted, fading into exhaustion, my link with him weakened. *Where?* I thought in the Eubian language. *Where are you?*

But he was passing out; soon I wouldn't feel him at all. The guard had left the room—wait, the second provider, the girl—the guard must have freed her before he left. She was running to the boy, the intensity of her concern yanking me back into the link.

I jumped to her mind. *Where are you? WHERE?*

She was untying the boy now, crying, cradling him in her arms. As he collapsed against her, my link with them weakened. Before it faded altogether I picked up the faint image of a mansion, one shaped like a huge galleon. I had no idea if either provider tried to send the image; it felt more like an overflow from the girl's agitated thoughts. But whatever the reason, I had a hint now from her blurred memory of the house.

After searching for an hour, I still hadn't found it. Finally I decided to go back to the hotel. I could

continue this tomorrow. If I remembered correctly, I was near a street that could take me out of the hills. I walked around a graceful fountain that spouted fragrances instead of water and came out into a lawn of rose-bells. Beyond the lawn, a road glistened in the silvery light from the street lamps.

On the other side of the street was the estate I sought.

The house seemed to float in its gardens, surrounded by bushes sculpted to resemble swells of water, even to the detail of the white flowers on their tips that evoked sea foam. The masts glowed with streaks of phosphorescence, and their furled sails looked, at this distance, like sheets of gold. The disks on them chimed together, their pitches blending into a song that sounded like water and wind.

A faint light rippled in the air around the house and the grounds, a hint of rainbow colors like an aurora borealis. I knew those colors; I had often seen them around members of the Triad—my aunt, my half brother, and my father. By order of the Assembly, when any member of the Triad went out in public, the rainbows went with them. Those colors were the only outward sign of a cyberlock, a brain implant that could be turned on or off by an external key. When activated, the lock produced a field tuned to its owner's brain waves. I had one, though I rarely used it. Anyone or anything entering the field produced by the cyberlock would set it off: low-keyed fields sounded an alarm, mid-keyed fields repulsed intruders, high-keyed fields killed them.

Was this lock tuned to the Highton? That would mean he had undergone surgery to have it implanted in his brain, a grueling process few people cared to undertake. That so young an Aristo should be so thoroughly protected was as disturbing as everything else about him.

Birds were flying through the rainbows, so the field had to be low-keyed right now, a warning system to catch intruders. But it would still permeate everything around the house, leaving no hole to sneak through.

Toggle Combat mode, I thought.

Toggled, the spinal node answered.

I watched the mansion, trying to assess the best approach. In combat mode my body relied on bioengineered mechanicals that ran along my skeleton, with living motors that also linked to my fiberoptic web. The only limit on my reaction speed was the time it took the mechanicals to move my limbs. And that *was fast*, far faster than any muscle could contract. Even so, I used the mode sparingly; despite reinforcements to my bones and joints, the system could still strain my skeleton.

I fought by reflex, automatically accessing the extensive libraries of fighting maneuvers in my spinal node. It made my reaction times even faster than if my brain needed to issue commands. Of course, preprogrammed reactions weren't always enough for the unexpected. And fast reactions did me no good here in the park. How was I going to get inside the mansion?

An idea came to me. I smiled. No, I couldn't do that. I really couldn't.

"Well, why not?" I said.

The rose-bell blossoms rang softly as I waded through them. When I crossed the road, its nervoplex surface shifted under my feet. On the other side I walked straight through the cyberlock rainbows, straight up the front path, straight up to the front door.

Then I knocked.

The door opened immediately, revealing two guards armed with laser carbines. Their confusion hit me like a blast of air: had his lordship actually been lunatic enough to invite me here? Had I actually been lunatic enough to accept?

"My greetings," I said—and whipped up my leg, kicking one carbine out of its owner's hands while I sent the other flying with a sweep of my arm.

Neither guard had a chance to summon help before I knocked them out. But as I ran into the mansion another eight guards appeared, running down the stairs in the entrance foyer and coming through archways on both my right and left. What the hell? Although Hightons always traveled with bodyguards, the usual complement was four. I had expected only the five I had seen at the bar.

As I focused on the guards, my mind quit time-sharing and went on boost, changing my perceptions so that everyone but me seemed to move in slow motion. The guards reacted as if they were underwater, barely changing position as I leveled my Jumbler at them.

Weapons link established, my spinal node thought. A grid of cross hairs “jumped out” to overlay my view of the foyer while stats flashed in a corner of my mental display:

Fuel: abiton

rest energy: 1.9 eV

charge:  $5.95 \times 10^{-25} \text{C}$

magnet: 0.0001 T

max radius: 0.05 M

I swept the Jumbler beam across the ground in front of the guards. Only orange sparkles showed as the beam cut through the air, but when it touched the floor, that polished parquet surface exploded. Debris flew everywhere, and rained back down into the trough I was gouging. Dust flew all around us. I doubted the owners of the mansion would rent to the Aristo again. His guests were very ill mannered.

The guards skidded to a stop at the trough, their arms flailing in slow motion to protect their heads from flying debris. But it wouldn't slow them down for long, and there were too many for me to knock out even with my enhanced reflexes. Either I was going to have to take the irreversibly drastic step of shooting them, or else find another way to reach the Highton.

I ran out the front door into the garden. A shot from a laser carbine came so close to my ear that I heard strands of my hair sizzle. Someone cursed, and shouted something about wanting me able to talk, not crisped into cinders.

I sprinted for a tower at the south edge of the mansion. It had to be the security center—Traders rarely varied in their procedures. They didn't comprehend innovation, opting instead for sheer strength. Unfortunately for us, sheer strength went a long way no matter how much imagination its producers lacked.

I reached the tower in seconds and annihilated its lock. Another guard was inside, his laser carbine already up and aimed. Even before my mind registered his presence, my leg was kicking into the air. My boot heel hit the carbine and it flew out of his hands, its shot going wide so that it burned into the tower wall on my right.

He hit my Jumbler so fast that I only saw a blur as it spun out of my hand. I barely managed to block his blows when he came at me. I slid the thorn-tube out from *my* sleeve, shooting its microthin sliver of metal at him. He brought up his arm and blocked it with the metal wrist guard he wore, but that gained me the fraction of a second I needed; while he was deflecting the drug-filled needle, I got him with a dart. It hit his neck and he spasmed in midpunch, his raised fist flailing in the air, the tendons in his neck outlined like cables under his skin. Then he collapsed into a heap on the floor, breathing but unconscious.

A glance at the console told me he had been monitoring the estate defenses. I deactivated the cyberlock first. Then I used his system to access an emergency node of the Skol-Net, one ridiculously easy to reach—for those who knew how and where to look. The instant I activated the account I sought, it released a virus that jumped into the Highton's computer system. Less than a minute had passed since I knocked at the front door.

Bells clamored outside. I grabbed my Jumbler and ran out of the tower into chaos. Lights blazed everywhere, alarms cried for attention, floodlights swung wildly across the gardens. The virus was setting off every warning system in every computer on the estate. In all that madness, they would never find the one alarm they needed, the one that registered me.

I fired the Jumbler across the street. Over here the glare of the floodlamps hid the sparkles in the air, but across the road the lights disappeared in an orange flash. Branches from a tree by the fragrance fountain crashed to the ground in a noisy confusion of exploding wood and flying leaves.

Shoving the Jumbler back into its holster, I ran toward a window on the second story of the mansion. If this supposed Highton followed the usual Aristo pattern, he would be staying on the second story in the room hardest to reach from either the ground or the air.

I climbed to the window using a specialized nervoplex trellis that vibrated under my weight, trying to throw me off. Had my reflexes been slower it would have succeeded. But I made it to the balcony and climbed over its railing, then stepped silently onto its polished floor. The Highton had left the curtains open on the crystal doors that fronted the balcony. I could see him standing in the middle of his bedroom

staring at the madly flashing console on his wall.

I annihilated the lock mechanism on the doors. Then I slid them open and walked inside. “My greetings,” I said in Highton.

He spun around. “How did you get in here?”

I tilted my head at a wardrobe by the wall. “I’m going to hide behind that. In a moment your guards are going to come and tell you an intruder is on the estate. You say you saw me run into the park and you want them to catch me.”

“I will say no such thing.”

“Yes, you will.” I closed the curtains on the balcony doors and then backed into the space between the wardrobe and the wall, keeping my gun aimed at his head. “Otherwise, I’ll annihilate you into oblivion.”

He didn’t argue. It was a good thing, because my Jumbler was empty. I couldn’t have annihilated a speck of dust with it. Even with wimpons for fuel, a gun could only hold so much antimatter.

A knock sounded outside.

The Highton turned to the door. “Come.”

From my hiding place I could see only the Aristo. I heard the door open.

“We apologize for disturbing you, sir,” a voice said. It had to be a guard.

The Aristo gave a perfect Highton scowl and waved his hand at the blaring console. “This is disturbing me far more. What is the problem? Who was that woman I saw outside? She looked like an Imperial Jagernaut.”

“She is,” the guard said. “The Primary from the bar. She damaged the front foyer and then ran out again.”

“Why?” The Aristo sounded genuinely curious.

A second voice spoke. “We don’t know, sir. We’ll question her as soon as we catch her.” His anticipation made my stomach lurch. I “recognized” the feel of his mind even though I had never met him. He was the guard with the two providers.

“I saw her run into the park across the street,” the Aristo said.

“We’ll search it thoroughly,” the first guard said.

“Good. Now leave me to my privacy. And fix the alarms.”

“We haven’t been able to isolate the virus that is causing the trouble, sir. We may have to turn off the entire system and restart it.”

The Aristo raised his eyebrows. “With all the commotion she could have climbed into this room without being detected.”

The first guard made his voice reassuring. “The trellis would throw her off, sir. And she was only on the grounds a moment. There wasn’t time for her to get close to you.”

The Aristo spoke dryly. “I’m glad you have such confidence. Now go find her.”

“Yes, sir.” I heard the guards bow, their clothes crackling with that irritating noise Trader uniforms made when someone bent at the waist. The door whispered shut and the pound of boots receded through the house.

The Aristo turned to me. “What do you want?”

I went to the console, keeping my empty gun trained on my hostage, and turned off the speakers. Alarms still blared in the rest of the mansion, but at least it was quieter in here.

“Have a seat,” I said. “We’re going to talk.”

He made no move to sit. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“You didn’t feel that way in the bar.”

Unexpectedly, he smiled. “No, I didn’t.”

There should have been a law against an Aristo having such a beautiful smile. No, he couldn’t be an Aristo. Not with a smile like that. “I don’t believe you’re a Highton,” I said.

“Why?”

His surprise sounded genuine. If he was a fake, either he didn’t know it or he was an astoundingly good actor. But I couldn’t be sure. At close range, I could pick up an Aristo’s emotions easily; their lack

of empathy had no effect on how an empath perceived them. But I picked up zilch from this one. Nothing. He was a blank wall.

I moved to the balcony doors and nudged open the curtains. A man was patrolling the garden below. “Your guards are good.”

“Apparently not good enough.”

“None of this makes sense.” I let the curtain close again. “You have eleven guards, and at least one of them has a biomech web in his body.” I thought of the guard with the providers. “Another is in favor with a powerful Highton, one with far more rank than you could have at your age. And few people, especially at your age, want or need to undergo the invasive operation that’s left you with a cyberlock in your brain. Since your guards hold the key to the lock instead of you, they must take their orders from someone else.”

He stared at me. “How did you know all of that?”

I didn’t. Most of it had been conjecture. But he had just verified it. “I’m good at what I do.”

“Yes. You are.”

I blinked. No Aristo would openly concede that someone like me, who to them was no more than goods for barter, had competency at anything besides serving Aristos. They knew perfectly well what we were capable of, but they never acknowledged it. Yes, this man had the mannerisms, the carriage, the accent of a Highton. But not the scorn. A true Aristo would have made no secret of his intent to punish me for my actions. I would have *felt* his contempt. But I felt nothing with this one. He looked both annoyed and intrigued, but I felt none of it. Nothing. It was almost worse than the cavity.

Then it hit me. He had *blocks* in his mind. These weren’t the instinctive psychological walls anyone could raise, empath or not. Elaborate mental barriers protected this man. He had been trained to stop his KEB from transmitting to other empaths. I knew the huge investment of time and effort it took to learn those barricading techniques. It had been part of my Jagernaut training. It was different from the mental doors I closed to let other empaths know my feelings were private. These were fortified protections that could be broken only by the force of a stronger mind.

But only psions built such barriers. *Only* psions. Normal people had neither the need nor the ability to do it. In fact, even with bio-mech enhancements most psibernauts couldn’t erect barriers as strong as I detected in this man. He was blocking out even me. That meant he had to be a potent telepath. But no Aristo could be a psion. It just plain wasn’t in their precious gene pool.

“Why do you look at me this way?” the Aristo asked.

“What way?” I said.

“As if I am a laboratory specimen.”

“I’m trying to figure out why a provider is traveling as a Highton.”

His anger sparked. “You come up here, throwing insults and waving guns, demeaning my bloodlines. Well, I am not impressed. Go ahead, shoot. This is what Jagernauts do, isn’t it? Kill without compunction.”

I didn’t need telepathy to know his anger was genuine. He believed he was a Highton. “We never kill without compunction. How could we? We’re empaths. We feel what our targets feel.”

“This thing you call empathy—it weakens the mind.” His voice quieted. “It is a frailty. Those with weak minds must work that much harder to become strong, to overcome their failings.”

Where did all that come from? “Did your parents tell you that when they taught you to hide your telepathic abilities?”

He paled, and I was sure I had hit the truth. He was a psion, which meant *neither* of his parents was an Aristo. But someone had taken great pains to conceal that fact. Why? Yes, many Hightons had children with their servers and some elevated those children to the taskmaker caste. But to pass off such a child as a Highton—I had never heard of it before. It would be a phenomenal “pollution” of their incessantly glorified bloodlines.

“How long did you think you could hide it?” I asked.

He stared at me. “What are you going to do?”

I couldn’t believe it. He was afraid of me. I had felt many emotions from Hightons: scorn, lust, anger,

obsession, disgust. But never fear. As far as they were concerned I was a provider, and they refused to acknowledge that a *provider* could have the power needed to inspire fear in them. Yet I felt his as clear and sharp as broken glass.

I *felt* him.

Sweat beaded on my temple. A moment ago his barriers had been impenetrable. Now they were dissolving, at least to me. He was a mental fortress, one that should have taken a tortuous battle of wills to break, yet now I felt him. He had to be voluntarily dropping his walls; I had done nothing. Yet I sensed neither the intent from him to drop his shields nor the realization it was happening.

He watched me with a healthy, sensual desire that caught me unprepared. Blood rushed to my face and to far more private places. *Block!* The wall-and-synapse psicon flashed in my mind, and kept flashing, telling me the block wasn't working. Either his desire was too intense to shut out or else I was feeling my own as well as his. What was going on? It was wrong, all wrong. No, it wasn't wrong, it was right, and that was what was wrong.

I took a deep breath. Stay cool. Find out who he is. But how? Well, I had a good starting point; if someone wanted him to pass as a Highton, they would have given him a Highton name.

"What surprises me," I said, "is that your parents gave you a name you obviously had no claim to."

The comment didn't provoke his anger, as I had hoped. He just shrugged. "I have far more right to it than the hundreds of other people who use it."

Hundreds. Given that only a few thousand Aristos existed, his name had to be a popular one. What were well-known Aristo names? That was easy. Kryx, as in Kryx Tarque. I would never forget it. Vitar was another, and Jaibriol, and ...

Jaibriol. *Jaibriol*. Now I knew why Rex and I thought this man looked familiar, but neither Helda nor Taas recognized him. This false Aristo, this dove hiding in a night-wolf's body, was a living reminder of a dead Highton, a man who had died when Helda was a small girl and before Taas was born. Comtrace hadn't reported it because we had looked for a living Highton. This man brought to mind a young version of the late Emperor Jaibriol Qox, the father of the present Emperor.

But a dramatic difference existed between the Trader who faced me now and the holos I had seen of Jaibriol Qox. Although the late Emperor may have been handsome in his youth, his face had aged into harsh lines that showed the truth of his nature. His son, the current Emperor, was a leaner, quieter ruler, softer-spoken—and just as vicious. The years had stamped that cruelty into his features, just as they had stamped it into his father's face. The man in front of me now showed no mark of that harshness.

The thought budding in my mind was absurd. It had to be wrong. But I had to test it. "How are you ever going to rule, Jaibriol? Your people will never accept a telepath as their Emperor."

He flushed. "There is nothing wrong with my mind. My people will accept me."

No. No. It was a lie. It had to be. But with his mind opening up to me now, there was no room for misinterpretation. We had been wrong, all of us.

Ur Qox had an heir.

I made my voice stay calm. "You're a provider. It's the only way you could have been born a psion. You have to get the genes from both parents." Both. *Both*. I stared at him. Now that I was looking for it, there was no mistaking his Qox lineage. Not only did he bring to mind the late Jaibriol Qox, but I could see his resemblance to the present Emperor as well. "That means your father—the Emperor—is at most only *half* Highton. You can't be more than one quarter."

"Stop!" Jaibriol clenched his fist. "Stop your filthy insults."

His blocks were dissolving like salt in water. I felt him. It was incredible. Beautiful. And sensual. I wanted him, just as an Earth salmon ready to spawn felt driven to swim upstream, against all obstacles, to reach home and reproduce. It made me want to strike out at him, furious that he—the Highton Heir—could so move me.

"They'll lust after your pain." I was losing my battle to stay cool. "All of them, your ministers, your peers, your women, your guards, your generals. Your life will be hell."

"You're insane," he said.

"You don't know. You've had barriers protecting you. But you can't do it forever. If you slip *once*,

*just once*, they'll know. You'll find out the truth about your precious Hightons. About your father. The man is a monster."

He pointed at the Jumbler I held. "This is all you understand. You see everything as war and hate. My father is a great man, far greater than you could ever comprehend."

"Where have you been for the last twenty years? In a cocoon?" I wanted to hit him. "Hightons torture people. Your father probably did it to your mother while he was siring you."

His face went white. "You are sick. Sick."

"You think I'm lying?" I waved my gun at him. "Fine. Come into my mind, phony Highton. You want to know what providing is like? Come and look. If you have the courage for it."

He watched me like a man balanced on the edge of a cliff. Then he fell.

I had meant only to make him see what had happened to me on Tams, to make that memory hurt him the way it hurt me. But I couldn't pull out of our link. His mind was too strong, more so even than what I had expected given the warning of his immense barriers. We dropped together, melding as we plunged, a joining I had known only once before with a seven-year-old boy. Only this time it was with an adult, with an intensity heightened by anger and sexual desire that hit me like a tidal wave.

Jaibriol Qox was Rhon.

I could smell him now, a musky, masculine smell that permeated the air around us and muddied my thoughts. Pheromones, Rhon pheromones, unlike anything normal humans produced. My whole body reacted to it. Our mental link picked up my arousal and fed it back to me, exciting me even more. It multiplied Jaibriol's reaction as well, locking us into a double feedback loop that fast became almost unbearable in its intensity. Had our personalities been incompatible, it would have been revolting. But *he fit* me. He was like an aphrodisiac, firm and masculine, warm, sensual, inviting ...

I fell into his memories like a diver plummeting into the ocean. His thoughts curled around me as if I were the only solidity in the sea of loneliness where he had lived for so long. He had spent the entire twenty-two years of his life, until a few weeks ago, living alone ... only the visits of his tutors broke his solitude ... his father rarely came to see him—

The demands of his life leave him no time, Jaibriol thought. He has more than me to consider. He is Emperor of Eube.

I recognized what he couldn't see: to his father, he was the ultimate provider. Somewhere within himself Qox had found the decency to leave the boy alone, avoiding him rather than risk giving in to the drive to torture his own son.

Too late I realized that as soon as I formed those thoughts, Jaibriol knew them. His mouth opened, then shut again. *How can you believe such a thing?* he thought.

*Jaibriol—I'm sorry.* I had to pull out of this link. Distance myself. I couldn't let this happen. I couldn't react with such sympathy to the Highton Heir.

Then I saw his mother, the Empress ... tall, regal in a black and gold dress that clung to her sculpted body. Gold glistened on her wrists and at her throat, diamonds sparkled on her ears. Her hair fell to her waist like black silk. Her eyes were rubies, as red and as clear as the most perfect gemstone. And her face, so lovely, so regal, so cold, cold and icy, as hard as her diamonds. Why did she hate me so? What horrible things had I done, that my mother despised my every word, my every move, my every breath?

I watched his face, wanting to touch his cheek, his lips. Jaibriol, can't you see it? There isn't even a remote resemblance between you and Empress Qox. She can't be your mother, not if you're Rhon and she's Highton.

*Stop!* He took hold of my lower arms, gripping them as if I were the mother who so loathed him. *I am not a provider.*

Despite his denial, I was sure he suspected the truth. How long had it taken his grandfather to find or engineer a provider who carried the Rhon genes? Years? Decades? Could he have made a Rhon heir for himself then? Probably. But I had no doubt he used the provider to sire a son who was half Qox and half Rhon. That ensured his genes remained in the Qox bloodline, but more importantly it required the least deviation from Highton behavior. That he managed to break those ingrained patterns of conduct even enough to sire a son who was half Highton astounded me.

The son he created—Jaibriol's father—must have completed the process. How? Used his own genes? Or did he also make a provider who could give him pleasure as well as carry his Rhon heir?

I could guess how the Emperor falsified the bloodline: threats and bribery. Qox had means available to no other Highton. I also had no doubt that he later murdered those who made the verification, executing the death sentence himself, in secret, leaving no witnesses to the truth of his son's heritage.

*No.* Jaibriol's thoughts shimmered like tears collecting on a mirror. *You're wrong. Wrong!*

*Jaibriol—I'm sorry. Gods, I'm so sorry.* I swallowed, trying to pull my mind away from him. But it was impossible—so lonely—his life had been so lonely. The *only* constant in it was his father.

*A great man, Jaibriol thought. I may never be worthy of his name.*

Don't worship him. It will only hurt you.

I don't worship him. I love him.

He left you with no one.

He brought tutors. Jaibriol formed an image in his mind, an elderly man with gray hair and large eyes. Marlin I loved most. He taught me to sing. His voice was magnificent. On my sixth birthday he gave me a hunterpup as a present. And he always encouraged my hobbies.

*Hobbies?*

Jaibriol showed me his library, a complex of buildings on the grounds of the automated estate where he lived. He showed me images of him studying, singing, reading, writing, training, building, researching. His "hobbies." He had nothing else to do with his time. He spoke fourteen languages, played seven instruments, had a voice that spanned three octaves, excelled at seven sports. He knew the histories and geographies of a hundred worlds and more, had studied mathematics and science at the doctorate level, could discuss the works of both human and nonhuman philosophers.

I stared at him. Don't you realize what you've accomplished?

I've done nothing. He showed no trace of pride. He simply had no referent to compare with his achievements. I am a failure as a son and an heir. Why else would my father hide me? He swallowed. Marlin stopped coming to see me. This always happened. They came for a while, then stopped. Only my father always returned. His next thought was more ragged. My nurse—Camyllia. She was there when I was small. She took me for walks, played with me, sang me to sleep and comforted me if I woke up afraid. She let me feel as if every moment we spent together was precious beyond words, that it would never come again so she had to make it the best that it could be. He drew in a shaky breath. Then she stopped coming. My father said she was sick ... that that she ... died.

I could see Camyllia in his mind, a young woman, stunningly beautiful, a brown-eyed, brown-haired version of Jaibriol. With her hair and eyes altered to look Highton she could have been his twin sister. But I had no doubt it had been Jaibriol's eyes and hair that had been altered. Because I was sure Camyllia wasn't a sister. She was his mother.

As soon as that thought formed, I imagined a blanket falling over my mind, hiding it from Jaibriol. His father would have killed anyone who knew his son's true identity. That the mother had convinced Qox to let her live long enough that Jaibriol remembered her was as astounding as it was heart-wrenching.

But Jaibriol saw through the cover I laid over my thoughts. *No. You're wrong.* A tear ran down his face, then another. *Wrong.*

Your father loved you. I made myself believe it so that Jaibriol would believe it. He isolated you because it was the only way to make sure no one hurt you. If any hint of who and what you truly are ever escapes, it will destroy you. Not to mention his father. He needed you to grow strong, to learn how to protect yourself.

His grip on my arm tightened. How can you think you know anything about the love of my parents? You're a Jagernaut, a killer. Can you even feel love at all?

As soon as he formed the question my mind responded. I tried to hold back, but he swept into my memories. He saw my childhood, a girl surrounded by an intense and passionate family. He felt what it was like to live with other empaths, the fulfillment that came with it, and he felt the gaping lack of it in his own life. He saw Rex, Helda, Taas, understood how close we were. He saw us working together, Rex and me most of all, even on Tams—



And then he found Tarque.

As his face contorted, he sank to his knees, pulling me down with him until we were kneeling face to face on the carpet. He bowed his head and leaned forward, his grip so tight on my arms that his knuckles turned white. Even when his forehead bumped up against mine he didn't look up, just kept staring at the floor. I dropped my Jumbler and clenched his arms while my mind heaved a blanket of denial over the memory. But the blanket whipped away again, thrown out of the whirlpool like a tiny rag that flew away in the wind.

While Jaibriol struggled with my memories of Tarque, I also shook with my own nightmare. I knew why Jaibriol existed. There was only one explanation. He had a destiny his father and grandfather considered even more important than the purity of the Qox bloodline. They had created him for one reason, and one alone—to take control of the Skol-Net. Through him, the Traders would finally conquer Skolia.

Gradually, so gradually that at first I wasn't aware it was happening, our minds separated, like a storm abating. No one, not even the Rhon, could sustain the intensity of that contact for long. I became aware of the room again. Jaibriol and I were still leaning into each other, he holding my arms as if he were my lover. I was gripping his sleeves so hard that the cloth had ripped in my hands. His face was wet with tears and I felt them on mine too. My Jumbler lay on the floor next to us.

I couldn't stop my arms from trembling. Jaibriol sat up, still holding on to me. "My father is not evil." His voice shook. "Hightons are not evil. You will see. You are wrong."

"You were there with me. You *felt* it."

The door's pager chimed, followed by a voice coming over the com. "Lord Qox?"

Jaibriol dropped my arms as if they burned. For a moment I was afraid he wouldn't answer at all, forcing the guards to come in and find out why. Then he drew in a ragged breath and spoke in a loud voice. "What is it?"

"We're ready to reactivate the cyberlock, sir."

Both Jaibriol and I stood up. Then he bent down and picked up my Jumbler.

No. Gods, no. How could I have lost my weapon to him? It was true, he couldn't have used it even if it had been loaded; the gun was keyed to my brain and could only be activated by me. But now that he had it, my bluff was worthless. And he knew my identity. All he had to do was say, "The Primary is in here."

Jaibriol handed me the Jumbler. "Go."

I backed into my hiding place behind the wardrobe. "The guards. In the garden."

He wiped his cheeks on his sleeve. Then he went to the door and touched a panel next to it, turning off the lights. When the door opened, the shadows hid his face.

I heard the crinkling sound of a guard bowing.

"I was asleep," Jaibriol said. "You will have to wait until tomorrow to turn on the lock."

"I'm sorry, sir." The guard sounded nervous. "But I'm afraid we have to do it now."

Anger mixed with fear stabbed through my mind. Neither emotion was mine. Although I could read Jaibriol well enough now to realize he was still barriered to everyone else, he and I were locked in a link that neither of us could break. But at least our meld had receded to a bearable level of intensity.

Almost bearable. The memory of how his pheromones affected me, of his muscled body under his clothes—my body responded with a surge of desire so intense I almost dropped the Jumbler again. *Block!* I thought. The psicon flashed erratically in my mind, then made a popping noise and fizzled out like a wet firecracker.

Overlaid on that unwanted arousal was another emotion, Jaibriol's loathing for the cyberlock, *hateful, suffocating, dizzying ...*

I took a silent breath, trying to dissociate myself from his reactions. I knew from my own experience that turning on the cyberlock was like being hit with a vertigo that never stopped until I deactivated it. Why had Jaibriol's father sent him here when the risk was so great he needed cyberlock protection? In our joining I had found only a sense that Jaibriol wasn't sure himself.

"You will wait until tomorrow," Jaibriol told the guard.

"I—I'm afraid I can't do that, sir."

Jaibriol spoke in a chillingly perfect Highton accent. "I'm ordering you to do it."

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm very sorry. But I have orders from your father."

Pause. "Give me six hours without it."

"I can't. I—I'm truly sorry, sir. But my orders. A lot could happen in six hours."

"Two hours," Jaibriol said. "Or I shall be—displeased."

"Sir, I *can't*. If anything happened to you, the Emperor would have me executed."

"Nothing will happen."

"I ... I can't."

Jaibriol's face relaxed into a smile. "I've heard your daughter is a gifted seamstress."

"Sir, my daughter has never offended any—"

"No, no." Jaibriol spoke pleasantly. "I have heard only good reports. Has she applied to the Tailor's Guild?"

"Yes, sir." The guard hesitated. "She was turned down. My daughter is not a taskmaker, you see."

"Well, perhaps I can mention her name to the Guild Master."

For a moment there was silence. Then the guard's uniform crackled again and again, multiple bows this time. "Thank you, sir. Your greatness. Your exalted highness." The words tumbled out over one another. "Thank you."

"Yes?" Jaibriol didn't sound pleasant anymore.

The guard took a breath. "Lord Jaibriol, before we activate the cyberlock I must oversee the repairs to the security system. That will take me two hours. At least." He paused. "Possibly four hours. Will you need me before then?"

I almost snorted. Although the virus I had unleashed was effective, I doubted it would take even an hour to clean out the system.

Jaibriol's voice relaxed. "No, I won't be needing you. Take care of the computers."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you find the Primary?"

"No, sir. She went into the park and destroyed some trees and power lines. Then she disappeared."

"Who is the guard I just saw down in the garden under my balcony?"

"Rak."

Jaibriol stiffened as if he had been struck. I caught a vivid image from him of the guard with the providers. Unease stabbed me, *a fear of Rak that he never really understood—*

*Block!* I thought. The fear receded, but the psicon kept flashing.

"Send Rak to the control center," Jaibriol said. "I want his report on the Primary recorded immediately."

"Yes, sir." The guard's uniform crackled again.

After Jaibriol closed the door, he came back over to me. "Sauscony—"

It was unsettling to hear a Highton speak my name with such longing. "Yes?"

"Stay with me."

"You know I can't do that."

For a moment he stood watching me. Then he touched my cheek. "Goodbye."

I swallowed. "Goodbye."

I went back to the balcony doors and checked outside. Rak was walking across the lawn below, headed for the house. The gardens were dark; either my mad virus had overloaded the system or someone had turned off the power to shut down the wildly sweeping floodlights. I glimpsed two more guards moving through the trees that bordered another garden. But with the lights out here in Jaibriol's bedroom and in the gardens below, both the balcony and the trellis were dark.

It took me only seconds to slip outside and climb down the trellis. I crept along the wall of the mansion, hiding in the shadows. When my way was clear, I ran across the street into the darkened park.

## 5. Denials

It was after midnight when I got back to the inn. An Allied police officer was waiting in the lobby by the front desk. As soon as I entered, she came over and spoke to me. “*Navarhos Valdoria?*”

I looked at her blankly, too tired to struggle with my translation programs.

After a moment she said, “*Espanol?*”

“Un poco,” I said.

“*Ist Deutsch besser?*” When I just kept looking at her, she said, “How about English?”

“Yes,” I said, not because my English was any better than my Spanish, but because I didn’t want to stand in the lobby all night.

“Are you Primary Valdoria?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“I’m afraid I have to arrest you, ma’am.”

“Can’t.” That wasn’t actually true, though I hoped it would put her off. She had to know that under Skolian law no Jagernaut could be arrested; the Allies had made a huge fuss about it during their treaty negotiations with us. No *one is above the law*. They liked that phrase. But it was their phrase, not ours. If a Jagernaut broke Skolian laws, the civil authorities could do no more than register a complaint with Imperial Space Command. That didn’t mean we got off; ISC held us to a code of honor meant to ensure we broke laws only if it was necessary to protect the Imperiate. But it was a military matter, not one for civilian police.

Of course, that was Skolian law. Right now I was in Allied territory.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the officer said. “But section 436, section G, paragraph 16 of Allied-Imperial Treaty MilCap allows for the arrest and deportation of any Imperial Jagernaut found guilty of violating Allied—”

“All right,” I growled. Then I squinted at her. “You handlock me?”

“No, I don’t believe that will be necessary.” She read me my rights; anything I said could and would be used against me and so on. The night clerk at the front desk watched the whole scene avidly. The story would probably be all over the city tomorrow. Imperial Primary wrecks Highton’s mansion. I just hoped they didn’t make one of their confounded amok-Jagernaut movies out of it.

The police officer took me to the station in her flycar. The screen that separated the front compartment from the back crackled every now and then, like an electrical discharge. The exit buttons in the back had been removed, leaving the inside of the car a smooth spherical cavity with a single seat where I sat. The officer had strapped a restraining web across my body, apologizing about “regulations” as she fastened me into its constricting embrace.

I felt like an idiot. I wondered what she would do if I told her I was a Rhon heir. It would certainly get me out of this mess. But then I would have to endure being lambasted by my half brother for using my title to circumvent an Imperial-Allied treaty.

The police at the station were exceedingly courteous while they booked me for breaking and entering, assault, damaging property, and violating a computer. It was weird. True, I was a Primary, but even so I had just walked all over their laws. Yet they almost seemed to approve of my actions.

They took holoshots of me, and my fingerprints and retinal patterns, along with a tissue sample for chromosome analysis. Then they put me in a room where five other people waited, all women with dark hair who wore close-fitting leather outfits that resembled my uniform. A policewoman lined us up facing a glass wall that showed our reflections. When I put my hands in my pockets and scowled, the other five women in the line copied me. The whole thing was surreal.

I couldn’t see through the glass, but I was ready to bet that whoever stood on the other side could see us. I tried to relax and let my mind probe beyond the wall. I felt several people, but only vaguely; none were psions.

Then I hit the cavity.

It was Jaibriol’s guard, the one with the providers. The hole in his mind was less threatening than a

true Aristo's, but he still made me feel like bugs were crawling on my skin. And he was *angry*.

I withdrew like a shyback deer fleeing a hunter. As I ran, I sent the guard a vivid mental picture of another woman in the line. But I was pretty sure it was too late, that he had already identified me.

They took me to see the police chief next, a portly man with close-cropped hair that stuck straight up from his head. It was cut into a flat plane on the top, making him look like a bristly scrub brush. He spoke to me in a language I didn't know. It sounded like the first one used by the police officer who arrested me. When I shook my head, an officer behind him leaned down and spoke in a low voice.

The chief nodded. "You speak English?" he asked me.

"Some," I said.

"How did you know where Lord Kyr was staying?"

Lord Kyr? "The Highton?"

"The man whose house you shot up."

The spinal node gave me several translations for "shot up," including English slang for emptied numerous rounds of ammunition into. The police chief must have meant what I did to the mansion. "Lord Kyr's" mansion. So Jaibriol was traveling under a false name. Well, he would have been crazy to announce he was the Emperor's heir.

"Provider me tell where," I said. "I his mind get." No, that sounded awful. My English was even more mangled tonight than usual. I accessed the translator and repeated what it told me to say. "I got the location from the mind of his guard's provider."

"I see." That seemed to be the answer the chief expected. Apparently the Allies accepted telepathy more than they admitted in public. But why had he anticipated my answer? He had no way to know the guard had providers unless the guard told him, and I couldn't imagine a Trader discussing his servers with the Allied police.

"What did she say to you?" the chief asked.

"The provider?" I asked.

"Yes."

She? I checked with the translator and it verified what I thought: *she* referred to a female. But the first provider I had reached had been a boy. And I had spoken to neither him nor the girl. Was the chief asking misleading questions on purpose? Where did he get his information? The guard had no way to know I contacted his provider. Even if Jaibriol had spoken with the police himself, which I doubted, he didn't know I had been in contact with the providers either. I wasn't sure if even the providers knew it.

But I felt no deception from the chief, only that he wanted to verify facts. So I said, "I never speak to provider. I touch mind of boy. Girl next."

He nodded. "That's what they told us."

They? He had *spoken* to them? How? "They okay?"

"The girl is better off than the boy," he said. "She could leave the hospital now if she wanted. But she doesn't want to be separated from her brother." He paused. "They would like to see you. I think they want to thank you."

No wonder the Aristo's guard had been angry. If his providers were in a Delos hospital, they were in neutral territory and couldn't be forced to return to him. But why did they want to thank me? I hadn't brought them to the hospital.

Then I realized that in the chaos I had created at the mansion—with the guards searching for me and their security systems going wild—the providers could have escaped.

"Yes," I said. "I see them."

The hospital was a ten-minute walk from the station. The nervoplex streets slumbered now, quiet under our feet, with no hover traffic. Even the light from the streetlamps was muted. The large moon had passed the high point of its arc in the sky and was headed down toward the horizon again, its disk shedding pale orange light over the sleeping city.

As we walked I glanced at the chief. "The providers—they from Tams?"

"Not originally. Both of their parents were servers brought to Tams a few years ago as part of an

Aristo's household."

"So these providers, they are born servers?"

"It's all they've ever known." The chief grimaced. "Christ, they can barely talk. Apparently even when they had the chance, they almost didn't make a run for it." He regarded me. "It took a lot of courage for them to do what they did."

*Translate 'Make a run for it,' I thought.*

In present context, it means attempt to escape, my spinal node answered.

No wonder the chief said they had courage. That was an understatement. To even think of escaping, they had to break years of conditioning. "You help them?" I asked.

He nodded. "When the boy is released from the hospital, we'll send them to Earth. They'll have a host family there, and counseling to help them adjust."

At least some benefit had come out of the mess I had made tonight. Now the providers had sanctuary, that word the Allies liked so much. Earth chose no side in the war between my people and the Traders, granting sanctuary to anyone who gave cause for needing it. I had always regarded them with suspicion because of that. Their sanctuary struck me as a convenient means for Imperial troublemakers to evade the authorities.

Tonight I saw it differently.

The providers were in a private room at the hospital. I recognized them as soon as the doctors ushered me into the room. They looked like fraternal twins, both about eighteen years old. The boy lay in the bed and the girl sat in a chair next to him, showing him a holobook. They jumped as the door opened, their faces going pale.

I hesitated at the doorway, then walked in. "My greetings." I spoke Eubian, the language of the server castes. It was named for Eu'be Qox, Jaibriol's great-grandfather and the first Emperor. Eube was also the word the Traders used for their empire, the Eubian Concord. That name had to be one of their more specious creations. I doubted any of the planets they conquered felt much "concord" with their unasked-for masters.

The girl watched me with eyes like pale seashells. Her brother sat up slowly. He wore pajamas, but I saw the welts on his wrists and knew there was worse under his clothes. I didn't want to imagine what his owner had done to him—and "owner" was the right word despite the Aristos' attempts to convince the rest of the universe that their providers were "favored subjects" rather than slaves.

The youth spoke with diffidence. "Are you the one who came to the house?"

I nodded. "I'm glad you got out."

The girl said, "We're sorry we caused you so much trouble."

"We really are sorry," the boy said. "We didn't mean to be a problem."

I couldn't believe they were apologizing to me. "I'm sorry I couldn't have come earlier." Say eighteen years earlier.

"We won't cause any more problems," the girl said.

I swallowed. "You never made any problem."

The longer I talked with them, the worse I felt. They kept apologizing. Their minds were open, unprotected; I knew their shame at having been providers, at having been the cause of so much commotion, at just plain having been. To say they didn't like themselves was the understatement of the century. The marks the guard had left on them went far deeper than welts.

Hadn't the heartbender I saw ten years ago, after my experience with Tarque, said something similar to me? I didn't want to think about that.

After we left the hospital, the police released me. They could have deported me for breaking their laws, but they showed no inclination to do it. I had a feeling the one they wanted to deport was the guard who had pressed the charges.

As I walked back to the inn, I brooded. How was I going to deal with knowing that the one human alive who could be my Rhon mate represented everything I most hated? I wondered if Jaibriol's father saw the irony of it, that in trying to create the ultimate weapon to destroy my people he had produced a remarkably decent human being.

Jaibriol's life, once he openly assumed his position as the Emperor's heir, would be hell. He would have to live as a Highton, trapped among a people who would sicken him. To survive he would have to become, in all appearances, just like them. If they ever learned the truth, they would turn on him in a way that would make the life of the two providers I had just met gentle in comparison. What would happen to Jaibriol when he realized the truth about his future?

I already knew the answer. I had seen it in my half brother Kurj, perhaps even in myself. The capacity of the human soul to harden was boundless.

But I didn't want to imagine Jaibriol as he would become. I wanted to remember him as I had known him tonight. Perhaps he would retain enough of that humanity so that someday he and a Skolian Emperor could meet at the peace table. He was the only Highton Emperor I could imagine who would ever genuinely talk peace with us. And that was another reason why I couldn't reveal what I had learned about him tonight.

I "knew" Jaibriol because I had melded with him. That was an experience my half brother Kurj would never share. Even in the immensely unlikely event that the opportunity presented itself, Kurj would never consent to it. Without it, he would never accept my conviction that Jaibriol was our one chance to end this war without losing it. Jaibriol's father and grandfather had created him to end the war, that was certain, but not by making peace. If Kurj ever learned that Ur Qox had sired an heir who could take control of the Skol-Net, he would never rest until he stood over the Highton Heir's lifeless body, preferably after Jaibriol had died a long, agonizing death.

I could barrier my mind to hide what I knew. But it would make a wall between me and everyone I loved. Rex would know something was wrong. He would never guess the truth but he would know something had changed.

It was still dark, long past midnight when I once again walked into the velvet and giltwood lobby at the inn. As I passed the front desk, the clerk looked up from the holobook she had been dozing over. "Excuse me, ma'am," she said in English. She reached under the counter and pulled out an envelope. "This was delivered for you about an hour ago."

Who on Delos would send me a note in the middle of the night? I took the envelope. "Thank you."

As I walked toward the stairs, I tore open the envelope. The handwritten note said: *I must talk to you. Come to dock four in the harbor.* There was no signature.

Damn. I was exhausted. The last thing I wanted now was to go run around the harbor. I went back to the front desk, where the clerk nodded over her book. "Miss?"

She opened her eyes. "Yes?"

I held up the envelope. "Who this come?"

She peered at me. "Pardon me?"

I had never understood why the Allies asked you to pardon them when you were the one being indecipherable. "This note," I said. "Who with it come?"

"A man. I don't know who he was."

"How he look?"

"Black hair. Dark eyes. He sounded Turkish."

"What Turkish?"

She smiled. "Turkey is a country on Earth."

Why would an Earth man want me to meet him at a remote dock in a sea harbor? It was crazy. I should go upstairs and sleep. But there was no way I could rest now until I found out what he wanted. So I headed outside again.

It took ten minutes to reach the harbor, which lay in a cove southeast of the Arcade. Breakers rolled in over reefs of knife-coral whose spires jutted out of the water, some a few centimeters high, others as tall as a person, still others soaring into the air for ten or more meters. Sparks flashed as iridescent insects flew in and out of the coral, building it up with secretions from their bodies just as the skeletons of sea animals extended the portions underwater. Glints of phosphorescence jumped in the sea, blues and greens, purples and pinks, flashes of yellow. The waves frothed around the spires and splashed high in bursts of spray. Gates and arches and channels had been cut in the coral, passages that allowed even the

largest freighters to enter the cove.

The moon hung at the horizon like a huge orange portal that rested on the sea, big enough to swallow a fleet of ships. The smell of salt was so thick I could almost taste it condensing out of the air onto my lips. The sweet odor of sealace tickled my nose as well. Fronds of the delicate plants lay everywhere, speckled with tiny bioluminescent insects, washed up by the breakers or dragged onto the piers by cargo handlers working on and around the ships.

Most of the piers were dark now, some empty, others with ships hunkered in their docks, groaning as the wind pulled at them. Lamps glared on pier twenty-seven, where a team of handlers loaded cargo onto a freighter with sails made from fluorescent purple nervoplex. Cranes swung boxes out over the water and into holds of the ship while the muscled handlers with their blue caps and red shirts shouted orders to each other.

Pier four was at the far end of the harbor. Darkness shrouded it, and a silence broken only by the lap-lap of waves against pilings. I walked under the pier, hidden in the shadows. It was getting cold now, enough so that I pulled my jacket tight and sealed it up the front. Breakers swirled around my boots, the water first covering the ground and then withdrawing to show me a stretch of gem-sand that sparkled blue and gold in the moonlight.

“Sauscony?”

I stopped. A tall figure stood by a piling. He had his collar turned up and a hood pulled over his head, but I knew him anyway. I doubted he could have heard me coming, yet he was looking straight at where I stood hidden.

“Jaibriol?” I asked.

He came over, pushing back his hood. In the shadows, when I couldn’t see that his eyes were red or that his hair glinted, he looked even more beautiful than before.

“I had begun to think you wouldn’t come,” he said.

I held up the envelope. “I just got your note. How long have you been waiting?”

“An hour.”

That long? Why? “The clerk said an Earth man brought it.”

“I came here in the dark so no one would recognize me. Then I paid a man to take the note.”

“But how did you get out of the mansion without alerting your guards? Isn’t the cyberlock on?”

“I talked them out of it for another few hours.” Dryly he added, “I’ve become quite good at it. If Rak isn’t there.” He grimaced. “Rak always insists on the field. I almost think he enjoys seeing it hurt me.”

“Is Rak the guard who has the two providers?”

“Had,” Jaibriol said. “They ran away.”

I exhaled. “He probably does enjoy seeing it hurt you, even if he doesn’t consciously acknowledge it. You have to barrier your mind against him better.”

For a moment he just watched me. Then he spoke. “You tell me Aristos are sadists. You show me horrors. And Rak’s providers refuse to come home. I want to disbelieve—” He paused. “But regardless of what you say, my *guard* is not an Aristo.”

“He has Aristo blood,” I said. “Probably more than you do yourself.”

His anger sparked. “You insult my bloodline without even a thought of what that means to me.”

I laid my hand on his arm. “I’m sorry. But it’s the truth.”

When I touched him, he stiffened. Then he sighed, as if capitulating, and pulled me into his arms. I was the one who went rigid then. But feeling him warm and firm against my body was too much. I laid my head against his chest and wrapped my arms around his waist. He bent his head, searching for my face with an unexpected clumsiness. His prodigious intellect and Highton manner made him seem older, enough so that I had forgotten he was hardly more than a teenager, one who had spent his entire life alone.

As soon as he kissed me, I forgot his age. Our minds started to blend again, an intimacy that made my desire for him flare like fire hitting oil.

Then an image of Rex flickered in my mind. My longing for what Jaibriol could give me was irrelevant. I had given Rex a pledge.

I pushed him away. "I'm sorry."

At first he wouldn't let go. Finally, when I didn't respond, he dropped his arms. "I hope this man Rex appreciates his fortune."

"I shouldn't have come here."

"Stay. Please." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. It was a V-script, the written record of a virtual telegram sent to his computer. "I received this two hours ago. I want you to tell me your version of what it means."

I took the card—and froze. Its seal was unmistakable; it came from his father, Emperor Qox. The heading indicated it had been decoded by Jaibriol's console, so it must have been sent in secret. The Emperor had certainly never meant for an Imperial Jageronaut to see it.

The message was brief: J'abriol—I have sent flags to smooth the situation on Tams. Proceed there to oversee.

I closed my eyes, then opened them again and reread it to make sure I had understood correctly. A "flag" was a battlecruiser and its associated warships. "What have you been told this means?"

"Nothing. But I can guess. Smoothing the situation must mean he plans to intimidate them, maybe fire on the planet." He spoke freely, willingly divulging information to an enemy officer without even the guarded tone I had heard him use with everyone else. "My father wants me there by the time the action is finished to see firsthand how to deal with a problem like Tams." Self-disgust filled his voice. "I am not much of an heir. I think he means for that to change now."

"You think Tams is a problem?"

"Yes."

I clenched my fist, crumpling the V-script. "That 'problem' comes from a lot of desperate people terrified of their Highton conquerors."

"Sauscony." He took hold of my shoulders. "You see the situation through your own biases. I know you believe them. But I see it differently."

I jerked away from him, wondering if I should hate him after all. "Then see this, Highton." I crammed the card back into his hand. "We've intercepted these coded messages before. You want to know what 'smoothing' means? Those warships are going to destroy the Tams atmosphere."

"How can you believe such a lie?"

"Lie?" I wanted to shake him. "I've *seen* it. Your father had it done to both CJ4 and Bullseye when the people overthrew their Aristo lords there."

His anger flared. "The people of CJ4 destroyed themselves with chemical warfare. I've never heard of Bullseye. Perhaps your propaganda ministers created it."

"I don't need to convince you." My voice quieted. "Your life may have been sheltered, but you're no fool. As soon as you start living among the Hightons you'll know the truth. You must already suspect, despite what you say, or you would have never asked me to come here tonight."

There was no arrogance in his face, only pain. "If my father tells me the truth, I must believe you are a monster. I should kill you now before you have a chance to become Emperor of Skolia. If you tell me the truth, then my father is a monster and he is the one I should kill." He spread his hands. "Kill a person I love? I could never do it. Not my father. Not you."

I stared at him. "How can you think you love me? You've only known me a few hours."

"We've known each other our entire lives." He touched my temple. "We lived them together tonight."

I shoved his hand away. He was wrong. I could never love the Trader Emperor's son. It was a lie.

Jaibriol spoke softly. "It won't go away, Sauscony. No matter how much you deny it, we will live with what happened tonight for the rest of our lives. If I become Emperor and you become Emperor, then we will have to live with it even as we swear to destroy everything the other values most."

"You won't value what you inherit. You'll hate everything it represents. And you'll live in terror, knowing you're only a breath away from becoming its victim."

"If that is true, then I will change it."

"Change it? Gods, Jaibriol. The structure of your empire is built, from its foundations up, on the



Aristo need for providers. It's not a social problem you can correct, or a few evil people you can remove from office. You can no more stop their need for providers than you can eliminate their drive to eat or sleep. Try and they'll crucify you."

His fist clenched. "You're wrong."

I spoke more gently. "I'm sorry for what your life is going to become. I wish I could change it."

"I don't want pity. I want you."

His longing was so intense I could almost touch it, the ache of a human being denied human contact his entire life, a child denied love from the day of his birth. And I wanted him so much it hurt. But if I admitted it even here, where no one but he and I would ever know, I could never again face anyone else I loved.

"I can't stay with you," I said.

He took a deep breath and spoke in his cold Highton accent. "Then go."

Somehow I made myself turn and walk away into the shadows.

## 6. Zabo Squad

I ran back to the inn, calling with my mind to Rex, Helda, and Taas: *Get up. NOW.* When I strode into the lobby, Rex was running down the staircase that swept out like the train of a blood-red wedding dress. I sped past the sleeping clerk and met Rex halfway up the stairs.

"I found out why the Aristo is here." I paused, out of breath from running. "He's Qox's son."

Rex stared at me. "What?"

"The Heir." Now that I was saying it out loud, I heard how fantastic it sounded. "That man we saw—he's the Highton Heir."

Helda and Taas appeared in the hallway at the top of the stairs, striding around the corner in time to hear my statement. They made it down to where I stood with Rex in two seconds.

"His name is Jaibriol," I said. "Jaibriol Qox." I looked around at them. "It's why Rex and I thought he was familiar. He looks like his grandfather."

"How you find all this out?" Helda asked.

"I figured out where he was staying. I broke into his computer system there. His father sent him a coded message about Tams."

"You've been busy," Rex said.

I grimaced. "I've been arrested, mug shot, lined up with five clones, questioned by the politest police alive and gone to the hospital to see two providers who escaped when I crashed Qox's mansion. They asked the Allies for sanctuary."

"You did all that in one night?" Taas asked.

Helda smiled. "What you need us for, Soz?"

I took a breath. "Because Ur Qox is going to flood out Tams."

"What does that mean?" Taas asked.

"At Bullseye he did it by converting part of the planet's moon into hydrogen. At CJ4 he used an asteroid. They pour the hydrogen into the atmosphere and use gigantic discharges to make it react with the oxygen there and produce water." I grimaced. "It's going to rain good and hard on Tams. When it's over, there won't be any oxygen left in the atmosphere and the surface will be flooded." I thought of the Earth religious texts I had read. No ark was going to save Tams. When Lucifer impersonated God, nobody survived.

The muscles in Rex's jaw stiffened. He and I had been with the battalion that found the remains of CJ4. ISC had kept the record of what we found under tight security. We didn't want a panic, as the citizenry of Skolia realized that if Qox wiped out our precarious defenses he could destroy our worlds the same way he had done his own.

"When does it happen?" Helda asked.

"He's sent flags," I said. "But I don't think they're there yet."

"We have to send Tams a warning," Taas said. "Tell them to evacuate."

Rex spoke quietly. "Evacuate in what?"

*Efficient.* That was the word Rex had used for the Trader sabotage on Tams that Comtrace had told us about. I hadn't realized just how accurate that assessment was. How could Tams evacuate without functioning ships?

Taas looked from me to Rex. "Even without their factories, they still must have been trying to rebuild their ship drives."

"Rebuilding isn't their biggest problem," Rex said. "It's the Evolving Intelligence pilots on the ships."

I nodded. "Tams is a mining station. They don't have the expertise to program an EI pilot from scratch."

"We can send them some," Helda said. "We make them from the EI's on our own ships."

"Yes." Taas tensed as if readying himself for launch. "We can put them in robot drones and coordinate their launch from the stand-off weapons platform in E-sector."

Rex considered them. "If the drones don't make it through, we won't have time for a second go-around before the Trader flags arrive."

"The rebels have control of the ground defenses," Taas said.

"Even so," Rex said. "The orbital defenses aren't trifles. And we have to make it on the first try. Once the flags get there, nothing is going to get in."

They looked at me. I knew what decision they were waiting to hear. Warfare had evolved terrifyingly beyond the abilities of humans to fight it. Although drones with EI pilots couldn't match the human mind when it came to innovation, no human could survive against the near light-speed processing abilities of a drone or its ability to endure immense accelerations.

Except a Jagernaut.

The enhanced link between our brains and our ships boosted our minds into the ship's EL. Add to that the advances in stasis technology and the end result was a weapon with the speed and endurance of a drone and the superior reasoning capability of the human mind.

"We're the only squad in this quadrant," I said.

"When do we leave?" Taas asked.

That was it. No one said a word about our nil chances of success. They just waited to hear my answer, waited to follow me into a fight we couldn't win. Even if we got through to Tams there was no way they could evacuate in time.

Rex's thought came to me. If we save only one life, it's worth it.

*Rex ...* Somehow I hid my thoughts. I had been so afraid that what had happened tonight would destroy what I felt for him. But as soon as his thoughts had touched mine I knew our connection was as strong as ever. This was Rex, who had been with me for years, more than a friend, soon to be a husband. Now I had to do what I swore would never happen—send the man I loved into combat. Yes, I had been doing it for years, but I had only acknowledged the truth of that tonight.

They were all watching me, waiting for orders.

I took a breath. "First we send a report to headquarters." I doubted backup could reach Tams in time, but we had to try. "Then we leave."

It was still hours before sunrise when we jogged out of the gate at the starport. Our ships waited near the terminal, Jag starships, the single-pilot craft that gave Jagernauts their name. Technically the spacecraft were called JG-17 fighters; the name Jag came from "lightning jag," the nickname the test pilots gave to the prototype, the JG-1.

The ships stood poised on the tarmac like alabaster works of art. On the ground, they were elongated, with wings extended; in flight, they would change according to our needs: spread wings for subsonic speeds; wings drawn against the body for hypersonic flight; rounder shape to minimize surface area during interstellar flight; rounded for stealth or for battle. Right now the hull was smooth, the weapons hidden in protected bays.

I strode next to my Jag, my hand sliding across its surface like a skater on ice. Its hull was tellerene, a composite material threaded with microscopic wires made from tubular fullerene molecules. Tellerene was lightweight, fatigue resistant, and retained its strength even at the high temperatures of a hypersonic

reentry. It was also self-repairing; the dangling bonds in a broken fullerene molecule reattached themselves, mending the wire. The hull showed fewer of the pits, grooves, and other damage that came from traveling in space, a smoothness that was one more factor in optimizing its performance. Like their pilots, Jags were rare, top-of-the-line technology, fast and deadly.

I stopped midway between the nose and the tail of the ship. Had I not already known about the tiny silver prong there, I might have never located it in the featureless hull. As soon as I pushed my wrist against the prong, it snicked into the socket there.

*Connection*, my spinal node thought.

Verified. The response came from Zabo, the ship's Evolving Intelligence.

The airlock sucked open, starting as a tiny circular hole that widened into a human-size oval so fast its edges shimmered with the motion. The outer and inner doors opened simultaneously; Zabo had analyzed the atmosphere out here and found it acceptable.

As I climbed into the cabin the inner hull activated, glowing with diffuse light. The cabin was small. Equipment filled the free space and the bulkheads: cocoon seats and a bunk, gear, hand weapons, food dispenser, waste processor, water line, anything else I needed to survive in space.

I crossed to the cockpit. When I touched the membrane that separated it from the cabin, the material dilated the same way the hatch had opened, like the shutter on a high-speed holocam. Inside the cockpit, I slid into the pilot's seat. It folded around me like a glove, releasing its cocoon, a swath of spun material thick enough to cushion against acceleration but not too thick to interfere with my movements. Then the exoskeleton snapped into place, encasing me in a framework of equipment. A visor lowered over my head, data scrolling across its display.

As soon as the seat registered my weight, the forward holoscreens switched on, giving a three-dimensional view of the area outside of the ship. Rex's ship was to starboard, Taas and Helda's to port. I could see the airfields, with their runways and launch pads, stretching out in the distance across the flat landscape.

The collar of the pilot's seat closed around my neck, its psiphon plugging into the socket at the base of my brain stem. Zabo's familiar "voice" spoke in my mind, androgynous and quiet: Zabo attending.

*Acknowledged*, I thought. I needed no other log-on procedure, no security codes, nothing. Zabo was tuned to my brain; had anyone else tried to use the Jag without authorization it would have locked up every system on the ship.

Boosting to psiberspace, Zabo thought.

I entered the Skol-Net as a black wavepacket this time, rippling across the grid in a hill of darkness. When I passed other glitters, they showed dimly through the blackness of my packet. A spark appeared next to me, growing into a second wavepacket, a red one scintillating with fiery glitters. A gold packet appeared next, followed by a green one.

Redzabo here, Rex thought.

Goldzabo here, Helda thought.

Greenzabo here, Taas thought.

*Zabo acknowledging*, I answered. Our four-way exchange flashed by in a fraction of a second.

A psicon in the shape of a small lock blinked in the corner of my mental display. As my attention flicked to it, Zabo thought, Security cloak at full strength. Presence of Zabo Squad undetectable to other users.

*Link*, I thought.

Redzabo linked, Zabo answered. Goldzabo linked. Greenzabo linked.

With the Jags amplifying our connection, I picked up Rex, Helda, and Taas so well that their thoughts murmured in the background of mine. When I concentrated on Taas's voice it increased in volume, resolving into his mental commands to Greenzabo. I relaxed my concentration and his words receded back into the murmur. All of their mental displays were there, in the background, waiting to be called forth if I needed them.

It had taken years of training to discipline my mind so that I could separate the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feel of that mental display—what Jagernauts called the mindscape—from my perceptions of

my own environment. I had to retrain my mind so I could think my own thoughts within that constant background noise. Most psibernauts never managed it, which was another reason why so few Jag pilots existed.

I rubbed my temples. We paid a price for this link; the energy required to maintain it, both in terms of our own minds and of our ships' resources, limited the circle to no more than four Jagernauts. Nor could humans sustain the intensity of that boosted connection for long. It stripped us of all privacy, not only from each other but from the onslaught of our enemies' emotions. But when it worked, the Jag link was a miracle. We could communicate anywhere, under any conditions, instantaneously.

*Ready?* I thought.

Redzabo ready, Rex answered.

Goldzabo ready, Helda answered.

After a moment I thought, *Taas?*

Another pause. Then: *Greenzabo ready.*

Do you have a problem? I asked.

No. Just took a moment to settle in.

His delay was normal for a new squad member. But in the situation we were headed for it could be fatal. Under normal circumstances I would never have expected an untried pilot to fly this mission. But we had no choice. I just hoped his virgin flight with the squad didn't end up as his last.

*Coordinate your checks,* I thought. Having each ship verify the pre-flight tests of the others gave a four-way check of our readiness. We ran the Jags through their paces: nav, cyber, weapons, com, hydraulics.

Then Zabo thought, Checking inversion engines.

Inversion. It still had the power to fascinate me even after so many years of familiarity. As Zabo ran through its checks of the engines, my thoughts followed like a spellbound child. We hadn't conquered the light barrier—we had snuck around it. To reach supraluminal velocities should have meant going through the speed of light, where the mass of a ship became infinite compared to slower objects, its length shrunk to nothing and its time stopped. It was impossible. For centuries humans had known that no ship could travel faster than the speed of light.

For centuries humans had been wrong.

The solution turned out to be simple. At supraluminal speeds, mass and energy became imaginary, square roots of negative numbers. To reach the supraluminal universe, all we had to do was add an imaginary part to our speed. Poof. The singularity at light speed disappeared. A ship went around light speed like a flycar leaving the road to go around a tree. Except that for starships, the "road" was the real universe.

Of course doing the math had been a lot easier than making the engine, or dealing with the bizarre effects of faster than light travel. But when our ancestors finally succeeded, the way to the stars had opened.

We adopted the word "inversion" from the Allies because it so aptly described how the process felt. But it came from a far more esoteric source. "Inversion" referred to a mathematical correspondence between superluminal and subluminal space derived by Earth scientists during the mid to late twentieth century.

What the engine actually did was rotate the ship out of the real universe into an imaginary one. During rotation we passed through an ill-defined plane of existence where we were part real and part imaginary. The transition was disorienting, to say the least; I had no desire to find out what would happen if we spent longer than an instant there. So we got as close to the "tree" as possible before we left the road; we accelerated as close to light speed as our fuel allowed before we rotated in or out of superluminal space.

Unfortunately getting close to the tree meant coming out of inversion at relativistic speeds, blasting the area with high energy radiation and particles. Trying that too close to solid objects courted disaster. Coming out anywhere except in a near vacuum also meant the ship displaced molecules of matter with explosive power, blowing up itself as well as whatever it had hit.

Inversion had brutally changed the face of warfare. Technology advanced to the point where normal humans could no longer cope with combat. With warcraft and missiles that could burst out of superluminal space at close to light speed, the concept of a front line became obsolete. Our defenses developed along with our offensive capabilities, making it possible to protect our settled worlds in marginal safety. But we couldn't watch all of space. Huge regions remained contested, places where no clear boundaries existed defining what was Eubian, what was Skolian, what was Allied.

Inversion check complete, Zabo thought.

*Thruster check.* Although close to planets the Jag used a fusion engine, in space it relied on photon thrusters.

Thrusters initialized and ready, Zabo answered.

And the fuel?

Containment on positrons is secure.

*Good.* The interior of the magnetic containment bottle was a universe of its own, a place that was both real and imaginary, and that existed only while the inversion engine operated. During flight it drew on the immense cosmic ray flux in complex space, collecting more fuel. The bottle spread its contents through complex space by varying the imaginary parts of charge and mass, which let it gather and hold far more charge than was possible in real space alone. The situation was simpler than with people; the psychological trauma of having both real and imaginary parts had no effect on particles.

A selector culled relativistic electrons from space while the fuel bottle leaked positrons into the interaction area. Matter/Antimatter. It interacted in glorious bursts of energy, producing our thrust. Gamma ray shields and superconducting grids protected the ship from being destroyed by its own waste heat while the thrust accelerated it at extraordinary g-forces.

The last element was a stasis coil that kept the quantum wavefunction of the ship from changing during acceleration. The g-forces couldn't hurt us because our molecular configuration was fixed during stasis. We didn't freeze; our atoms continued to vibrate, rotate and otherwise behave as they had in the instant the coil activated. The atomic clock that measured our time in stasis continued to work. But none of the atoms could change their quantum state, which meant the ship and everything inside of it became rigid even to the huge forces we experienced. Without that protection, the g-forces would have smashed us flat.

Interrupt, Zabo thought.

*What's going on?* I asked. The image of an Allied satellite intruded in my mind, shown with so much detail that I could see the bolts in its hull. A message appeared below the satellite, written in code. As the gibberish flashed across my mindscape, Zabo gave me both a visual and verbal translation.

Frigging rockets. The message was about me. The Allies were sending their report of my arrest to Imperial Space Command. It had been translated from Greek into Skolian by Tiller Smith.

Zabo, why did that display come up now?

When I detected the transmission, your spinal node picked it up and flagged on the name "Tiller Smith."

I directed a thought to my spinal node. *Why did you flag on Tiller Smith?*

It registered 82 percent on your interest scale, the node thought.

That made no sense. Why should it calculate Tiller Smith would interest me so much? The last thing I needed, when I was preparing to go into battle, was my spinal node dumping unnecessary satellite images into my pre-flight mindscape.

Run a diagnostic on your flag routines, I thought. There's no reason for Tiller Smith to register that high.

Checking. Then: The name Tiller Smith did not cause the flag. It was your response to the data in a book he gave you.

Why would a book of indecipherable poetry agitate the node so much? *Cancel all flags concerned with Verses on a Windowpane.*

Canceled. The satellite display vanished.

Primary Valdoria, Taas thought. I'm getting a spillover onto my grid of your satellite input. I can't cut

it off. What commands did you try? I asked.

Stop, Cancel, Break, Quit, Exit, Bye, System, Chop, Stomp, Flush, Dump, and Curse.

Curse? What is that?

I swore at it.

I smiled. *Try Erase.*

*That worked.* His Erase psicon appeared in my mind, a buxom woman wearing a few scraps of cloth and holding a can of paint. She painted the hem of her skirt and it disappeared, showing even more of her thigh. Then she vanished back to Greenzabo.

I laughed. You all ready to go?

*Ready,* Rex thought.

*Ready,* Helda thought.

*Ready,* Taas thought.

Then let's do it, I thought.

Priming fusion engines, Zabo thought. For near-planet maneuvers the Jag used a fusion reactor that produced heated plasma gas for thrust.

The control tower cleared us for takeoff on launchpad twelve. But as we taxied toward it, the traffic controller's voice crackled on my audiocom. "Sorry, Primary Valdoria. The four of you will have to hold. We've got a snag on twelve."

"Acknowledged." As we slowed to a stop, I thought, *What's the problem?*

Zabo gave me an image of several ships sitting on a launchpad we had to pass to reach twelve. These craft are preparing to lift off.

The Trader insignia of a crouching black puma gleamed on their hulls. The ships waited in the predawn air, the glare from lamps on the launchpad making their hulls glitter like ice. The sleekest was a Streamliner, the starship of preference for Highton Aristos. The three heavier craft were Escorts, bodyguards for a Streamliner. Given that most Hightons traveled with only one Escort, two at the most, I had a good idea what passenger this Streamliner carried.

Rex spoke in my mind. *Qox.*

*Yes,* I thought.

Taas's thought sparked like an iron arc. *We should blast him off the pad.*

Helda's thought rumbled. *Ya.*

I scowled. What you're talking about is assassination.

*Ya,* Helda agreed.

*Let's do it,* Taas thought.

I couldn't believe it. They were serious. They wanted to go out there and blow up a civilian ship with no provocation, murdering a major interstellar leader. *Cut it out,* I told them.

All of my displays indicated launchpad twelve was clear. I was sure we could have used it. I also had no doubt the tower didn't want us anywhere near the Trader ships. They probably feared we would do exactly what Taas and Helda suggested.

Warning lights were flaring around the launchpad now, strobing the darkness. Clouds of steam swirled up and around the ships. Then one of the Escorts lifted into the sky, blasting the pad with its exhaust and lighting up the area. The other ships followed in a staggered pattern, the rumble of their leaving growling through my mind and my bones.

We hurtled through space, racing the specter of Qox's flags. In inversion, we could go as fast as we wanted, just never *slower* than light speed.

If anyone on Delos could have watched, they would have seen our ships get shorter and our mass increase as we got closer to the speed of light. After we went superluminal, speeding up made our length increase and our mass dwindle. Even when we reached one million times light speed, the ship looked normal to me; I was, after all, at rest relative to it. But to anyone on Delos, our mass was just a few grams and our length thousands of kilometers.

At speeds faster than 141 percent of light, time contracted. Right now we could shoot through space for a century and only an hour would pass on Delos. If we ever reached infinite speed our massless Jags

would stretch out the length of the universe and time would stand still everywhere else while forever passed for us.

But we had a problem. Close to light speed, time dilated; it passed more slowly for us than for Tams. We had skimmed too close to light speed when we inverted and time dilation had jumped us a few hours into the future, stealing valuable moments we desperately needed.

Zabo, plot pastward course, I thought. Compensate for the time dilation.

Course plotted.

*Good.* At faster than light speeds we could travel into the past relative to Tams. If anyone there could have watched, they would have seen this: after we left Delos, while we were en route to Tams, four new ships and four antimatter ships appeared in the Tams system, pair-produced from photon annihilations near the planet. The matter ships and their pilots were identical to Zabo squad. In fact, they *were* us.

While the matter ships continued on to Tams, the antimatter squad returned to Delos in a time-reversed path, flying backward at superluminal speeds, gaining fuel rather than losing it, like a movie run in reverse. At the point where I had just given the order to “turn around” and go pastward, Tams would have seen us meet the antimatter ships and annihilate. The energy of the photons created by our mutual destruction balanced that lost when the new ships and their antimatter siblings were created.

Since we were at rest relative to our ships, we saw no bizarre creations or destructions. We simply traveled from Delos to Tams. In any case, the end result was the same; our four Jags arrived at Tams sometime after we left Delos.

I vehemently wished we could reach Tams *before* we left Delos, with enough time to evacuate the planet. But no craft or missile had ever succeeded in thwarting the laws of cause and effect by coming out of inversion before entering it. The best we could do was come out at our destination the instant after we inverted near our point of origin. Realistically it took longer, anywhere from hours to days. The farther we traveled, the more errors accumulated and the bigger the discrepancy. I just hoped we made it in time. Although Qox’s flags had farther to go, they carried entire systems dedicated to optimizing spacetime variables.

But we had an advantage they could never match.

No electromagnetic signal could reach a superluminal ship. The only way to communicate was to shoot superluminal particles—tachyons—at one another. But no one had yet figured out how to make tachyons reliably carry information, particularly given that *during* inversion signals could arrive before they were sent. So inverted ships traveled in limbo, drifting apart. A squad that entered in tight formation would leave spread but across both space and time. The greater their shift in time, the longer they had to hail one another; the greater their drift in space, the farther those hails needed to travel.

Except for Jags.

Rex, Helda, Taas and I were one mind. More than one mind. We were a part of the Skol-Net, which meant we had instantaneous communication not only among ourselves but also with the minds linked into a star-spanning computer network. We coordinated our actions with a precision that challenged light speed itself.

But psiberspace had limitations. If we tried to learn our future by entering the Skol-Net after time dilation jumped us futureward, we would link to a future timeline and *still* be in it when we returned to the present. The time needed to dissolve and reform the link could kill us. All our peek at the future would tell us was that we died in battle because we had no idea what the ships we were fighting were doing when we engaged them.

We could check the future, then drop out of the Skol-Net and re-enter it after we returned to the present. But that meant traveling through inversion without a psilink. We would drift in space and time, nullifying the very link that was our greatest strength. The very act of checking our future increased our chances that we would learn we died in combat.

Zabo, I thought. Check the Net. Any readings on Qox’s flags?

An Imperial sentry has sighted Eubian warships. Their trajectory intersects the orbit of Tams. Estimated arrival times appeared in my mindscape.

How many ships? I asked.

Different views of the Trader craft appeared. Two battlecruisers, an orbital platform and three Shieldcraft. Also one labcraft.

I grimaced. That had to be the Trader flags. A labcraft could convert an asteroid or moon into hydrogen to react with the Tams atmosphere. At least the flags had no idea we were coming. I wanted to be in and out of Tams before they showed up.

What about the Streamliner that took off from Delos? I asked.

Zabo replaced the display of the Trader ships with images of Jaibriol's ships. Their present course puts them at Tams at roughly the same time as the Eubian flags.

*Any data on the Tams situation?*

Our most recent intelligence reports the rebels still control the ground defenses. However, all existing Tams links to the Skol-Net are currently inoperable.

That was no surprise. The Traders would have destroyed those links as fast as possible to make sure our intelligence was dated.

Taas sent in a thought. What about orbital defense systems?

He sounded calm, but I felt his tension. Zabo responded to my thought by showing me Taas in his cockpit. Data flashed under the image: pulse, blood pressure, temperature, breathing rate, brain activity.

*Hey, Taas thought. I'm fine.*

*There will be hordes of sat-bangs in orbit,* I thought. Those low value decoy satellites, usually good for one missile or an old style laser, had electronic signatures that made them appear as high value targets to incoming craft or missiles. *Robot drones too. Possibly a robot crewed Sentinel.*

Why a Sentinel? Helda asked. Putting a platform in orbit makes it vulnerable.

Zabo swapped to Rex, drawing on his expertise. They have no reason to expect an attack, he thought. There are no moons to put a base on, so the Sentinel's vulnerability may be outweighed by the fact that the rebels control the ground defenses.

How about manned Solos? Taas asked.

Only a few, Rex thought. Normally ground based. But they may be in orbit here.

*Especially given the EIs they carry,* I thought. All the rebels needed to do was capture one Solo and they had an EI to adapt for their own ships.

The possibility of a Sentinel worried me. That platform would make the orbital defense system even more deadly. In theory, a Jag squadron coming out of inversion could take on an orbital platform and survive; realistically, if we didn't knock it out immediately, when we had the advantage of surprise, our chances plummeted.

Our best bet was to reinvert as close to Tams as possible, launching a cloud of smart missiles. The immense kinetic energy of our near light speed velocity would make our missiles into bullets with the power of megaton explosives. Well-settled planets had defenses against relativistic attack, but Tams was a small station in a backwater region of space. Also, the Traders knew it was in our best interest to make no overt moves against them. Right now they were probably concentrating on the rebels.

But all that meant was that we had a chance of success. Whether or not it was more than vanishingly small was another story. I had seen stats on the Tams ODS, its orbital defense system. It wasn't trivial. And since Tams had been knocked out of the Skol-Net, our intelligence on it was incomplete.

What about tau missiles? Helda asked.

*They've got them,* I thought. *Just hope it's not too many.* Taus were equipped with inversion drives. Given that the problem the Traders faced was on the planet, though, I hoped they had put the expensive and bulky tau missiles low on their list of priorities.

Of course, they could have made short work of the rebellion by smashing a tau into Tams at relativistic speed. The rebels had made the same assumption as had the rest of the same universe, that Ur Qox wouldn't destroy a desirable territory.

We had been wrong, all of us. The Tams resistance was a symbol of defiance, one far more potent in Qox's obsessed mind than any of us had realized, powerful enough that he wanted them destroyed in the most dramatic way possible as a warning to any others who thought to defy his rule.

I input my conclusions into the link. When we reach Tams, our advantages will be surprise, speed,



and our Jag link. Disadvantages: we're four Jags against a full ODS and we can't communicate with Tams until we come out of inversion. Strategy: We reinvert close to the planet, only twenty million kilometers out, coming in with a spread of a hundred thousand kilometers between ships. We transmit our warning to the rebels using neutrino communicators and exhaust modulation. The Traders would be hard pressed to stop either; the gamma source produced by our exhaust would be a spectacular beacon, and neutrinos went through almost anything.

*Immediately upon reinversion we release a cloud of .89c MIRVs.* The multiple independently targeted reentry vehicles would travel at 89 percent of light speed, giving them the energy equivalent of megaton bombs. *After we knock out the ODS, we deliver the EIs.*

*Understood.* The response echoed from all four ships.

Ready to reinvert, Zabo thought.

I fired the photon thrusters—and went into stasis. The only way I knew I hadn't been conscious while we decelerated was by the discontinuous change in speed registered on my displays. I fired the thrusters again and the Jag decelerated more, slowing down in a series of jumps I perceived as a continuous process.

The stars moved forward, converging on a point directly in front of the ship. Their colors shifted toward blue until they went ultraviolet and disappeared from my screens. Zabo overlaid a grid on the holomaps showing the position of the stars as they collapsed into the point—

—and we roared out of inversion in perfect formation, at the same instant, blasting our warning to Tams as we hurtled toward the planet, preceded by a swarm of MIRVs.

Zabo flooded my mind with data; the Tams ODS was meeting us with what looked like an entire fleet of Sentinels. But I recognized those energy signatures. Most came from decoys, I was sure of it.

Taus sighted—disappeared, Zabo thought.

Evade!

—and I came out of stasis. Zabo had thrown the Jag into such an abrupt course change that the stasis coil had kicked in, protecting me from the lethal accelerations.

Taus detonated to port, Zabo thought. Stats poured in, giving me the analysis far faster than my unboosted brain could ever have absorbed it. Tau antimissiles equipped with inversion drives were catching our MIRVs and inverting. They targeted our positions and reinverted, exploding both themselves and their MIRV captives in violent bursts of radiation.

At these speeds the taus had to invert to catch us. But their foray through relativistic and superluminal regimes threw them off. Had they been able to track us while they were traveling in inversion, our evasive tactics might have failed. As it was, they came out seconds too late. We had shot past the point where they expected us.

We were far beyond the planet's orbit now, headed toward the Tams sun. We accelerated again, going in and out of stasis as we pushed closer to light speed.

*Invert,* I thought.

My stomach wrenched with the familiar twisting sensation. We entered superluminal space and kept accelerating, hurtling at millions of times light speed. Time went faster here for us than for Tams, so that we could come around and re-enter the system with only seconds passing since we left it.

Reinversion brought us out a few million kilometers from Tams, flying toward the planet from the sun, spraying the last of our MIRVs in a cloud ahead of us.

ODS sterilized, Zabo thought.

*Verify.* The thought came from all four of us at once.

Verified. Zabo gave us the stats. We had eliminated the entire system: taus, decoys, drones, and a Sentinel orbiting platform.

I heard an indrawn breath over the com channel connected to Taas's Jag. Helda whooped and Rex sent me an image of his face with a wickedly exultant grin. I was grinning myself. We had done it!

Taas's laugh rumbled in my mind. The ODS were against us, but we beat them.

I smiled. Continue dumping velocity on approach to Tams.

We "braked" down, flicking into stasis during deceleration, again, again, we were nearing Tams now,

slowed down almost enough for atmospheric entry, again—

I came out of stasis to the scream of alarms. Stats reeled through my mindscape: Solos and cybernetic drones were boiling up from the planet.

*Damn! Engage shrouds!*

Three voices answered me in a lightspeed pulse of thought. Engaged.

We disappeared. Blackbody shielding turned the alabaster sheen of our hulls into surfaces that reflected no light. At best, it was minimal stealth; the Traders knew we were here, and every time we accelerated our exhaust gave us away.

Helda, get down as far as you can, I thought. We'll cover you. Drop the EIs in a drone. Whether or not the rebels could recover it was another story. But we had no choices now. We had lost our advantages of speed and surprise, and our MIRVs were gone. Nor could we use any more inversion tricks; to invert we had to accelerate to near light speed, which would mean leaving Helda undefended while she tried to make the drop.

The Solos and drones were coming from an underground base. Analysis said we were seeing the beleaguered remains of the ground defense. Scan said most of the ground defenses had been destroyed. Zabo calculated an 84 percent probability that the rebels had been overcome, and had blown up the installations rather than let them be recaptured by the Traders.

*Prime Annihilators*, I thought. Like Jumblers and photon thrusters, these guns worked on pair annihilation. Inversion technology had opened the way for efficient antimatter weapons. Annihilators used antiprotons, with energies two hundred times greater than positrons, millions of times greater than the wimpy bitons in Jumblers. After being accelerated, the beam was neutralized and focused by running it through foils where it picked up positrons.

Despite the drawbacks of beam weapons, that they were easier to avoid than smart missiles, Annihilators were the best offense against ships that used stasis "shields." An object in stasis could survive immense forces—including enemy fire. Although a ship in stasis was more fragile to missile hits than to acceleration, it was still difficult to destroy. Annihilating matter in stasis was easier than deforming it, making the beam weapons vital in combat.

Zabo, I thought. Do any of the drones or Solos have inversion capability?

Yes. Zabo showed me four drones and five Solos with photon thrusters. Three of the Solos had MIRV capability.

Rex swore, and my fists clenched. Those three Solos could try the same gambit we had used to take out the ODS. Yes, we had warning and could use decoy dust to confuse their MIRVs, but I didn't need an EI analysis to see how slim our chances were. We had one advantage: the Solos had no way to coordinate during inversion. They couldn't invert or reinvert simultaneously, particularly not with us harrying them, which meant the first to launch its MIRVs would as likely destroy the other Solos as us.

The question was: were they willing to kill each other to kill us?

I didn't want to find out. We had to destroy them before they had a chance to try.

As Red and Gold closed on two of the Solos, Zabo showed me a drone on an intercept course with us. Firing, Zabo thought.

My Annihilator cut through the magnetic fields shielding the drone. No beam was perfectly neutral and mag-shields deflected charged particles. But most of the shot reached its target. Where it hit, annihilations created pion showers, which started other devastatingly high energy processes, giving birth to particles and radiation that tore through the fusion engines, the weapons bays, the inversion engines, the generators powering the antimatter containment fields—

—and the drone disappeared in a silent burst of radiation and exploding debris. Part of it vanished with the eerie *sucked away* effect created when real matter collapsed into the complex space within a fuel containment bottle.

Warning: Zabo thought. Greenzabo detected.

Taas fired at one of the MIRV Solos even though thousands of kilometers still separated them. Zabo highlighted his shot on my display, red for a tau missile. It streaked out like a miniature—and volatile—starship. Taus were too bulky for a Jag to carry many; Taas had just used a fourth of his

supply.

Lost a fourth of his supply. The Solo caught it with an Annihilator shot. The tau exploded close enough to destroy the Solo, but the ship remained whole, thrown into stasis by its EI. It sped away from Taas and toward me like a rigid body set into frictionless motion.

Then the Solo dropped out of stasis—and I gasped as fear punctured my mind, a foreign terror, strange and eerily familiar at the same time.

Blocking, Zabo thought. The Block psicon flashed in my mind, and kept on flashing. Although the fear receded, it didn't disappear; with my boosted concentration so intimately focused on the Solo, I couldn't shut out the pilot's reaction.

It hit me like a hovertrain. He was so scared, so *young*, barely more than a boy, one who had never expected combat on this simple assignment at Tams ... *never wanted to fly a Solo, never wanted near one. How could I ever have believed it would make my dreams reality, lift me up into the taskmaker caste—I'm going to pay for that dream now—*

*Zabo, block!* Tears ran down my face, the tears of my enemy. The block psicon flashed futilely in my mind, over and over.

Firing, Zabo thought.

My Annihilator caught the Solo point-blank and detonated it into oblivion. I gasped as the boy's death scream vibrated in my mind.

Zabo. I drew in a sobbing breath. Disconnect emotive centers.

Disconnected.

Then the part of my brain that cried in protest against the killing was locked in a glass-walled prison, seeing but with protests unheard, unable to stop me from doing what had to be done.

Red and Gold have been detected. Zabo flashed me images of Helda and Rex engaging two drones and a Solo with MIRV ports. It showed me another three drones on intercept courses with us.

*Switch to evasive pattern two*, I thought. Zabo fired the maneuvering rockets, "cold" thrust from the fusion engines, changing course every second or less. The cocoon protected me against lesser accelerations and Zabo snapped us into stasis when the forces were lethal. My Annihilator beam snapped out and one of the drones exploded in a violent flash of radiation.

An Annihilator shot from another drone stabbed through space where we had been an instant before. Robot ships had no need of stasis to keep a pilot alive, making them more maneuverable than Jags. But their strategy was limited to EI capability. Although a mature, well developed EI came close to human reasoning power, it wasn't close enough. Zabo and I had worked together for over two decades, both of us upgraded every year, a synthesis that had evolved far beyond what any EI or human could do alone.

My Jag hurtled past the third drone and caught it with an Annihilator shot. As the drone exploded, Zabo showed me another MIRV Solo. It was thousands of kilometers away, running stealth, using shrouds to hide as it hurtled toward me. Even without Zabo's detection, I would have known it was there. I felt the pilot. He was a taskmaker, part Aristo, the same as Jaibriol's guards.

*Switch to Impactor*, I thought. My Annihilator was drained. Even with advanced inversion technology, a Jag still only had so much space to carry antimatter and a good portion of that went to our positron fuel.

The Solo came at me like a knight in a stealth jousting tournament. As we hurtled past each other, separated by over a thousand kilometers, I fired the Impactor, a stream of smart clusters that fused on impact like little H-bombs. The Solo was veering in its own evasion pattern and releasing clouds of smart dust that confused my tracking systems. My shot missed on its first go around, stabbing uselessly into space.

The Solo had fired his Annihilator. It winged my mag-shields and particles spiraled madly off into space, but there was no damage. Stats told me I had been in stasis several times in the past few seconds.

The clusters from my Impactor shot were going after the Solo now. His decoy dust countered, some of it igniting the cluster bomblets and some coming after us. As we hurtled away, Zabo released a cloud of decoy dust that spread out behind us in a cone, leaving a wake of explosions.

Goldzabo hit, Zabo thought.

Gold, report, I thought.

Lost mag-shields and Annihilators, Helda answered.

One look at her stats was all I needed. The alarms display for her Jag was lit up like a holiday decoration. *Helda, get out of here. Go back to headquarters and report. Rex, cover her.*

*Got it,* Rex thought.

Greenzabo hit, Zabo thought. Stats showed the damage was far less than what Helda had taken.

*Taas?* I thought.

*I'm fine,* he answered—and punctuated it with a direct hit on a drone. In one flashing detonation it became a note in the history files.

Solo to port, Zabo warned.

I snapped my attention to the new Solo. Impactor, firing pattern K. Release decoy dust.

This new Solo evaded my shot. The pilot fired his Impactor, but the clusters didn't jab at my Jag. Instead he targeted an area off to my port side—and nearly hit the ship as it jumped to almost that exact position.

I swore. This pilot was good. Too good. *Zabo, evasive pattern Q.*

*Die, sweet Jagernaut.*

The thought from the Solo hit me like a weapon. No telepath sent that message, no one remotely resembling a telepath. But it formed with such single-minded intensity that in my boosted state I had no choice but receive it. The thought blanketed me with suffocating, choking scorn, and a lust so intense I reeled from it: *Die, sweet Jagernaut. Die. Now. Slowly. In pain. Die, sweet empath.*

The masters had come. This pilot was an Aristo warrior.

*Fire Impactor.* I was shaking now, struggling to free myself from the Aristo's concentration. But I couldn't do it. The only way would be to disengage my brain from Zabo, which was suicide.

The Solo veered in his evasive pattern and my shot barely winged his ship. Several clusters exploded on impact, but the craft remained secure in stasis.

Another Solo registered on my detectors, matching velocity with my Jag as adeptly as the first. A second "voice" came to me: *Die, Jagernaut.*

And I was falling, falling, falling into a cavity, a dark hole, caught, trapped—

Blocking, Zabo thought. The psicon flashed in my mind and my sense of falling receded.

*Zabo, Impac—*

The Jag bucked, ramming my shoulder into the cushioned exoskeleton around my body. Stats told me I had been in stasis for nearly a second. Alarms blared in the cockpit and flashed on my mindscape.

Hit from port Solo, Zabo thought. Starboard Impactor destroyed.

*Sweet Jagernaut.* The thought slid across my mind like an oily caress. *You're mine.* A second thought echoed it, hungering: *Mine.*

Then yet another thought penetrated: *Die, little Jagernaut*—and a third Solo materialized, firing out of a stealth approach even Zabo hadn't detected.

My Jag shuddered violently, alarms blaring. Hit to starboard, Zabo thought. Annihilators no longer functional.

*Fire taus, I thought. Get all three of them.*

Three of my four cannons fired, taus surging out of their maws. The missiles jumped in and out of stasis as they shot after the Aristo's ships. One Solo took off, accelerating away from Tams with the tau in pursuit. The second Solo destroyed the missile bearing down on it before the tau hit. The third missile found its target, one of the MIRV Solos, and detonated the ship in a fierce blast.

The Solo that had destroyed its tau hurtled away, the pilot's anger blasting my mind. *Die, Jagernaut. In agony.*

and the first Solo re-appeared, jumping out of inversion a few thousand kilometers away, blasting the area with high energy exhaust that would have demolished my Jag had the Solo managed to come any closer.

and then that same Solo exploded in a flash of radiation.

*Got him!* Rex thought. *I'll—*

Red hit, Zabo thought.

*REX!* His stats reeled through my mind: shields 8 percent, environmental support 4 percent, hull cohesion 14 percent. His antimatter containment fields teetered on the brink of collapse.

*Fire tau,* I thought. As my last cannon fired, the Solo that had hit Rex let loose with its own tau. The two missiles matched velocity, caught each other—and inverted. They reappeared to starboard and detonated together, their explosion blanked from my mind as Zabo threw me into stasis.

Drones to port, Zabo thought—and I was fleeing two drones that had jumped out of inversion, their Impactor fire crossing in space where my Jag had been only seconds earlier. Their shots hit each other and they both exploded.

I felt nauseous from being clapped in and out of stasis. My spinal node was trying to compensate by spurring my traumatized brain to release endorphins, but it wasn't enough.

Warning. Zabo showed me a Solo accelerating away from Tams—and this one had MIRV capability. It was headed toward the sun, surging up to relativistic speeds.

*Catch it,* I thought. We leapt after the Solo, accelerating desperately. I had no taus left, no Annihilators, nothing, if I had to I would ram the Jag down its—

Goldzabo appeared so fast that had it not been for Zabo reeling off the data I would never have understood what happened. All I knew was that the Solo exploded as if it had been slammed by an invisible cannon shooting straight at its nose.

Zabo told me the rest; Helda had jumped out of inversion in front of the Solo with a precision impossible for any ship except one in a psilink. She read its position straight from my mind. Her Jag came out at 80 percent of lightspeed, blasting the Solo with the exhaust from its photon thrusters. Before the Trader ship even finished exploding, Helda was gone.

It was damn near suicide. Had her calculations been off by even a few *meters*, she would have come out on top of the Solo, destroying herself as well as it. A miscalculation in the other direction and she would have destroyed either my ship or what little remained of Rex's ship.

But I had time neither to curse at her for disobeying orders nor to voice my rush of gratitude. The Jag lurched sickeningly, throwing me against the inside of the cushioned exoskeleton around my body.

Hit to starboard. Stats told it all: one more hit and we would be no more than radiation and expanding gas.

*Soz.* Rex's thought came to my mind, dim but clear.

He was alive! *Alive.* I fought the urge to laugh, then to cry.

Suddenly Zabo ignited the thrusters—and we leapt away from an Annihilator beam the instant *before* a Solo fired at us.

*Lucky Jagernaut.* The thought penetrated my mind, taunting, thirsty, sliding like oil as the Solo hurtled away from us.

Sweat dripped down my temples. It wasn't the first time Zabo had anticipated a shot from an enemy craft. The Traders knew our weakness, that during combat our boosted state made our minds vulnerable. They played it to the hilt, taunting, baiting, trying to unbalance us. But any pilot who concentrated too hard on a boosted Jagernaut, particularly one with my experience and stratospheric rating, risked that Jagernaut picking up their more guarded thoughts as well, including their intent to fire.

Gold, get back to headquarters, I thought. You hear me, Helda? NOW. No more heroics. You may be the only one who can get in a report.

*I'm gone, Helda thought.*

Both the drone that had hit my ship and the Solo that had missed were out of range now. Not that it mattered. I had nothing to shoot with. As far as my scans could determine, they were the last Trader ships. The drone was on intercept with Taas. The Solo, a non-MIRV craft, was leaving the planet. I had no doubt it intended to try Helda's gambit with inversion. A fast analysis pinpointed its likely target: Redzabo Jag, drifting helplessly in space like an invitation.

*Intercept Solo, I thought. Catch him, Zabo.*

We took off after the Trader craft. Zabo threw me into stasis. Again. Again. I was sick with the lurching jumps of consciousness, my mind dizzy, my throat dry. A prong clicked down from my helmet

and water ran into my mouth.

I licked my lips. Pump positron fuel into Annihilator.

Annihilators no longer functional, Zabo thought.

Then dump positrons into something that will hold a confinement field and load it into a tau cannon.

Zabo gave me stats. Confinement won't hold for long.

It won't need to.

Solo will be at inversion speed in 3.1 seconds.

Follow it.

Then I dropped my mental blocks.

I opened my mind, drawing the Solo pilot in as if I were the drain in the bottom of a barrel filled with acid. He poured into my mind like a caustic whirlpool: *Pain, Jagernaut. Pain and fear and terror. Die*

---

We inverted, Zabo locked to the Solo through my link with its pilot. We screamed silently through imaginary space, chasing the Solo as it came around and headed back to Tams.

Entering Tams system, Zabo thought.

*Reinvert*, I thought.

We managed to jump out a split second earlier than the Solo, but I hadn't been able to maneuver into position to use my exhaust against it. As the Solo reinverted, I thought, *Fire into its primed tau cannon. Then get us out of here.*

In the same instant that my makeshift missile plunged into the Solo's cannon maw, the Trader craft came out of stasis and fired its cannon. The positron missile and the tau smashed into each other—and Solo vanished in a furious blast of radiation.

I gasped, the sound coming out in a choked gust of air.

Ten planetary drones approaching from dayside of Tams, Zabo thought.

TEN? Gods of all Skolia. How long until they're within firing range?

Four minutes, Zabo answered. Three minutes until air in Secondary Blackstone's emergency tanks exhausted.

Green, report.

My drone stopped droning, Taas thought.

Taas, you've got to get an EI to the rebels. You have four minutes to get down as far as you can, make the drop and get out.

*Got it*, Taas said.

Soz, don't be a fool. Rex's thought came dimly into my mind. You go in. Have Green cover you.

I nudged closer to Rex's ship, maneuvering as carefully as my Jag could manage. I had to get close, so close we almost touched. *Release accordion*, I thought. *Connect to Red.*

Released, Zabo answered.

Soz. Rex's thought came again. Tams is more important than one aging Jagernaut. Go in with Taas. He can't do it alone.'

*You should have more faith in him.*

The accordion bridge unfolded from my airlock. As it clanked onto Rex's Jag, Zabo thought, Air pressure in Red at zero atmosphere. I'm sealing your space suit. One point two minutes of air remain in Blackstone's tanks.

Rex, get into the accordion, I thought.

*I can't move*, Rex answered.

Zabo, open Red. Then release my controls.

Opened and released. As the exoskeleton snapped away from my body, the psiphons popped out of my spine. I pulled out of the chair and squeezed past the cockpit membrane. Then I propelled myself across the cabin.

Zabo opened both the inner and outer airlock doors. I shot past them, into the accordion bridge that floated between Rex's Jag and mine like a diaphanous tunnel. The airlock to Rex's Jag was also wide open. I hurtled straight into Red—and into chaos.

Equipment floated everywhere, knocking past me as I moved through the cabin. One section of the inner hull had buckled inward. When I squeezed into the cockpit, I found Rex struggling to pull himself out of the pilot's seat. It was dead, its exoskeleton jammed around his body. He grabbed my arms and with both of us working we managed to drag him out. But even when he was free of the chair, his legs trailed uselessly behind him. I tried to contact him with my suit radio, but I couldn't get a response.

Zabo spoke over my radio. "Blackstone has no more air in his suit tanks or emergency reserve."

I could see Rex's face through his helmet, see him gasping. He propelled himself through the ship and into the accordion, hurtling like a human missile. He flew into the airlock of my Jag with me close behind him. As Zabo closed the outer door, Rex hit a side wall of the airlock and went limp.

"Zabo, *air*." I grabbed Rex, clawing at his spacesuit. The two of us floated out of the airlock and into the cabin, tumbling out of control.

Rex's helmet came off in my hands. As we butted up against the hull I yanked off my own helmet. I anchored our bodies by wrapping my legs around the med cradle that was already unfolding from the hull. Grabbing his head, I pinched his nose with my fingers and breathed into his mouth, a big breath for his big lungs. We butted up against a bulkhead. Breathe in. Out. In. Out. Rex, breathe. *Gods, breathe.* In. Out—

"Approaching craft within firing range in forty-five seconds," Zabo said.

In. Out—Rex gasped in a huge, shuddering breath. As I let go of his nose, his eyes opened and he looked up at me, his face pale in the cold light of the cabin.

"Take care of Rex." Even as I spoke, the medcradle was enveloping him in its embrace.

"Thirty-two seconds until drones within range," Zabo said. "They are locking on target."

I sped into the cockpit and slid into the pilot's seat. The instant I was plugged into the ship I blasted a thought over the psilink: *Taas pull out. Now!*

No answer.

Drones firing, Zabo thought as acceleration slammed ...

Gasping, I reeled with the aftershock of having been in stasis too long. Fixing the molecular wavefunction of a human being for extended periods could be disastrous; when it relaxed, it had to respond to the forces in its new environment. If that environment had changed too much, the catastrophic fluctuations of the readjusting system could tear a person apart, atom by atom.

My molecules managed to stay together, but I felt like hell. My vision was too bleared for me to read the control panels, but the mindscape told me what I needed to know: Zabo had accelerated us into inversion and beyond all in one step, keeping us in stasis the entire time.

*Greenzabo, report*, I thought. I waited, then sent out another thought. *Taas?*

No answer.

I am unable to obtain a fix on Green, Zabo thought.

Gold?

No fix, Zabo answered.

I swallowed. Neither Helda nor Taas would have willingly dropped out of the link. Helda might have landed, but given the damage to her ship, I knew there was also a good chance that it had collapsed.

How is Rex? I asked.

His life functions are ceasing.

*Help him!*

He needs more help than I can provide.

*NO!* Had all I succeeded in doing with this desperation run was to kill my squad? No. Not now, not after all we had been through together.

I took a breath. *Zabo, put us back into stasis.* For Rex, neither time dilation nor any other relativistic effect made one whit of difference. All that mattered was how long he was trapped *here* on the Jag. *Don't bring us out until we get there.*

Neither you nor Commander Blackstone may survive another—

Does Blackstone have any chance of surviving if you don't put him in stasis?

No. But you do.

Put us in stasis, Zabo. Then break every transit-time record ever made getting to the hospital at headquarters.

That was the last thought I was able to form before the coil activated.

## 7. Aftermath

I threw up when we lurched out of stasis. The sterilizers in my spacesuit whirred as they cleaned up the mess.

We hurtled into the Dieshan system, plowing through the layers of security by blasting my clearances into the Net. I brought Zabo down on the hospital roof in the middle of the night, descending in a glare of floodlamps. Rex lay motionless in the medcradle, its huge arms buffering him while intravenous threads trailed into his limbs through sockets in his spacesuit.

As I opened the airlock, I saw people running across the roof toward us. Within seconds they were loading Rex into an air stretcher. I went with them, jogging next to the stretcher while doctors kept trying to take readings on me.

It happened too fast. We were running down a glaring white corridor toward Surgery; then I was in a circular room with white walls, white ceiling, white floor, a crowd of meds in white uniforms surrounding me. I struggled against the grip of a medman who held my arms. When he wouldn't let go, I bent over and rolled him over my back, using his weight against him. He hit the ground with a resounding thump, his hospital jumpsuit ripping along the seams.

The other three meds, two women and a man, took hold of my arms. The one I had thrown was climbing to his feet now, and a third medwoman was trying to press an air syringe against my arm.

"No!" I yanked my arm away from her syringe with its knockout sedative. I had to stay conscious, had to know what happened to Rex.

"Primary Valdoria, please." The woman with the air syringe brushed the disarrayed gray curls out of her eyes. "You need medical atten—"

"Put that goddamned syringe down," I said. "Or I'll have you thrown into prison for attacking an Imperial heir."

The woman blanched, and lowered her arm. But that was as far as she relented. When the other four meds tried to pull me over to a chair, I swore at them.

"Sit," the syringe-wielding woman said. "Try to relax."

Was she crazy? Rex was dying and this madwoman wanted me to relax? I tried again to twist away from the meds, but they kept hold of me.

"Soz." A hand came down heavy on my shoulder.

I turned in the grip of the meds and looked up.

Helda.

I closed my eyes, then opened them to make sure it was really her. I hadn't killed them all.

"Did you report?" I asked.

"Ya." She hesitated. "Taas?"

"He didn't respond when I told him to pull out."

She exhaled. "I am sorry."

Softly I said, "So am I." Sorry didn't begin to say it.

Helda motioned toward a curving white sofa set up against one of the curving white walls. "You wait with me?"

I nodded, and yanked my arms away from the meds, who finally let go. Then I went with Helda and we sat on the sofa. Its nervoplex surface shifted under my weight, futilely trying to ease the tension in my muscles.

And then we waited.

And waited.

We sat there for eight hours. Someone came and asked me questions, taking my report. Then they went away again. During all those long hours I kept reliving the battle, the moments when I gave Taas his



orders, or Rex his. I kept thinking of other scenarios, other commands I could have given that might have changed the way it ended, given them and Tams a chance to live.

I tried to shut off my brain. But I could still hear the dying scream from the child-pilot in the Solo. Overlaid on his death were the minds of the Aristo warlords who had nearly destroyed Zabo, their lust for my death like a dirty taste in my mouth I could never clean out, not ever, not if I tried for a thousand years, no more than I had been able to clean off the crust of that hatred from any other battle I had fought with them over the last quarter of a century.

It was early in the morning, about an hour after dawn, when I dozed off. My head fell back against the sofa, but when it hit the nervoplex surface I caught myself and sat up. Then I let it fall back again and closed my eyes.

“Do you want some coffee?” a voice asked.

My eyes snapped open. I knew that voice.

“Primary Valdoria? I brought some cof—”

“*Taas!*” I jumped up to my feet.

He grinned and held out a plastic cup filled with that godawful drink the Allies had inflicted on our import shops. He was still wearing his spacesuit. I grabbed him a hug, followed by Helda who nearly knocked him over. His coffee splattered all over us and all over the floor.

“Hey.” His voice came out muffled against Helda’s big bosom. “I can’t breathe.”

She let him go. “It is no good if you die from suffocation now, heh? Not after coming back from the dead.”

He blinked. “The dead?”

I laughed unsteadily. “I thought you were dead when you dropped out of the psilink.”

“I got hit by a drone when I tried to pull out,” Taas said. “That’s what knocked me out of the link.”

I stared at him. The only way to knock him out would have been to damage Greenzabo so seriously it couldn’t access the Skol-Net. “You made it back here with a crippled computer?”

Taas smiled. “It wasn’t so bad. I just had to do a few calculations in my head.”

In his *head*? “You must have one incredible brain.” But I had known that when I picked him for the squad. “Did you get the EI through to Tams?”

He nodded. “I don’t know if it did any good. I haven’t heard any reports yet.”

“Soz.” Helda touched my arm.

When I glanced at her, she nodded toward the door. I turned to see a doctor approaching us. He stopped in front of me. “Primary Valdoria?”

I tensed. “Yes?”

“We’re done in Surgery.”

“And?” Tell me he’ll live, I thought. Tell me he’ll be all right.

The doctor pushed his hand through his hair. “He had bruises, broken bones, internal bleeding. None of that was too serious.”

But? I felt it hanging in the air. “What about his legs?”

“The problem isn’t his legs,” the doctor said. “It was the psiphon socket implanted in the lumbar region of his spine. It ripped out of his body, partially transecting his descending neural fibers between the cervical and lumbar enlargements.”

I rubbed my head, as if that would somehow make my brain work. “Tell me so I can understand.”

“The implant cut his spinal cord.”

“You can fix it, can’t you?”

The doctor exhaled. “Normally we can make even neural cells regenerate now by tricking them into thinking they’re in an embryonic state. We tried regenerating the nerves and his spinal cord. But it didn’t work. Then we tried three different operations to link up the severed portions with bio-optics. His body rejected them.”

“But you will be able to fix the damage eventually, right? As soon as he starts responding to treatment?”

He hesitated. “Normally I would say yes. Unfortunately a biomech system as extensive as the ones

you carry in your bodies can have unexpected side effects. We don't fully understand it yet. But there have been so many manipulations and injuries to Secondary Blackstone's nervous system and biomech web that he's developed a toxic reaction to some of the drugs we use to promote regeneration. And if we try anything more with his web, his body may reject the entire system, not just our attempts to repair or expand it."

I stared at him. "What are you telling me?"

He spoke quietly. "Secondary Blackstone is paralyzed from the waist down. He may never regain function of his legs."

"No." It couldn't be. They wanted me to believe Rex had been crippled the day before he resigned? And that the biomech web had done it to him, the symbol of the only thing that stood between us and the Traders?—no, it couldn't be.

Helda spoke softly. "When you let us see him?"

The doctor looked up at her. "He's sleeping now. We'll let you know as soon as he's able to have visitors." He glanced back at me. "Primary—"

I knew what was coming next. Solicitude. I couldn't bear that, not now. I regarded him implacably. "What?"

"I'm told your ship's log indicates you haven't slept in over fifty hours." He paused. "Preliminary readings indicate you have two broken ribs, multiple bruises, also internal tissue damage from being in stasis too long. You need medical attention and sleep."

Sleep? I was too agitated even to sit down. "I'm fine."

"Ma'am, you aren't fine. You're about to collapse." When I started to object, he held up his hand. "We can give you a bed here."

I scowled. "I don't want a bed."

"It would be in your best interest."

A vivid picture from his mind intruded into my thoughts, an image of how I looked to him, like an injured rockdeer, a wild, beautiful animal growling while he tried to coax her to come near enough so he could heal her wounds. The image was so startling I just stood there blinking at him. As the Allies would say, it took the proverbial wind out of my proverbial sails, which was a dumb metaphor when I considered it, given that he saw me as a rockdeer and not a ship.

I blew out a gust of air. Maybe I was more exhausted than I thought, too tired even to form coherent thoughts.

"All right," I said. "I'll rest. For a little bit."

The curtains cut out the worst of the harsh Dieshan sun, letting in just enough light to keep the room bright. I lay in that pleasing warmth, rising slowly out of sleep, wondering why I felt so sore.

Then I remembered.

It was a bonecrusher. When I slept, my mind relaxed its barriers, enough so that sometimes it could take input that I blocked when I was awake. At times my dreams even sampled possible futures, the closest I ever came to experiencing precognition. During those dreams I picked up events that were either taking place or about to happen. The more intense the feelings of the people involved—and the closer I was to them—the more vivid the dream.

But all too often intense feelings accompanied misfortune. I hated those dreams. Instead of waking up refreshed I opened my eyes into misery, knowing that I or someone I loved was now or soon to be hurt. I called those dreams bonecrushers because it felt like they crushed me. Today I was waking up into a bonecrusher.

As my mind became more focused, I realized someone else was in the room, a presence like an iron blanket on my mind. I turned over to look.

My visitor stood by the bed, a giant man over two meters tall with musculature so heavy it couldn't have evolved on a world with standard gravity. He looked more metal than human. His skin glistened as if it were an alloy of epidermis and gold. Although his eyes were open, inner lids covered them like a shimmering gold shield, opaque to the world. I knew he could see perfectly well through them, but to everyone else his eyes were unreadable blank spaces. His face would have been handsome if it hadn't

been so hard, but no hint of gentleness softened that masklike visage. He wore a plain uniform, beige trousers and a sweater with no markings, no adornments, nothing to indicate his identity—except for a gold band on each upper arm even wider than the band that denoted my rank of Primary.

The Emperor of Skolia had come to see me.

I sat up, wincing as pain shot through my torso. Then I saluted, clenching my hands into fists and crossing them at the wrists, right over left, as I raised them to him.

Kurj inclined his head. Even after knowing him for so many years, I still found it hard to believe we were related. Although we had the same mother, we bore almost no resemblance to each other; Kurj looked like our grandfather and I like our grandmother.

His coloring came from genetic adaptations our grandfather's ancestors made when they colonized a world with a too bright sun. The metallic sheen of his skin and hair reflected sunlight and the inner lids protected the eyes. His appearance highlighted the truth; he was as much machine as human, with a biomech system even more extensive than mine. His appearance had become a symbol, the metallic Fist of Skolia, the case-hardened emperor with no mortal softness that could be exploited by the Traders.

Kurj watched me with his shielded eyes. "How do you feel?"

"Fine." I rubbed the restrainer around my torso that held my ribs in place. I had no recollection of anyone putting it there. Not that I would, though, now that I thought about it. I had been so keyed up the meds had finally knocked me out with some potion in an air syringe.

I looked around the room. The rainbows of a cyberlock shimmered along the walls, the ceiling, the floor, isolating us inside of its field. The rainbows were more intense than those I had seen around Jaibriol's mansion on Delos: Kurj's cyberlock was keyed to kill.

"The doctors told me about Rex Blackstone," Kurj said.

My attention snapped to him. "Have you seen him yet?"

"He is still asleep."

I wanted to ask what else he knew. But I couldn't get the question out. Faced with Kurj's impassive metal face, my words dried up and blew away.

So instead I said, "Did Taas's EI drop help?"

"Some." Kurj's voice tightened. "By the time our units arrived, Qox's flags had finished flooding the planet. We couldn't get anyone else off alive. But we were able to protect the refugee ships that had already made it off planet and were trying to flee the system."

I dreaded the words he hadn't said. "How many died?"

He spoke quietly. "Two thirds of the population."

Two thirds. The words fell like rocks. Two thirds. Six hundred million people had lived on Tams. I wondered what Jaibriol thought of his father now.

"I've also read your report on the Aristo," Kurj said.

That was all. *I've read your report.* But that meant he knew the truth. Ur Qox had an heir. The devil had reproduced himself.

No wonder the Emperor had never divorced his wife. She knew her "son" was another woman's child. She probably thought Qox had taken a Highton mistress. Had he secluded his wife for months and then showed up with the baby? If she denied Jaibriol, it would have put the Highton Heir under a scrutiny Qox must have wanted to avoid at any cost. I was surprised he hadn't murdered the Empress as well. Was Taas right, that Ur Qox actually loved his wife? Or did he just doubt he could get away with killing her? She had to have her own people, her own political machine, probably with influence approaching his. So he made a devil's bargain with her: keep her silence and she kept her title.

There had been a time when I tried to convince myself that among the Aristos, the women were their gentle side. They disdained the military, which meant we rarely had contact with them. So a mystique surrounded them. But my three weeks on Tarque's estate had cured me of my notions. The Aristos had no gentle side. The women were as cruel as the men. Nothing, not size, shape, sex, or anything else made one whit of difference.

Kurj was watching me. "The Delos authorities sent us a report about your activities in the Highton's mansion." He considered me. "Your methods weren't exactly subtle."

“Am I to be reprimanded, sir?”

“No.”

That was no surprise. Kurj had never had much use for subtlety.

“I’ve arranged for the Zabo squad to receive commendations,” Kurj said. “We will broadcast the ceremony on all of the news holos.”

So. Make us heroes. In Kurj’s view of the universe, it made sense. It gave the ISC a better image. I felt about as heroic as a slug.

Unbidden, Kurj’s thought entered my mind. Every time you fly a mission, you risk your lives. You know that. Your squad knows that. He paused. Blackstone knows that.

*Yes, sir.* I kept the rest of my thoughts hidden. What else could I say? Knowing that Rex was aware of the dangers we faced didn’t make what had happened any easier.

“Soz.” His voice gentled. “You deserve the commendations.”

A light glowed on one of the three bands that circled Kurj’s left wrist. He had the bands on both wrists, metal strips implanted directly into his skin. When he touched the light, a man’s voice came into the room. “A medwoman is here to see you, sir. Her codes cleared security.”

“Send her in,” Kurj said.

The cyberlock field dimmed, leaving an opening across the room. A hole appeared in the wall there and enlarged into a floor to ceiling oval. Two Jagernauts stepped through the opening. I recognized both of them; they were two of Kurj’s four bodyguards.

Then a woman appeared, a girl really. She walked inside, her face flushed as she stared at the floor. She was a beauty, with a silky mane of gold hair that fell to her waist in ripples. Curls floated around her face, a breathtakingly beautiful face, soft and sweet, golden. She looked like a delicate, younger version of my mother, so much so that my breath caught. But she didn’t have my mother’s vibrant quality, that glowing self-confidence that drew people like pale moths seeking the warm light of a lamp brightening the night. This girl looked far more fragile.

Kurj nodded to his guards. “You may go.”

After the Jagernauts left, the wall closed up and the cyberlock field rippled back over it, trapping the girl with us. Fear closed around me like glass enclosing an insect. I couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe—

*Block,* I thought. The fear receded, and my muscles relaxed. But the girl stayed riveted in place, staring at the floor. She wasn’t even able to acknowledge Kurj, an omission that made her a criminal, punishable by prison. For that matter, Kurj could have given her any sentence he wanted, including execution. No one was going to argue with him. But I had a feeling that wasn’t what he had in mind for her at all.

He regarded the girl. “Come here.”

At first she didn’t move. Then she took a breath and walked forward, still staring at the ground. She stopped in front of him and knelt, first on one knee, and when he didn’t give her permission to rise, on both knees. Her shoulders trembled, making the lace neckline of her white dress slip forward so that her breasts were visible to anyone whose eyes were above the level of her shoulders.

For a while Kurj stood looking down at her. Finally he said, “You are the girl I saw tending children in the nursery?”

“Yes, s-sir.”

“What is your name?”

“Charissa Deirdre.”

“You have a message for me?”

“Yes, s-sir.” Her voice was soft.

“What is it?”

“Your guard—the Jagernaut—the biggest one. He told me that—that you gave orders. That—I was to inform y-you when—” She took a breath. “When the—the broadcast you wanted to watch was ready to b-begin.”

“And is it?” Kurj asked.

“Yes, sir.”

Broadcast? What was Kurj doing? If he had wanted to watch some news program, all he had to do was set my room console to activate when the broadcast was about to start. What purpose was there in ordering a girl who worked in the nursery to come tell him? No, I knew why. Some men asked women who interested them to dinner. Kurj had other methods.

“Get up,” Kurj said.

The girl stood up, her eyes still cast downward. She was young enough to be his great-granddaughter, or even his great-great-granddaughter; although he looked a fit and muscled forty, in truth he was ninety years old. He towered over her by more than half of a meter, so that the top of her head barely reached the center of his massive chest.

“Look at me,” he said.

She looked up with her large eyes, beautiful eyes, brown flecked with gold. Bright spots of color showed on her cheeks. Kurj cupped his left hand under her chin, stroking her cheek with his thumb. His hand was so large that his fingers covered her right ear lobe and his thumb, on the back swing of its stroke, covered her left lobe. With his other hand he touched a button on one of the metal bands implanted in his wrist.

“Yes, sir?” His guard’s voice came out of the com in the band.

“The girl is ready to leave,” Kurj said.

The cyberlock opened again and the two Jagernauts came back inside the room. Kurj ignored them, still looking at Charissa. She stared at him like a shyback gazelle mesmerized by a hunter’s light.

Kurj bent his head and kissed her, a long kiss, taking his time with it. Then he straightened up and glanced at the Jagernauts. “Have her taken to the palace.”

“Yes, sir,” the larger guard said.

Charissa went with them quietly, looking at neither as they took her from the room. When she was gone, I sat on the bed with my fists clenched under the blanket.

Kurj turned back to me. After a moment he said, “You disapprove?”

“You’re an empath,” I said. “You must have felt how frightened she was.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps.”

*Perhaps?* How could he have stood there, submerged in her terror, and not react to it?

And who the hell was I to judge him? I had killed a terrified pilot who was barely more than a child, purposely blocking off my emotional responses so I could destroy his ship.

“If you hadn’t killed him,” Kurj said, “he would have killed you.”

I thought of the Aristos. “So we become what we fight.”

“We survive.”

My voice snapped out before I could stop it. “And survival means raping whoever catches your fancy?”

Kurj’s jaw stiffened. “You overstep yourself.”

*That one.* Tarque’s image seared my mind. He had made me kneel in front of him and praise him with every noxious title he could think of, promising me a respite from the pain if I did what he wanted.

Kurj exhaled. He walked over to the window and pulled aside the curtains, letting painfully bright sunlight cut into the room. He stood in the swath of light, glittering gold, his hands clasped behind his back while he stared out at the sharp edges of the cascrete and chrome grounds around the ISC hospital.

Then he said, “You compare me to a Highton?”

I just shook my head. I couldn’t talk to him about Tarque.

He turned around, his body a silhouette in the glassy sunlight. “Did it ever occur to you that I need companionship?”

I stared at him. I didn’t know which surprised me more, his admission of loneliness or his method of alleviating it. What kind of companion would Charissa make if she was so traumatized she could barely breathe when she was in the same room with him?

“You want me to court her,” Kurj said. “To ‘woo’ her. To make her want to come to me.” He spoke harshly. “I bow to no one. Not Ur Qox, not the President of the Allies, and least of all not

Charissa Deirdre.”

Is that how you see love? I thought. As a loss of control? Or are you punishing her for looking like the one woman you most want in your bed, the one you can't have? But I didn't let those thoughts out where he could find them. It might be true that I spoke more openly to Kurj than almost anyone else alive. Even so, the limits on what I could freely say—or freely think—in his presence were far too stringent to let pass certain truths.

After all the years I had known him, Kurj remained an enigma to me. He was a brilliant war leader, one who inspired a fierce loyalty from his officers. I had yet to resolve that in my mind with his darker side.

Across the room the VR equipment activated, speckled patterns and lines swirling on its floor-to-ceiling screen. Then a holo formed in front of it, the three-dimensional image of a sleek black puma with red eyes. Its lips drew into a snarl that showed fangs glistening like wet daggers. Music swelled out of the wall, the haunting sound of the Trader anthem.

So. Kurj *had* set the console to activate. He was watching the screen now, his arms crossed, his gaze intent on the emblem of his enemy. He had already filed Charissa away in his mind and moved on to other matters.

I couldn't put her out of my thoughts that easily. I kept seeing her frightened face, kept feeling her horrible sinking sensation as she heard Kurj's words: *Have her taken to the palace.*

*Block*, I thought. The psicon sputtered in my mind and fizzled, but that was it. The memory stayed strong. My blocker only removed emotions. Deleting memories was too dangerous, a process that could inadvertently wipe out other needed information as well.

In front of the screen, the puma stretched a paw forward, its claws extending out in a fan of sharpened points as the Trader anthem swelled in a crescendo.

I spoke in a voice as neutral as I could make it. “Who is broadcasting this?”

Kurj continued to watch the puma. “We picked it up from the Trader's waves.”

“Qox is speaking?”

“Yes.”

We were probably getting the transmission even before many of the Trader worlds. To transmit off planet, Qox had to record the broadcast and send it via starship to wherever he wanted it heard. But once we picked it up, we could shoot it over the Skol-Net instantaneously, to be picked up by telops, the telepathic operators trained to receive psibernet communications.

The broadcast had to be about Tams. Qox couldn't hide this time. Two hundred million witnesses had survived his latest attempt at genocide. Their words would show the lie of his.

The image of the puma shimmered—and then we were *there*, sitting in a great circular hall that echoed. Far above our heads, the ceiling curved in a white dome. High-backed benches made from white stone filled the hall, each curving around to form a ring. The rings were concentric with the center of the room, the smallest only a few meters across, the largest curving around the perimeter of the hall. Red cushions softened the seats and backs of the benches, plush red cushions the color of blood.

Aristos sat on the benches. Ranks and ranks of Aristos. Hundreds. Thousands. They sat side by side, like subunits in a machine, all dressed in black, with glittering black hair and ruby eyes, all seated on blood-red cushions in a stone white hall.

At the center of the rings, a pillar of crystal reached from the floor almost to the ceiling. The crystal was so clear it would have been invisible if it hadn't been for the distortion made by light refracting through it. Everything behind it looked displaced and magnified.

The puma crouched in the air behind the pillar. The animal twisted and swelled in size, its proportions elongating. Its back legs pulled out straight, its body came upright, its front legs reached out like arms, its fur receded into hair—and a man stood there, two meters high, three meters, four. When he finished growing he was five meters tall, his head almost brushing the ceiling of the hall.

He stood behind the pillar, using it as a podium. He was lean, gaunt. His Highton features were unmistakable, but nothing else made his face remarkable. What set him apart was his presence, an air of undisputed authority that marked him as Ur Qox, Emperor of Eube.

The music stopped. Qox waited a moment, then spoke in the Highton language. “My people, I come before you tonight with great pride. We have much to rejoice over. We, the children of Eube, have been chosen. We have an honor never before known, the honor of living in the greatest civilization to grace the great, turning wheel of our galaxy.” He paused. “We have worked hard to build our glory. To shine where darkness once blanketed the stars. We persevere against even the vilest threats to our accomplishments and well-being.”

And he went on and on, coming up with ever more grandiose tributes to his empire. He never even mentioned Tams. Did he actually believe he could hide it? I wished he would finish the damn speech. Even seeing him now, so long after he had made the recording, made me feel as if mites were burrowing into my skin. He, the Hightons, all of the Aristos—just their images were enough to terrorize us, as if our minds recognized what they could do on a subliminal level that our conscious thoughts tried to deny.

“I come to you tonight with great news,” Qox continued. “The constant threat we live with, the threat of enslavement by our malevolent enemies, has been dealt a great blow.” His expression became firm, that of a leader struggling with righteous anger. “The latest object of the ruthless Imperial forces has been Tams Station, one of the Concord’s most vulnerable members. Yesterday Imperial Skolia attacked the defenseless Tams with no provocation.”

I couldn’t believe it. He was blaming *us*. In the “seat” next to me, Kurj stiffened. All around us, the Aristos clicked the ornate rings on their fingers, click, click, click, like a huge insect rattling with agitation.

Now grief tinged Qox’s voice. “It is with great sorrow that I bring you this news. Tams lost most of its population. Yes, my people, *four hundred million* innocent citizens died at the hands of Imperator Skolia.”

Kurj watched the speech with his shielded eyes, his face a metal mask. But I was an empath, one of his own blood. No matter how thoroughly he blocked his anger, I still felt it.

Triumph washed over Qox’s face. “But our gallant forces drove away the warmongers. We saved two hundred million of our brave citizens.”

I gritted my teeth. This was even worse than I expected.

Pride swelled in Qox’s voice. “My people, I cannot take credit for the rescue at Tams. No, that credit goes to a hero like none other you have known, a man whose greatness has only begun to shine, a star rising in what had looked like Tams’s darkest hour.” He motioned to someone out of range of the camera. For a dramatic moment he stood alone, waiting, his hand outstretched.

Then Jaibriol appeared at the podium.

Qox gazed out at the assembled aristocracy of his empire. “This man commanded the mission that saved Tams Station.” He laid his hand on Jaibriol’s arm. “I present to you Lord J’briol U’jjr Qox. My son. The Highton Heir.”

“No,” Kurj said.

A collective gasp rose from the Aristos, like a flock of birds startled from their roosting place, rising into the air with a flurry of sound and motion. All around us, they clicked their finger rings, click-click-click, click-click-click.

Jaibriol didn’t respond. He hardly looked like the same man I had met on Delos. Huge, dark circles rimmed his eyes. He stood next to his father like a dead statue, grim and silent.

Qox went on to describe how he had hidden his son’s birth; Imperial assassins had been poised to murder the Highton Heir, but now the assassins were dead, killed in a fierce battle with brave Eubian soldiers who had defended Jaibriol Qox at great peril to their lives. He finished up with another one of his tributes to the greatness of himself and his ancestors and the Hightons and Eube.

The entire time Jaibriol stood there, unsmiling, tall and broadshouldered, the image of his revered ancestors, every bit the perfect hero, the extraordinarily handsome heir to the Qox dynasty. The Traders would worship him.

Mercifully, the broadcast finally ended, and the assembly hall dissolved into the reality of my hospital room. I sat in bed, too demoralized to speak.

Finally Kurj spoke. “He blames us for Tams.”

“He can’t get away with it,” I said. “There are two hundred million witnesses.”

“Even so.”

Even so.

Maybe this son of his will die a miserable death in battle, Kurj thought.

I swallowed. *Maybe*. Such a loss would devastate Qox more than Kurj knew. It would destroy the meticulously laid plans of two generations of emperors who had sacrificed their damned bloodlines so they could produce a Rhon heir. It was a risk I knew Qox had no intention of taking. Jaibriol would never see combat.

I wondered what Ur Qox would do if he knew that the witnesses to his crimes at Tams existed because his son, the “star rising in Tams’s darkest hour,” had betrayed his father’s plans to an Imperial Heir.

Rex lay on his back with his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling under the blankets. His face looked so thin, so much paler than I remembered. A gold sheet covered most of his body, letting me see only his shoulders and head. The collar of his blue hospital shirt was open at the neck, somehow making him look vulnerable.

The bed was a floater, its fabric stretched around a cushion of air, with a computer chip worked into one corner. The grid of superconducting rings woven into the fabric let the bed respond to every move he made, easing his legs here, tightening under his back there. The floater also rocked slightly, the motion that waves lapping against a boat might make. Most empathes preferred a floater to nervoplex because the floater felt like an inanimate machine rather than a living piece of material.

I didn’t know whether to stay, or come back later when he was awake. I hesitated, then turned to go. As I took a step I heard his voice behind me. “Soz.”

I turned back around, breaking into a smile. “You’re awake.”

He watched me with a neutral expression. “Apparently.”

“How do you feel?”

“Fine.”

I bit my lip. *Rex—I’m sorry.*

“For what?” Rex asked. “Saving my life?”

“For getting you—like—” I looked at the outline of his legs under the blankets. “Like this.”

“Paralyzed,” Rex said. “The word is *paralyzed*.”

I flushed. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop it.” He pushed a lock of hair out of his eyes and the bed readjusted, trying to ease his tension. “Stop laying this guilt you think you have at my feet. I can’t deal with it.”

I started to speak, then realized what I was going to do and smiled instead.

“You think that’s funny?” Rex asked.

“I was going to apologize for apologizing.”

His face relaxed, almost into a smile. “Please don’t.”

I sat on the edge of the bed, my hip touching his, my body settling as the floater accommodated my weight. Then I took his hand in my lap. “Rex, we’ll be all right. We just need time to readjust.”

He curled his fingers around mine. “Soz—”

His voice made me uneasy. Something in it warned me I wasn’t going to like what he had to say. “Yes?”

“I think we should cancel the marriage.”

“You don’t really mean—”

“Don’t tell me I don’t mean it.”

“The fact that your legs don’t move doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

He exhaled. “Every time I see you—it will remind me of how much I’ve lost.”

“We can find new memories.” *Rex*, I thought.

But his mental doors were closed. “You sit there—so beautiful—*whole*—and I can’t bear—even just to see you.”

I raised his hand to my lips and kissed his knuckles. “I know it will be hard. But we can beat this thing.”



He swallowed. "Not this time."

*Rex, we're strong together. We can deal with it. We need each other.*

His grip on my hand tightened. *Don't you understand?*

*No. No, I don't understand. You swore you wouldn't walk out on me.*

"Walk out? I can't even walk across the room."

"That doesn't make me love you any less."

He gritted his teeth. "Soz, I can't do the husband thing."

"That could change."

"And if it doesn't?"

"It's you I want to marry. Not your reproductive organs."

He gave me an incredulous look. "You have the body and drives of a young woman. You will when I'm a doddering old man. What are you going to do, spend the rest of your life celibate? But no, you won't have to. You've never really understood the effect you have." A muscle in his face twitched. "I don't want to watch while you take your lovers."

I stared at him. "You know me better than that."

"You're a human being. Not a saint."

That certainly wouldn't get any argument from me. But even so, he was wrong about the lovers. I spoke awkwardly. "How do I say this? You've got a reputation that's been touted halfway across the galaxy."

"What does that mean?"

I smiled. "You of all people should know there's more than one way to satisfy a woman."

"It's not the same."

"That doesn't matter to me." *Rex*. I tried to reach him and hit a solid wall.

"I couldn't give you heirs before," *Rex* said. "Now I can't give you children at all."

"You don't know that." I was talking too fast again. "Maybe we'll need help from the doctors, but we can still do it."

"Damn it, Soz. Will you listen to me?" He pushed up on his elbow. "I won't be the Emperor's crippled husband."

"I'm not the Emperor."

"There's no comparison between you and your brother Althor. It's you who will be Emperor. You need a consort worthy of that position."

"Don't tell me that." I struggled to keep my voice calm. "Even if I do become Emperor some day, it won't make a whit of difference. Your legs—it doesn't *matter* to me."

"It matters to me."

*Rex*. We can work through this. I'm sure of it.

He lay back and stared at the ceiling. Then, finally, he opened his mind, opened it wide. I felt what it was like for him to lie there helpless, to remember what we had been in the past, to imagine how our life would be now. I felt his frustration, his shame, his pain at just the sight of me. I was like a laser cutting him into pieces. I couldn't wish that on any human being, most of all not on the man I loved.

"Goodbye, Sauscony," he said.

My voice caught. "Goodbye."

I left his room blindly, unable to see because of the blurring in my eyes.

The Emperor's office was huge, and filled with empty space. It had no rugs, no ornaments, almost no furniture. The walls were neither glass nor metal, but a smooth surface intermediate between the two. They glowed orange and gold with desert scenes from the world that had been our grandfather's home. Fifty-five years ago, this had been our grandfather's office. That was before Kurj—accidentally or not—killed him to assume his position as Emperor.

Sometimes I wondered how our mother dealt with that, knowing her first-born son had killed her father. The Assembly ruled it an accident. But in reading the transcripts of their deliberations, I was never sure whether they came to that conclusion because they truly believed it or because they were cowed by Kurj's power over the Skol-Net and the military.

This much was clear: the passions that had been ripping apart my family then—Grandfather’s death, my mother’s terrified flight from Kurj, her secret marriage to my father—those were a direct threat to the survival of the Skolian Imperialate. If the Rhon destroyed itself the Skol-Net would collapse, and without it Skolia would fall to the Trader’s superior military like eggs dropping on the ground. I had no doubt the Assembly did whatever they felt necessary to ensure the survival of the tempestuous family that kept the Net alive.

My mother never spoke about Grandfather’s death. Did it torment her even after all of these years? Had Kurj murdered him so he could assume the power of the Emperor before his rightful time? Or was it truly an accident? Only my mother knew the truth.

Whatever it was, and however she felt about it, she still loved Kurj, I was sure of it. Gods only knew why, but she did.

Kurj sat watching me from his chair. The desk in front of him stretched the length of the room, a thirty-centimeter-thick sheet of glass with console screens and controls embedded in it, and in the columns that supported it. The wall behind him was a window as thick as a fist, its glass polarized to mute the biting glare of the Dieshan sun. The office was up high, at the top of a tower, the highest of the high glassy towers in the metropolis that was Headquarters. Beyond the window I could see a landscape of rectangles, all towers or squat buildings, all functional, all glass and steel and rock-hard casecrete. Where the city ended the red desert began, stretching to the horizon, flat and barren.

A flier appeared from behind a nearby tower, banking in a smooth arc. Sunlight reflected off its glossy black body. The silver insignia of Imperial Space Command glittered on its nose, the letters ISC inscribed inside a triangle, which was inscribed inside an exploding sun.

The window had no drapes. Kurj had no need of them. He used the window as a tool. He set the polarization of the glass to mute the glare, but only enough so that it wasn’t blinding. I stood at attention in front of his desk trying not to squint. Even with my enhanced optic nerves, my eyes still refused to focus on both the brilliant cityscape outside and Kurj’s shadowed face in here. He was a dark silhouette in a chair, his face and his mind unreadable.

“Forshires Hold,” Kurj repeated. “I want you to train JMI cadets.”

I didn’t want these new orders. I had no desire to train cadets at a military academy. “Permission to speak?”

“Go ahead.”

“I’d like to take the squad out again.”

Kurj continued to watch me. His mind pressed on mine like a weight.

But I didn’t care. I just wanted to go out and fight and fight and fight until every Trader had suffered, the way every provider suffered, the way all of the people the Traders had tortured had suffered. The way Rex suffered. I wanted to go out and pulverize the bastards.

“So you want another combat assignment,” Kurj said.

“Yes, sir.”

“You want to fight Traders.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Kill them.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Destroy them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kurj regarded me. “I once had this same conversation with Rex Blackstone.”

That threw me off balance. “Sir?”

Kurj got up and went to the window. He stood with his back to me, his hands clasped behind him as he stared over the city. His city. His planet. His empire.

“It was when the two of you came back from Tams Station,” he said. “After you had been Kryx Tarque’s provider.”

I stiffened. Kurj and I had never talked about what happened on Tams. He knew every detail of it from my reports. But I had never spoken about it to him. I didn’t intend to start now.

“You think I want revenge,” I said.

“Don’t you?”

“Well, why not?”

“Revenge lust clouds the mind.”

“My mind is fine.”

“Blackstone said the same thing.”

“This isn’t the same.”

“No, it isn’t.” Kurj turned to face me. “I need you functioning. In sound body. In sound mind.”

“You’re looking for problems that don’t exist.”

Kurj didn’t answer. He didn’t even move. He just watched me with his metal face.

Warning, my spinal node thought. External probe conducting invasive pattern search.

*Let him look.* I thought. It was true that no other telepath had Kurj’s raw power. But it was like his physical strength; blunt and heavy. He had none of the delicacy needed to uncover what I had hidden from him.

He stood for a long time, unmoving. Finally he spoke. “Very well. I’ll leave the combat option open. But right now I need you at JMI. I need a good trainer there.”

“Yes, sir.” I knew better than to press him further. But behind my walls and barriers, hidden within the fortress of ice that surrounded my emotions, I thought, *I’m coming back. Too much is unfinished.*

## II. Foreshires Hold

### 8. A Time to Search

Returning to the planet Forshires Hold was like coming home. Almost.

I had first been stationed here only a few years after receiving my commission. The barracks where I stayed then were part of a cramped building out in the countryside near Jacob’s Military Institute, about twenty kilometers from the city Eos. Now my “rooms” were in the affluent section, in a venerable old building with luxury apartments.

I would rather have stayed in the barracks out by JMI.

My assignment was to design a training program that would get the JMI cadets into better physical shape. Two out of every eight days I worked with them, and the rest of the time their instructors carried out my program. It was a good program. It would whip any cadet into top shape. But once I finished working it out, I didn’t have a thing to do.

So for six out of every eight days I sat in my penthouse and brooded. I knew what Kurj was up to. He wanted me to recover from whatever stress he imagined was interfering with my ability to function. I was a vital cog in his war machine, a cog he had decided needed refitting. So he gave me preposterous orders, stuck me in a beautiful city on a beautiful planet and assumed nature would take care of the rest.

He was wrong. Nature did nothing. I sat in my apartment and stared at the paneled walls until I was ready to explode. I had been a fool to consider leaving combat. I couldn’t retire. It left a person too much time to think.

Kurj was right about one thing, though. The JMI program did need an overhaul. I reworked the cadets’ entire schedule, everything from what they ate for breakfast to how many kilometers they ran to when they climbed scaffoldings. Only 14 percent of them could meet the physical requirements of the program when I first tested them.

Char Iaki, the Commandant at JMI, finally took me aside one afternoon, into his office. He nodded toward the window. Outside, in the slanting light of Forshires’ gilded sun, cadets were walking across the quad, heading to classes, the library, the simulation rooms.

“They need more time for their class work,” Iaki said. “They’re too exhausted at the end of the day to move, let alone study.”

“We had to meet stricter requirements at DMA,” I said. It was true that the Dieshan Military Academy, which trained Jagernauts, usually lost half of its entering class by the time graduation came. But

with reason. “These men and women have to be our best. If they can’t make it, we had better find out now instead of when lives depend on their ability to operate under pressure.”

Iaki spoke quietly. “Training them and breaking them are two different things.”

So now I sat in my apartment and wondered if I were going overboard. Why did we bother training cadets at all? The Traders were inexorable. They would break us no matter how hard we fought them. What was the use of it? We were all going to die, or worse, be eaten up by the Aristo war machine.

Cut it out, I told myself. I picked up a holobook I had dropped on the sofa last night. The title glowed in rosy letters: IDIOMS FROM AFAR. It was my hobby, learning figures of speech from other languages. My brother Kelric and I had done it all the time when we were young, always searching out clever turns of phrase. *Sauscony esta construyendo castillos en el aire*. Sauscony is building castles in the air. Here was a good one from English: shot to high heaven.

I blew out a gust of air and set down the book. Then I got up and walked to a south-facing window in my living room that looked out at the countryside. The building where I lived stood at the edge of Jacob’s Shire, a park of rolling hills covered with cloud-grass that rippled like golden clouds scudding across the land. It was early evening, a softer evening than on Diesha, a shorter one than on Delos. The amber sun hung in the southwest above the horizon.

Of all the places I had lived aside from my childhood home, I liked Foreshires best. It was the second planet of an orangish star that had acquired the name Ruth from the explorer who discovered its planetary system. Prior to ISC occupation, the people here had numbered their twenty-three cities according to when each was built. Some poetry-minded administrator in Imperial Space Command had renamed this city Eos, after a dawn goddess he apparently read about in a study of Allied mythology.

My brother Kurj didn’t have a poetic bone in his body, and he preferred well-ordered names to poetry any day. But the mythology of Earth had always fascinated him, especially the works of a tragedian named Seneca. I had never read the stuff myself, and I doubted even Kurj knew why it enthralled him. Whatever the reason, he let Eos stand as the name for this city that before had simply been Ruth-2, #17.

I understood why someone would wax romantic about this place. The sky alone evoked reams of poetry from its people, the descendants of an independent group of colonists who had settled here one hundred years ago. At this latitude, 30 degrees north, the planet’s rings spanned the sky in a bridge, reaching their highest point directly to the south. Had I been at the equator, they would have gone straight overhead in a strip so narrow it almost disappeared. Here the arch curved in a wider band, its thickest point directly south, the lower edge 41 degrees above the horizon and the upper 45 degrees above it. Most of the arch was a faint whitish-gold, but as it curved down to the mountain-rimmed horizon in the east and the west it shaded into a deeper orange, then pink and finally red.

I wondered what it had been like all those centuries ago when an asteroid glanced off Forshires’s surface. It couldn’t have been too catastrophic given that the planet was well on its way to being healed, with only the rings as evidence of the event.

The plants and animals were still adjusting to the presence of the rings, though, and to the dust in the air. Friction with the upper atmosphere and collisions between rocks and still caused chunks of ring material to fall to the planet. They showed up in the night sky like meteors. The atmosphere contained dust, chemical impurities, and ash, making a natural smog that never blew away. The amber sunlight also peaked closer to the red end of the spectrum than average for suns of human habitable worlds. It all came together to give Foreshires a rich golden sky instead of the blue more common on worlds with oxygen-nitrogen atmospheres.

But for all its beauty, the sky looked strange to me, not right, not like home. I didn’t want to look at pretty sky now anyway. I wanted to see people. Real people. Not robots or machines or Jagernauts. Normal people.

I bent down and rubbed my calf, working out a cramp. The gravity here was a little heavier than standard, though no more so than on the world where I had spent my childhood. But it usually took me a while to get used to it after I had been on Diesha or in space.

I walked over to a window that looked west, out toward the city. From here I could see a boulevard

far below basking in the gilded evening light. I couldn't see much of the street, though; the trees were lush with foliage, making a green canopy that started a few meters below the level of my apartment and rolled out to the west and north for kilometers. It was like being above the clouds, except these were leafy green clouds.

A tower poked above the trees nearby, and others showed farther in the distance. Although I knew they were the same as the one where I lived—metal and casecrete—they looked like delicate constructs of rosewood, ivory, and ebony, with green accents, as if an artist had made them in minute detail to hang against the gold sky. Each curved in a crescent shape reminiscent of the rings. The convex side on the tower nearest me faced west, but others faced in other directions.

I peered down at the boulevard. Wasn't there *anyone* around? Here and there, when the wind blew aside the leaves, I glimpsed the pale blue tiles that paved the street below.

A couple appeared, strolling along the boulevard. They were dressed in skimpy clothes that brought to mind rose and gray petals waving in the breeze. It was hard to see clearly from so far up, but it looked like the woman was laughing. The man started to laugh as well, a big man with dark hair and what looked like a big laugh. Like Rex.

I turned away from the window. What was wrong with Kurj, sending me here with nothing to do but think?

Well, I didn't have to sit like a lump. I could go out. Do something. But what? The only people I knew on Forshires were military personnel. I kept getting asked to formal dinners at the Imperial Embassy where I stood around in my gold dress uniform, with its glittering trousers and tunic and sash, and a saber hanging at my hip that served no useful purpose other than to glitter along with everything else. It was awful.

I squinted at the console in the wall. The computer was a Pak 20. It could do anything for me. Well, almost anything. I didn't think husband-providing was within its capabilities. Or maybe it could even do that. Virtual reality in the bedroom.

"Pako," I said. "I want some clothes."

A light glowed on the console. "Dress or duty uniform?" Pako asked.

"Not a uniform. Clothes. You know, like normal people wear."

"What style?"

Style? "I don't know. Pick something. What a woman here would wear to go for a walk."

Pako's screen came on and a holo appeared in front of it, a naked image of me standing in the air. I blinked at it, surprised by how young I looked.

Clothes appeared on the image, a strapless wrap that barely covered my breasts and buttocks. "Is this acceptable?" Pako asked.

I reddened. "I said clothes. Not scraps."

The wrap changed to a filmy blue dress that came almost to my knees. "Is this acceptable?"

It was still less than I usually wore, but compared to what I had seen—or not seen—on the strollers below, it was conservative. "I guess so. Send it over."

It arrived within minutes, delivered by a young man in a blue uniform who smiled shyly. Shoes came with it, blue slippers with small silver bells that hung around the edge of the shoe at the ankle. After the delivery boy left, I put on the dress. The whole flaming thing was lace. What was the function of that? The neckline was too low, too. And it had no sleeves, just straps that crossed in the back. I felt naked.

"So what?" I muttered. Then I went out for a walk.

Once outside, though, I had no idea where to go. There weren't many buildings in this district, mostly just trees, and plazas with those blue tiles. Some of the paths had curving patterns made with rose and gold tiles that swirled through the blue. As I walked, the bells around my ankles chimed softly. Mercifully, there wasn't a speck of nervoplex anywhere.

I crossed the boulevard to the park on the other side. For a while I wandered down a path under the trees. The air quality was good, the concentration of dust low enough so it didn't bother me. People strolled by, nodded, wished me a good evening. Men smiled at me.

Everyone wore those shoes with the bells, so that the park was full of a sweet, faint music. The bells

had to be a new style; I had never seen them before on Foreshires. But then, I had never taken a walk like this either. I felt like an intruder. I didn't belong here. This lovely evening was for normal people.

Eventually I came to a cafe with a giltwood sign that said HEATHER'S DREAM. I wondered what Heather dreamed. Curious, I pushed open the door.

A big woman in an apron appeared in front of me, smiling broadly. She took my arm. "Good. You're right on time."

"I am?"

She hustled me over to a crescent shaped table made from unpolished wood and sat me down on a bench in its concave side. "Here you go."

A youth who couldn't have been much more than twenty slid into the seat next to me. "Hello," he said. "I'm Pulli."

As I blinked at him, the woman said, "Do either of you want a drink?"

"Rootberry juice for me," Pulli said.

*Rootberry* juice? People who drank rootberry juice took vitamins and ate noxious vegetables that looked like miniature cabbages. Why had the woman put me here with this Pulli person?

Before I had a chance to escape, more people showed up, and then more, and even more. They all crowded in around the table, filling up both its convex and concave sides, ordering drinks and introducing themselves to each other. Within moments I was surrounded by a herd of rootberry drinkers. Everyone was talking at once, saying where they lived, what they did for a living, where they went to school. They were university students and young professionals, all glowing with health.

A lanky man folded himself in on my left, grinning at me. "So, Green Eyes, you got a name?"

"It's not Green Eyes," I said.

He laughed. "I'm Hilt. Raik Hilt. Everyone calls me Hilt."

I nodded, wondering how I was going to extract myself from Hilt and his healthy friends.

At the far end of the table a woman stood up. "All right, everyone, let's get to business. I'm Delia, your excursion leader. We'll just go a few kilometers tonight. Next time we'll do a full day trip, but I wanted you to meet each other first." She smiled. "Well, happy hikers, let's catch the trail."

Flaming rockets. I had been trapped by a gang of rootberry-guzzling happy hikers. As the group squeezed out from the table, I got ready to make my escape.

Hilt stood up with me and took hold of my arm. "Listen, Green Eyes. You can have the honor of being my partner tonight."

"Thanks, but I can't stay." Call me Green Eyes again, I thought, and I'll dump a pitcher of rootberry juice over your head.

I felt a nudge against my mind, silent laughter at my image of Hilt doused in rootberry juice. I turned and found myself looking at a youth on the other side of the buzzing group, a man with bronze curls and brown eyes.

He smiled at me. His brief touch on my mind hadn't been strong, but it was enough to let me know he was an empath. He was also gorgeous, shy, marvelously well built, and bore absolutely no resemblance to either Rex or Jaibriol. I smiled back. Maybe I would stick with the group after all.

So I went for a hike with a crowd of exceedingly healthy people I had never seen before in my life. It was an easy walk along dirt paths that meandered through the cloud-grass meadows of Jacob's Shire, a chance for members in a newly formed hiking club to get to know each other. The youth who had touched my mind was Jarith, a music student at the conservatory.

I should have enjoyed the walk. Although I was less used to the gravity here than the others, the easy walk wasn't enough to bother me. Here I was, on a beautiful evening in a beautiful place and with beautiful people. But I couldn't relax. What was I doing, acting as if I were normal? I was an impostor, pretending I had the right to behave like everyone else.

Stop it, I told myself. I had earned the right to enjoy one evening's rest.

Tell that to Rex, I thought. Tell that to the providers while they scream.

I pushed my hand through my hair. Then I realized my arm was shaking. What was *wrong* with me? Hilt had been talking to me for several minutes and I had no idea what he said. How was it that I could

face death in combat a thousand different ways, yet I couldn't deal with a simple conversation?

We climbed to the top of a hill that let us look out across the countryside. The sun was dropping down to the horizon in the west where the rings met the mountains, though this early in the summer it was too far north to sink behind that great arch. Far in the southwest, the roofs of Jacob's Military Institute reflected the setting sun's rays like liquid glass.

Hilt motioned toward JMI. "Take a look, Soz. That's where they train the robots."

I glanced at him. "Robots?"

He wasn't smiling anymore. "That's right. Robots trained to salute and kill."

It took conscious effort for me to remain calm, an effort far out of proportion to his comment. "Those cadets you call robots are all that stand between you and the Traders."

Hilt scowled. "Don't tell me you're one of those."

"One of what?"

"Parrots of the empire, our dearly beloved military dictatorship."

A woman named Mika spoke. "You've got it all wrong, Hilt. To live in a dictatorship you need a dictator. We don't have a dictator. We have a Triad." Dryly she said, "That's three dictators, my friend."

"That's absurd," Pulli said. "The Assembly rules Skolia. Not the Triad."

"If you believe that, you are woefully naive," Mika said.

"What Triad?" Hilt demanded. "Everyone knows Lord Valdoria is just a propaganda figurehead they prop up there because the people love him."

I went rigid. That was my *father* he was talking about. Lord Eldrinson Althor Valdoria. True, he had become an interstellar potentate by accident. A simple farmer from a backwater planet, he had neither the interest nor knowledge to rule the Imperiate. Before assuming his title as Key to the Web, the only reason he ever left home was because of his epilepsy; without treatment, he suffered such severe convulsions he could barely function.

The memory came back vividly: twenty-seven years ago the Traders tried to assassinate Kurj. Only a Dyad existed then, Kurj as Emperor and my aunt as Assembly Key. After the attempted assassination, while Kurj lay near death, the Traders launched an assault against the world where the Assembly met. In the ensuing chaos, my aunt's bodyguards whisked her off to the hidden base Safelanding.

Then the Traders penetrated our computer defenses—and crashed the Skol-Net.

The entire system collapsed, both the electronic net and the psibernet. Minor patches were managed here and there, but only Kurj and my aunt had both the Rhon strength and the Dyad access required to restart the entire system. But my aunt was unreachable at Safelanding and Kurj was dying. Skolia was left blind and deaf, floundering like a crippled animal with its brain gutted while the Traders moved in for the kill.

But they had miscalculated. My father—the "nobody" of the Rhon—was at an ISC hospital, the unwilling patient of doctors who insisted he make regular visits so they could monitor his epilepsy. When the Skol-Net failed, he was only a few hundred meters away from the command center. So a desperate crew of techs jacked him in to the psilink that powered the system.

No one knew what would happen when my father joined Kurj and my aunt in their private circle of power. The link might disintegrate, unable to spread itself out over three such disparate minds. Or it could overload, killing all three of them in one galaxy-wide short circuit. Or maybe, just maybe, my father would survive long enough to repower it. Never mind that he had no idea how it worked, that he came from a society so primitive it had no electricity, that he might well die from a mental overload even if the rest of the system survived. It was either jack him in or let Skolia fall to the Traders.

No one expected what happened. My father told me later that the Net had looked like a toy to him, like the meshes that we, his children, used to play with when we were small. Except this sparkling mesh was broken. So he fixed it—and in the process reactivated the star-spanning brain of Skolia.

He didn't understand the technology, didn't even try. To this day he can't access it without help. But none of that matters. Once he enters psiberspace, he *becomes* it, supporting the Skol-Net as the ocean supports a huge web floating within it. He holds it together with an innate gift no one else in my family has ever matched.

I spoke in a voice that even I could tell came out cold enough to chill ice. “Without that man you so blithely call a figurehead, you wouldn’t be standing here free to insult the Rhon. You’d be a Trader slave, mister.”

Hilt snorted. “I always wonder if you people who spew out Imperial propaganda have any comprehension of reality.”

Pulli spoke uneasily. “Maybe we shouldn’t be having this discussion.”

“That’s the whole *point*.” Hilt’s voice snapped. “We’re so oppressed by the Rhon we’re afraid even to discuss them. All that’s allowed is worship. Well, I don’t worship tyrants.”

“Why do you think the Rhon oppresses you?” I asked.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Hilt told me.

That was a good feat, considering I didn’t know yet. “What?”

“That the Rhon’s military machine ‘occupies’ planets for their own good.”

“We don’t live in a gentle universe,” I said. “If we’re going to survive we need strength, and that includes people and territory. If we don’t get them first, the Traders or the Allies will.”

“That’s one hell of a justification,” Hilt said. “What makes it any more right for the Rhon to do the conquering instead of the Traders or the Allies?”

Rebeka, another woman in the group, spoke up. “The Allies don’t conquer anyone. They offer citizenship as a choice.”

I glanced at her. “And you think we ought to do the same?”

She spoke carefully. “Doesn’t it bother you that we’re forced to follow laws made by conquerors who never gave us a choice?”

“You don’t think Imperial law is just?” I asked.

“You’re missing my point,” Rebeka said. “They took everything away, even the name of our planet. We never had a choice.”

“To choose what?” Why was I so angry? “If Foreshires hadn’t become part of the Skolian Imperialate, you would still be struggling to survive right now instead of enjoying the affluence that lets you join hiking clubs and spend your time strolling in meadows.”

Rebeka spoke quietly. “No, we weren’t rich before. But we had the right to be ourselves.”

Hilt watched me. “Why is it so hard for you to comprehend that people want responsibility for their own lives?”

“The Allies have a luxury we don’t share.” Even I could hear how bitter my voice sounded. “As long as we and the Traders claw at each other’s throats, Earth is free to do as she pleases. So fine. Good for Earth. If we ever adopted her practices it would kill us.”

“You’re certainly cynical,” Mika said.

Hilt snorted. “I’m not sure I believe the Traders are such a big threat. What better evil than the Aristos could the Rhon conjure up to divert attention from their own flaws?”

I felt my face go hot. “If you think the Traders are no threat, you’re a fool.”

“Right,” Hilt said. “And now you’re going to spout off the List of Aristo Evils. Come on, Soz. I mean, have you ever actually *seen* a provider?”

I froze, the memories jumping into my mind: Tarque, kneeling over me on his bed while I screamed and screamed and *screamed*—

“Leave her alone!”

Everyone spun around. It was Jarith who had spoken, the youth from the music school.

The others stared at the usually soft-spoken musician. Jarith reddened but he didn’t back down. “Stop it.”

“Why?” Hilt demanded.

Rebeka spoke to Hilt in a low voice. “He’s an empath.”

Hilt blinked at Jarith. Then he turned back to me. “What did I say?”

I swallowed. “You asked me if I had ever seen a provider. The answer is yes.”

Everyone went silent then. I had no intention of elaborating and no one asked me to. The look on Jarith’s face had been enough to tell them the details were better left unsaid.



Rebeka motioned at the far side of the hill, where the rest of the group had started to walk again. "They're leaving."

So we followed. Conversations began again, fitfully at first and then with more ease as they drifted to less volatile subjects. I stayed out of it. I hadn't felt much like talking before and now I just wanted to get out of here. The worst of it was that they were right. People needed freedom to thrive. But they were wrong about the Rhon. We had no more freedom than they. We were locked in a war that left us no choices, neither the conquered nor the conquerors.

Was I truly fool enough to believe Jaibriol could make a difference? There was no solution. He was the one who would change. He would do what he had to do to survive. He would become Highton. And I would watch, hating myself for wanting to believe otherwise, hating myself for loving him.

I can't bear this, I thought. My mind is going to implode.

Jarith dropped back to walk with me. "I'm sorry. About eavesdropping."

"Eavesdropping?"

"Your image—of the Aristo." He paled. "But it was so vivid."

"You don't need to apologize," I said. "I practically shouted it at you."

He didn't probe, but I felt what he wanted to ask. *Was it you on that bed?* I just shook my head, not wanting to pursue the subject, and let him interpret the gesture however he wanted.

"I hope you're not angry with the others," he said. "They're just not used to hearing such a conservative line."

"You think I'm conservative?"

He laughed. "Ultra." A grimace chased across his face like a cloud scudding over the sun. "Don't worry about Hilt. He gives me a labor too."

Translate last sentence from Jarith, I thought.

Slang, my spinal node answered. To give a labor': to behave in a confrontational manner.

I couldn't fathom why anyone would want to give Jarith a hard time about anything. "What for?" I asked.

"He says I'm apathetic. He thinks I ought to go out and fight for what I believe in." Jarith shrugged. "I guess I'm just not political. I'd rather sing."

I sighed. Here was this gentle youth with the face of an angel and no political opinions. Pako couldn't have found me a better companion if I had programmed it to search the planet.

Right, I thought. What's the problem, Soz? You can't deal with anyone who challenges you?

I gritted my teeth. I dealt with people who challenged me all the time. All day long, every day, every year, every decade. I deserved a rest.

You're not resting, my inner voice answered. You're hiding.

Shut up, I told it.

Jarith spoke again. "Some of us are going to a holomovie tonight." He hesitated. "Would you like to come?"

Gods. He was asking me for a date. At least, I thought that was what he was doing. It had been so many years since I had socialized that way, I wasn't sure if I remembered what qualified as a date. Maybe when people went together in a group it had some other name. Gang date? No, that sounded too weird.

Who cared what it was called? What was wrong with me, that I kept having conversations in my head?

"Yes," I said. "I'd like to go." I had little in common with these people, but going to a movie with anyone right now was better than returning to my empty apartment.

After we got back to the cafe and washed up, we strolled through the park. Jarith came, as well as Hilt and Rebeka and a handful of the other hikers, everyone wearing chiming shoes now instead of hiking boots. As the sun set behind the hills, the horizon lit up with a spectacular red fire and the sky above us turned a dusky bronze. The shining rings arched across it, pale amber at their apex and shading into deeper hues lower down. At the western horizon the rings were a rich crimson; in the east, where the shadow of Foreshires fell across it, the arch looked like a mythical dragon had taken a bite out of it. The

edges of the bite were red, but the color darkened toward the interior until it was completely black at the center.

As the sun disappeared behind the mountains, the evening grew chill and Hilt lent me his sweater. Mercifully, the conversation stayed light, just a lazy discussion about what holomovie to see. I had no opinion. I had absolutely no idea what was playing anywhere. We finally solved the problem by walking into the next theater we found, a place in the park playing something called *Brain Warp*. The holos outside showed a Jagernaut, feet planted wide, blasting away with his Jumbler. But then, half of the holomovies made nowadays had soldiers as heroes.

We sat down on a plush rug floor in a circular theater with about two hundred other people. Jarith and I reclined on cushions, talking about his classes at the university. Rebeka and Hilt were eating, and Pulli bought another glass of that godawful rootberry juice.

After a few moments the lights dimmed, then went out altogether. Music swelled, the urgent beat of a drum overlaid with a melody played by horns and strings. Then, suddenly, we were in the middle of a field near JMI. A Jagernaut stood nearby, a handsome man with dark hair, sculpted muscles, and a Jumbler snug in a holster on his hip. He took off jogging and we “jogged” with him, following at whatever distance the director had thought would give us the optimum view of the action.

Within minutes I knew I had made a mistake in coming. I saw how the movie was going to end almost as soon as it began. The Jagernaut went on a mission to rescue a beautiful and remarkably buxom woman who supposedly had been abducted by the Traders but was actually a Highton spy. The Traders caught the Jagernaut, planted a trigger in his brain, and let him go. We were supposed to wonder what horrible fate would befall our unsuspecting hero when the villains set off the trigger.

The movie made no attempt at accuracy. When the Jagernaut went to see a heartbender, the doctor’s office was in a hospital. You never found a heartbender in a hospital. It was hard enough to convince one of us to go for help as it was. Faced with the prospect of walking into the hospital, a blatant admission of “yes, I’m screwed up,” most of us would run in the opposite direction. A true heartbender had an office somewhere innocuous, a place with no associations to mental health, usually a government building.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. The “hero” spent most of his time breaking the code of honor we lived by. He cheated, lied, treated his lovers like dirt, and showed no hint of remorse when he went into combat. It was absurd. He was supposed to be an *empath*, for pugging sakes.

But what got to me the most was that the actor looked like Rex, who would never stoop to the kind of behavior this guy inflicted on the galaxy. Yes, Rex had women all over. And yes, they were attracted to him because he was glamorous, handsome, and charming. But they fell in love with him because he was a decent human being who treated people with respect. This insipid holomovie was an insult to him.

When the movie reached its climax, big surprise—the Jagernaut went berserk. The Traders activated his trigger and he went crazy in a crowded plaza, mowing down buildings with his Jumbler. I was so mad by then that I got up and left the theater in the middle of the scene, walking right through the Jagernaut to the accompaniment of loud protests from the rest of the audience.

As I was crossing the lobby outside, Jarith emerged from the theater and strode after me. “Soz. Wait.”

I stopped at the exit and waited for him to catch up. As he reached me, Hilt and Rebeka came out into the lobby. They looked around until they saw us, then headed in our direction.

Jarith spoke softly. “What is it? What’s tearing you up inside?”

“Nothing is tearing me up.” I was so angry I could hardly speak. “I just don’t enjoy watching trash, that’s all.”

Hilt and Rebeka reached us in time to hear my last comment. Hilt gave me an annoyed look. “You know, this attitude of yours is getting tiresome.”

I wanted to hit him in the face. I hadn’t been this angry in I didn’t know how long. But why? So it was a stupid movie. So what? “Go to hell,” I said.

Rebeka lay her hand on my arm. “It’s only a holomovie.”

I pulled away from her. “It’s an offense to the people who go out there and risk their lives every day

so kids like you can live safe and healthy and free to watch banal movies.”

I expected Hilt to tell me I was being an idiot. But he just shrugged. “I don’t see why you’re making such a big deal about it. No one ever meant for *Brain Warp* to be a political statement or a work of art.”

Rebeka regarded me. “Listen, maybe we all got off to the wrong start. How about if we try again? Why don’t we forget this movie and go for drinks somewhere?”

I knew the last thing I could handle right now was drinks with them. I made myself speak in an apologetic voice. “I’m pretty tired. I guess I’m on a short fuse. I should go home and sleep.” The words were a cover. I wouldn’t sleep. But I had to say something.

Neither Rebeka nor Hilt looked disappointed that I wouldn’t be joining them. Jarith kept watching me. He stood silently while I said goodbye to the others, but after they headed back to the theater he said, “May I walk you home?”

My shoulders relaxed. “Yes. I would like that.”

As we strolled across the park, I tried to think of something to say. But no clever lines came. For that matter, no stupid lines came either.

When we stopped outside the apartment building, Jarith gaped up at it. “You *live* here?”

“When I’m on Forshires,” I said.

He looked at me. “You travel a lot?”

“Some.” I wanted him to come upstairs and keep me company, real company, the way a man could help a woman hold the night at bay. I wanted him to make love to me again and again until his warm masculinity banished the ghosts that haunted my mind.

Jarith whistled. “I’ve never known anyone who could afford a place like this.”

Okay, I told myself. There’s your opening. Ask him up.

But what if he said no?

“Are you going back to the movie?” I asked.

“Just to get my coat.” He grimaced. “I promised to meet some people to rehearse later. We have a music exam tomorrow.”

“Oh.” What was wrong with me, lusting after an artist, someone with all of the aesthetic qualities I lacked? It could never work.

Jarith hesitated. “Would you like to get together again?”

I couldn’t. “Yes.”

“Some of us are going to the beach on Tillsborn. Why don’t you come? We can meet you here at noon.”

I smiled. “All right.”

“Well. Good.” He grinned and waved at me. “See you then.” And he took off, heading toward the theater.

After he left, I went upstairs. My place seemed dark even after I turned on every one of the lights. I had lamps all over, graceful flowers of glass tinted enough to diffuse their light into a pleasant glow. The walls were paneled in giltwood the color of sunshine. Windows arched everywhere, letting in copious light from the rings in the night sky. The carpet was white, the silk cushions on the furniture were white, the sculpted moldings on the doors were white. The place was gorgeous. But tonight it looked dark and cold and empty.

I was at the bar pouring a glass of whiskey when Pako said, “You have a visitor.”

I looked up. Had Jarith changed his mind and come back to help me chase away the loneliness? “Who is it?”

Pako’s screen cleared to show me the steps outside the apartment house. Hilt stood out there, shivering in the chill air.

“Damn,” I muttered. I went to the console and flicked on the com that connected to the porch where Hilt waited. “Yes?”

His voice came over the speaker. “You forgot to give back *my* sweater.”

I blinked. I hadn’t even realized I still had it on. “Pako, let him up.”

A few moments later a knock sounded at my door. When I opened it, Hilt stood there grinning.

“Hey, Green Eyes, you’ve got some place here.”

“How did you know where I lived?”

“Jarith told me.”

I took off the sweater and gave it to him. “Thanks for letting me wear it.” Then I started to close the door.

Hilt pushed the door back open and walked past me into the apartment. “You know, you make a lot more sense now.”

I regarded him from the arched doorway. “I don’t recall inviting you in.”

“No wonder you come down on such a traditionalist line. You’re Money.” He turned to me. “I’ll bet it’s Old Money too.”

“Good night, Hilt.”

He came over to me. “The Ice Princess. Of course you support Rhon politics.” He slid his finger along the strap of my dress, following it down my front until his hand came to rest between my breasts. “You’ve got a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.”

I pushed away his hand. “Get out.”

He pressed me against the wall, his face so close to mine he was almost kissing me. “Someone ought to crack open that Ice Bitch crust of yours.”

I snapped. I shouldn’t have, but I did. My combat reflexes weren’t supposed to kick in without my command unless I was threatened with direct violence. And Hilt wasn’t. He was abrasive and obnoxious and I didn’t like him, but he was no rapist. A simple “stop it” would have been enough.

But I didn’t tell him to stop it. I tried to kill him.

By the time it registered on my brain what my reflexes were doing, I had already shattered my whiskey tumbler against the wall behind me and was stabbing a dagger of glass at Hilt’s chest. Blood poured from my hand where the glass had shredded my skin. When the signal from my brain finally stopped my thrust, the shard was less than a centimeter away from his body.

It happened so fast that even after I stopped Hilt just stood there, staring at the dagger of glass I held above his chest. Finally he drew in a breath. Then he took the glass out of my hand. I looked at the blood running all over my hand, my arm, my dress.

“I think you’d better get a doctor,” Hilt said.

“It’s nothing. I’ll clean it up.”

I expected him to call the police then. But instead he spoke in a quiet voice. “I’m sorry. I was out of line.”

He was out of line? I had almost just killed him. What was *wrong* with me?

“I’ll call the hospital,” Hilt said.

I had to struggle to keep my voice calm. “No. Just go.”

He looked at the blood gushing out of my hand. “I think you shou—”

“Go.”

“All right.” Hilt opened the door. “I’ll check on you tomorrow.”

“Fine.” I closed the door and locked it.

Pako spoke. “I can have medical help here within one minute.”

I went to the bar, turned on the waterfount, and stuck my hand into the arching spouts of water. “No. I’m fine.” The water running into the sink turned red.

After I cleaned and bandaged my hand, I poured myself another drink. If I got drunk enough, I wouldn’t be able to think. And right now I didn’t want to think.

“I have pending business for you,” Pako said. “Your netmail has been waiting for six hours.”

“I’ll check it tomorrow.”

“One of the messages requires attention now.”

I scowled at the console. “All right. Play it.”

The voice of Char Iaki, the Commandant at JMI, floated into the room. “Sorry to disturb you, Primary Valdoria. We’ve had to postpone tomorrow’s training session with the fliers because of an engine failure. Could you do your lecture instead?”

He must have meant the lecture I was supposed to give about cyber—human interfaces. “Pako, tell him I’ll do it tomorrow afternoon.”

Then I got drunk. Very drunk.

## 9. A Time to Weep

But isn’t it dangerous?” the cadet asked. She leaned forward. “The fiberoptics and mechanicals are foreign bodies, aren’t they? Doesn’t your own body reject them?”

The huge number of questions from the cadets had caught me by surprise. I was at the front of the hall, half sitting on the edge of a desk while I answered their questions. Iaki had offered me a podium, but I felt more comfortable this way. And I *did* feel comfortable. I was enjoying the lecture.

“Most parts of the biomech are grown from my own genetic material or coated with bioshells of that material,” I said. “It’s similar to having, say, a regenerated organ in your body. Of course, the biomech web is much more extensive than that. Not everyone’s body will accept it.”

A cadet from farther back in the packed hall signaled. When I nodded to him, he said, “What if the fiberoptics malfunction?”

“They carry messages,” I said. “Like nerves. If something goes wrong, they just don’t carry any more messages.”

“Can’t your brain misinterpret their signals?” he asked.

“Possibly,” I said. “But it could misinterpret signals from any part of my nervous system, natural or synthetic.”

The woman next to him spoke. “What if something goes wrong with the person who has all of these enhancements? Most times, if you surprise people—well, they just jump. But if we wire people to kill, don’t we run the risk that if their mind malfunctions, the rest of their systems will too? An insane Jagernaut could do a lot of damage.”

What the hell kind of dumb-assed question was that? “Our reflexes activate *only* if our lives are in danger. We’re trained *not* to react in other situations.” I glanced at the wall-timer above Char Iaki, who was standing across the hall by the door. Iaki had made no move to stop the session even though we had gone twice as long as scheduled.

I turned back to the cadets. “We’ve been talking over two hours now. Time to quit.”

A murmur of disappointment rolled over the hall. Then they started to clap. And they kept on doing it. I stood there at a loss for how to react. I wasn’t used to people applauding for me. Usually either they wished I would go away or else they were Traders and wanted to kill me. Socially, all I seemed to do lately was annoy people.

But the cadets kept clapping. I grinned, glad that at least someone didn’t find me insufferable.

As the cadets filed out of the hall, Char came over to me. “You fascinate them.”

“I didn’t expect so many questions,” I said.

He smiled. “It’s not every day they get a chance to talk to a marvel of biosynthetic technology.”

“Thanks. I think.” His comment left me with the same odd feeling as had the last cadet’s question, as if I could malfunction like the engine in a flier. I rubbed my neck, pushing my thumb over the socket there.

“Need a lift to the city?” Char asked. “I noticed you didn’t bring a flycar this morning.”

“Thanks. But no. The underground is fine.” I actually hated the underground. But I didn’t want to ride in a flycar. This morning, when I had come down from my apartment to leave for JMI, I had stood looking at my flycar for almost five minutes trying to convince myself to get into it. But for some reason I hadn’t been able to do it.

So I took the underground instead. The commuters had stared as if I had two heads. True, most commuters weren’t Jagernauts in full uniform. I was tight and glossy black from toe to finger to neck. I had even worn the standard-issue black gloves, to hide the bandages on my hand. The Jumbler at my hip hadn’t helped either. I wanted it because I planned to talk during my lecture about how it was keyed to my brain. But once I boarded the train I wished I hadn’t brought it. The people around me looked terrified. Well, yes, most commuters didn’t carry a particle accelerator with antimatter on their hip. But I

had the safety engaged. There was no danger from it.

It was evening by the time I left JMI. The air was clear and the setting sun still warmed the day, its amber orb hanging above the horizon. The evening was lovely. Why take the underground? It was only twenty kilometers through Jacob's Shire from here to my apartment. I could jog it in less than two hours. Or I could take the road, a country lane that meandered for twenty-five kilometers through the countryside before it reached the city of Eos. If I got tired, I could catch the flybus that ran along it every few hours.

I headed out along the road, walking past meadows filled with soft cloud-grass and the encroaching shadows of evening, double shadows, one in each pair stretched out long from the setting sun, the other a fainter shadow from the rings. Birds with brown and gray and gold feathers hopped through the grass, every now and then fluttering their wings enough to fly a few meters. Purple-furred animals with big ears loped after them, sailing above the ground with each jump, momentarily outlined against the bronzed sky, then disappearing again below the clouds of grass. The scenery looked unreal, as if it were a holomovie shot through gold filters.

After about an hour I came to a building by the road, a restaurant and store combined. When I heard singing inside I paused, longing to go in but not wanting to be stared at. Loneliness finally won. I went up to the door and pushed it open.

Inside, tables were set along the walls, with a few extras in the middle of the room. The place was lit only by candles, star-shaped molds with purple wax that pooled in the points of the star. With the evening fading into night, not much light came from outside either. A man with curly brown hair sat on a stool on a wooden dais across the room, relaxed and informal, singing in a husky baritone. Only a few other people were inside, either talking to each other or listening to the music. I slipped into the seat at an empty table by the wall without being noticed.

When the waitress came, she barely even glanced at the Primary's bands on my jacket. In a cafe so close to JMI, she was probably used to seeing officers.

I ordered a glass of gilder rum. And drank it. And ordered more. And drank it. And ordered more. It was strange. I had drunk more alcohol in the past two days than in the previous half year. But I was comfortable here, ensconced in this dusty room with nothing to do but listen to this fellow sing. He reminded me of Jarith. He didn't really look like Jarith, other than his thick curls, but he was a singer and he was handsome.

I motioned the waitress over to the table. "I'd like another drink."

"Rum?" she asked.

"Yes." I indicated the singer. "Would you—when he finishes his set—would you ask him if he would like to join me for a drink?" Then I hesitated. What if he didn't want to come over? Hastily I added, "Unless he has to prepare for his next set."

The waitress smiled. "I'll tell him."

I had already finished two more drinks by the time the youth stopped singing. The waitress beckoned him over. After she spoke to him, he turned to peer across the room at me. Then he nodded to her and disappeared behind the stage.

I winced. But before I had much time to feel stupid for extending my invitation, he reappeared, walking toward me. He stopped by my table and bowed. "Evening, ma'am."

I smiled. "Soz." I indicated the booth. "Like t'join me?"

"It would be my pleasure." He sat down across the table from me. "I'm Nik."

"Nik." Had a good sound to it. "What'd you like to drink?"

"Ale would be fine."

I motioned the waitress over again. "Bring us ale and rum."

"Yes, ma'am." She had that look waitresses get when they thought you had drunk too much.

Nik glanced at my empty glasses, then at the waitress, then at me. "Actually, I think I'd rather have coffee." He smiled. "Will you join me?"

"No thanks," I said. "Rum's fine."

After the waitress left I tried to think of something clever to say. But my mind wouldn't cooperate. It

kept wandering. All I came up with was, “You sing well.”

“Thanks,” Nik said.

“I got a brother who sings. Ballads n’things.” I grimaced. “I try never to inflict my voice on people. Scares ’em.”

Nik laughed as if I had said something funny. “I’ll bet you have a beautiful voice.”

“Beaut’fully off tune.” It scared even me, it was so bad. “Only person I ever sang to was my li’l brother Kelric, when he was a baby.” I could see Kelric in my mind now, smiling that smile I had so loved. “Guess he didn’t mind. When he was two and I was eleven, he used t’run up for a hug when he saw me.”

Nik’s face softened. “That sounds nice.”

I warmed at the memory. “It was.”

Although we continued to talk, I was having trouble with the words. They kept slurring. But for some reason Nik seemed to enjoy my company despite my inability to communicate like an intelligent human being.

When the waitress returned with our drinks, Nik gave her an odd look. It reminded me of the expression my “little” brother used to get when something worried him. Little. Huh. Kelric had grown into a giant, nearly as big as Kurj. But where Kurj was hardness and metal, Kelric was sunlight and laughter.

It was strange to see Kelric’s look on this Nik person, though. Whatever he wanted, the waitress seemed to understand. She gave a slight nod and left the table.

I took a swallow of rum. “Kelric liked that lake too.”

“Lake?” Nik asked.

“It was a—this big lake.” My thoughts had wandered again. I saw the waitress across the room talking to a balding man with a large stomach who had the look of a proprietor about him. He nodded, then headed toward the booth.

“You went to a lake with your brother?” Nik asked.

“We—yes.” The proprietor was definitely headed for our table. “He’s comin’ here.”

“Your brother?”

“Nooo.”

The proprietor reached the table. He gave me a deep bow. “Evening, ma’am. Welcome to my establishment.”

“Lo,” I said. The room tilted behind him.

He smiled broadly. “I’m glad you enjoyed Nik’s show.”

“Yes.” I wished he would go away so I could enjoy Nik.

“Perhaps you would like a change from the rum?” he suggested. “We have some excellent mineral water.”

“Rum’s fine.” Fizzy water was almost as bad as rootberry juice.

The proprietor tried again. “Perhaps a lit—”

“Thank you,” I interrupted. “But I’m fine. Jus’ fine.”

He exhaled. “Well. Good.” Then he bowed and left.

Why did they keep bothering me? I unholstered my Jumbler and put it on the table. Of course I had no intention of using it. But it would keep away unwanted visitors.

Nik stared at the gun, then looked up at me.

“Ever seen one o’ these beauts before?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Not up close like this.” He looked like he didn’t want to see it now either.

“It won’t hurt you.” I lifted the Jumbler and tapped it against my temple. “We used t’swim in that lake.”

Nik’s face went white. “Soz—the safety—”

“What?” I was having a hard time holding my hand steady. The gun slipped, skittering against my head.

The proprietor suddenly reappeared, speaking fast. “Why don’t you give me that?”

I stared at him, astounded he would ask for my weapon. When he reached for it, I pulled back and

he only managed to push it away from my head.

And then he clicked the safety into place.

For a long moment I just sat there, staring at the gun in my hand. The safety had been disengaged. Off. *Off*. I had put a loaded Jumbler to my head without the safety on.

I swallowed and put the Jumbler back in its holster. Then I stood up, looking at the proprietor. "Do you have a place where I could lie down?"

He exhaled. "Of course. Just follow me."

He took me to a small living room in the back of the building. It looked like part of his own house, separated from the cafe by a hallway. As I dropped onto the sofa I heard the faint sounds of Nik's singing again. The proprietor brought me a jug of some hot drink, but I couldn't make myself swallow any of it.

I didn't actually lie down, but I must have sat there for over an hour while my mind cleared. Finally I lifted my head and looked around. The proprietor was sitting in an armchair across the room watching me.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Drunk." Comprehension of what I had done had sunk into my skull. One slip of my finger and I would have annihilated my biosynthetic head. I put my elbows on my knees and my forehead in my hands. I could feel the gloves against my skin, the leather shields that hid the bandages on my hand.

The proprietor came over and sat next to me on the couch. "Do you want me to call someone to pick you up?"

"No." I stood up, then held still while queasiness rolled through my stomach. When it settled, I headed for the door, not the one back to the restaurant but one across the room.

The proprietor came with me. "There are no more buses back to the city until morning. Why don't you sleep on the couch here?"

I shook my head. "I thank you for your help. But now I need to—" Need to *what*? "To walk."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." I tilted my head toward the cafe. "Say good night to Nik for me."

"I will." He opened the door, letting me out into a field behind the restaurant. More stars showed here than in Eos, though they still weren't easy to see in the glare of the rings. I guessed it was almost midnight; Foreshires's shadow on the rings had moved up the arch until now it cut the span almost in half. The two sides of the arch almost met overhead, like two scythes set point to point in the sky. The air smelled of cloud-grass, and everywhere I heard the chirps and rustles of the country night.

I headed home, walking along the road, still drunk enough for my brain to feel deadened. I didn't want to think. I didn't want to know what had impelled me to point a primed Jumbler at my head. So instead I let my mind stay blurred in a daze.

I must have walked for hours. Eventually the road widened into a highway, which meant I was about five kilometers from Eos. Up on the left, the subdued light of Soldier's Green glowed in the night. The Green was a huge park, mostly wide lawns interspersed with gardens and tiled pools. It was beautiful. But its reason for existence wasn't beauty. It was a memorial to the ISC soldiers who had died in battle.

I stopped at the side of the highway and looked into the Green. I had never visited it despite the many times I had been on Forshires. I didn't want to go now. But my feet took me anyway, walking down gravel paths through garden after garden. I avoided the monuments and statues, the sculptures and plaques and obelisks. I let myself see only the lawns and the flowers.

But at the Dome, I stopped.

It wasn't actually a dome. It was a circular structure, about ten meters in diameter and as tall as a two-story building. The walls were panels which reached almost, but not quite, to the domed roof. There were twenty-nine panels, each a meter wide, connected to the roof by columns, each with about a handspan of open space between it and the next. The thirtieth panel was missing, leaving a wide entrance that I reached by climbing three steps. The entire monument was made from smooth white stone. And that was all there was to it.

Except for the names.



They were listed inside. Only about half of the panels were full, but every year the unused space diminished. What would we do when the final panel filled with names? How many more Domes would we need to list the Imperial Jagernauts who had died in combat? Because that was the monument's sole reason for existence—to honor Imperial Skolia's defunct biosynthetic marvels.

I walked up the steps and entered the monument. I didn't want to see the panels. I didn't want to see the names. But I kept moving, unable to stop. I went to the panel opposite the entrance and looked at the engravings in the marble. The date of death carved next to each name was old, decades old. But even so I recognized far too many of them.

I was starting to shake. It wasn't cold, but my body shook as if ice covered it. I walked around the perimeter of the Dome, looking at the panels, seeing the dates become more recent, seeing more names become familiar. So many. *So many*. Why did I have to know so many of them? I remembered their faces, how they laughed, how they walked, how they spoke. Every name cursed me, an accusation that I still lived when they had died.

I wanted to run out of that place, to hide, to bury my head in the oblivion of alcohol, of forgetfulness, of death. But I couldn't stop reading, or walking, or remembering. I came closer and closer to the last panel, inexorably, unable to keep away from it. I didn't want to go near it but I couldn't stop.

And then I was there. The dates were from the past year. His name was engraved at eye level, just a name, like all of the others.

Kelricson Garlin Valdoria Skolia, Jagernaut Tertiary.

Kelric. My baby brother.

He had been Kurj's third heir. The only other person besides Jaibriol Qox who had ever shared with me that miraculous joining of minds only two Rhon psions could know.

I took off my gloves and touched the marble, scraping my fingers along his name. Then, slowly, I slid to my knees, my hand dragging along the stone, my fingernails rasping over each name in turn. I crumpled at the bottom with my fists clenched and my head bowed. And I began to cry. I knelt there, my shoulders heaving, and I cried until it hurt.

It was a long time before my tears eased. But finally I turned to sit with my back against the panel. I pulled my knees up against my chest and laid my head on them.

## 10. A Time to Heal

The caroling of a bird woke me up. I lifted my head, confused. Why was I so stiff? I found myself looking across a stone floor to a stone panel. Then I remembered.

Although the sun hadn't risen yet, it was light enough to tell me dawn was only a few minutes away. I put on my gloves, then got up and walked stiffly out of the Dome, my mind waking with the rest of the morning. The chill of dawn cut the air and dew covered my uniform. I felt as if I had run a race all night.

I walked across a lawn to the highway, heading for Eos. Only a few flycars hovered along the road this early, humming on air cushions above the blue tiles. The people in them turned to stare as they whirred past, but today I didn't care. I didn't have the energy to care. Nothing mattered except completing this walk I had begun. I kept my mind numb, afraid that if I let it function again I would never finish what I had started.

By the time I reached Eos the sun had risen. The road became a wide boulevard that cut through the metropolitan center of the city. Although trees lined the street, there were fewer of them here than where I lived. Broad lawns of trimmed cloud-grass floated everywhere, stretching between government buildings and around crescent shaped monuments. Hover traffic was allowed in this part of the city, and flycars hummed by me on the road. Pedestrians strode by on the walkway, some glancing at me warily, others absorbed in their own thoughts.

I kept moving.

Finally I reached the Imperial embassy. I climbed the wide steps and walked between the columns into a vaulted hall that arched high above my head. Benches lined the walls and people were sitting on them, engrossed in their own business: talking, reading, waiting. At the far end of the hall a line of people

waited to enter the embassy proper, to take care of whatever business had brought them here. I went down the hall, my boots echoing on the marble floor, and got in line.

I could have bypassed the line. I could have gone to the front, or to another entrance, or even gone home and had someone from the embassy pick me up after I slept. But instead I waited. If I deviated from my walk now I would never finish it.

The line went up a flight of stairs to where a woman stood at a podium. She gave each person directions on where to go and then sent them through a security check into the embassy.

It only took a few minutes for me to reach the front of the line. The woman smiled and spoke as if it were perfectly natural for a Jagernaut Primary to show up at her station. "What can we do for you this morning?"

I couldn't go on. I had made it this far, but I couldn't go any farther.

She tried again. "Can I direct you to an office?"

"I want to see the heartbender," I said.

The people behind me in the line stopped talking. Everyone within earshot turned to look. Suddenly there wasn't a sound anywhere.

Whoever had chosen the embassy officials chose well. The woman didn't even blink. This might have been the only time in her career she had encountered the request, but she didn't hesitate a moment. She touched a small panel on her podium, then spoke to me. "An escort will take you to see Tager."

A wide hall stretched out behind her, its polished marble walls reaching far back into the embassy. Four men appeared at the end of it, striding toward us. They were big. I had no doubt they were also armed.

She motioned to the security check. "You can go on through, Primary."

The checkpoint was the usual arch monitored by guards. When I stepped through it, lights blazed, horns shrilled, buzzers buzzed. I hadn't even thought to take off my Jumbler. The two guards at the checkpoint dropped their hands to their guns, and the escorts coming to get me increased their speed, striding faster down the hall. I just stood there, trying to stay numb.

No one spoke. No one asked me to give up my weapons. No one said a word. The people in line stared, the woman at the podium stood quietly, the guards watched. I felt their emotions like sandpaper on a raw wound. They feared if they did the wrong thing it would set me off like an explosion. No one understood the truth, that the risk was to me, not them. One wrong word, one wrong look, one wrong move and I would beat it out of there so fast they would hear the air whistle past my clothes.

Then the escort reached us, and the tallest man bowed. "Welcome." He motioned me toward the hall he had just come down, raising his arm as if I were a guest at an embassy dinner and he my host. I knew perfectly well he was one of the elite guards in the embassy security force. But no hint of his status showed on his civilian clothes or in his gracious manner.

So I went with them. They took me through vaulted archways and polished corridors until we reached an office. Its walls were glass, the kind that looked dark and opaque on the outside. But I was sure whoever was inside could see out.

A door in the glass slid open. A man stood in the center of the room, looking out at us. When my escort stopped at the door, I glanced at them, first right, then left. But they just stood there.

So I walked into the office by myself. It was a huge room, with a white carpet so thick it covered the toes of my boots. The glass shelves that lined the walls held delicate vases, glass statues, other knickknacks. The paintings on the walls were just attractive enough to please the eye without being distracting.

I walked over to the man. He was a normal-looking human being with brown hair and a lean build.

"Are you the heartbender?" I asked. It wasn't his true title, of course. The official name for his position was Imperial Space Command Class A6 Psychiatrist.

He nodded. "Yes. I'm Jak Tager." He glanced at the escort and lifted his hand. The door immediately slid shut, leaving me in private with Jak Tager, Class A6 heartbender.

I walked to a shelf and looked at a glass vase on it. "You have a lot of breakable stuff in here."

He came over. "I guess I do."

I glanced at him. He hardly looked like a world-class mental health expert. The woman at the security check had just called him Tager. “Are you a doctor?”

He nodded. “I have a medical degree and also a doctorate in psychology.”

“How many patients do you have?”

He smiled slightly. “One.”

“Does that include me?”

“Yes.”

I snorted. “Then what do you do with all your time?”

“Research.” He seemed pleased by my interest. “I study the psychological effects of biomechanical—human interfaces.”

Good Gods. He was *that* Tager. I had read his work myself. The man was the undisputed expert on the effects of biomech systems on the people who carried them in their bodies. I had never realized his actual occupation was heartbender. It meant that in addition to his scientific accomplishments he also had an ISC commission, most likely from JMI or the Dieshan Military Academy.

I had no idea what to make of him. He looked so normal. Ten years ago, when I went to the heartbender after the Tams incident, I asked her how many patients she had seen in her entire career. She told me eight. *Eight*. Eight in twenty-five years, and that included me who saw her only twice.

I hadn’t wanted to see her. I had gone because I was forced. Yes, my CO had chosen well. Had I had any inclination at all to accept help, that heartbender could have given it. She was the one I wanted to talk to now. But that was irrelevant. Tager was my only choice and for some stupid reason I didn’t want to talk to a man. I didn’t know why. I just didn’t want to do it.

I exhaled. “Maybe I made a mistake coming here. I’m wasting your time.”

He watched me. “What made you decide to come?”

I shrugged. “There isn’t really a problem.” After a moment I added, “I’ve just done a few things lately that are—a little strange.”

“Strange in what way?”

“Last night I pointed a primed Jumbler at my own head.”

Tager spoke quietly. “Tell me about it.”

“I was talking to this singer in a pub. I was drunk. I put the gun against my head without the safety on. My hand wasn’t steady.” I stopped. I didn’t want to talk to this stranger, not about last night and not about anything.

Except this time I had come of my own free will, looking for something, I didn’t know what, but I wasn’t going to find it unless I at least made an effort. I took a breath and tried again. “Two nights ago I almost killed a man, an ordinary civilian, just because he pushed me up against the wall. I don’t know why. Well, yes, I think he’s obnoxious. I don’t like him and he doesn’t like me. But that’s all.”

Tager was still watching me with that look of his, like he genuinely wanted to understand. Well, that was his job, after all. He had to look that way.

“How did it happen?” he asked.

“I didn’t like how he touched me.” I was getting uncomfortable, really uncomfortable, far more than what I was saying warranted. “I snapped. I don’t know why.”

“What did you do?”

“I broke a glass and almost stabbed him.”

“Why didn’t you like the way he touched you?” Tager spoke carefully, but not like the people at the security check who had been afraid that if they made a wrong move I would explode. With Tager it was as if I was someone he respected, which was absurd considering I had known him for all of five minutes. Respect had to be earned and I had done nothing to earn his yet.

“He touched the strap of my dress.” Describing the incident made me feel foolish. To say I had overreacted was an understatement. “Then he put his hand between my breasts and pushed me up against the wall.”

Tager stared at me. “Did he know you were a Primary?”

“No. I had just met him in a hiking club.”

“Did he threaten you?”

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

“Why?”

I frowned at him. “What do you mean, why? Because I know.”

“How?”

Why did he keep asking me that? “I’m an empath, that’s how.” I scowled. “He made some crack about me being a bitch. But he wouldn’t have tried anything violent.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Yes, I’m sure. You got a problem with it?”

“Your reflexes wouldn’t activate without a reason.”

Is this how he earned his probably stratospheric salary, by stating the obvious to his one and only patient? “You’re the heartbender. You tell me what the problem is.”

Tager exhaled. “You have to give me some help.”

“That what you learned from all those degrees? Have the patient diagnose herself?”

He showed no irritation, just continued in his quiet and respectful voice. “I need you to tell me more.”

There was something odd about the way he watched me. I had seen that look before. For some reason it made my anger ease. “Like what?”

“Have you done anything else recently that is out of character?”

I finally recognized his expression. My mother got that look when someone she cared about was in pain. And his concern felt genuine. He wasn’t giving me a trained mask he wore for patients, however few of them he had. I mattered to him. But why? Why should he feel compassion for me, a person he had never even met before, a biosynthetic marvel of fake humanity?

“No,” I said. “I haven’t done anything else strange. I’m only myself.” That was strange enough. “Maybe I should go home. I’m just tired, that’s all. I walked a long way yesterday.”

He smiled. “With the hikers?”

Hikers? He must mean the rootberry drinkers. “No. I walked back from JMI last night. Actually, I walked to Soldier’s Green. I slept there.”

“Why?”

I wished he would stop asking me that. “I was tired.”

He just stood there, looking at me, waiting.

“I took the underground to JMI,” I said. “But I didn’t like being stared at. So I walked home.”

“You don’t have a flycar?”

“Yes, I do. But yesterday morning I couldn’t get into it.”

“Do you ride in them often?”

“All the time.”

“Did something happen to you in a flycar?”

“Of course not.”

“But yesterday you couldn’t get into yours.”

I suddenly wanted to shake him. “So what the hell is wrong with that?”

“Primary—” He paused, obviously looking for a name. I regarded him implacably. Finally he said, “Talking to me may make you uncomfortable. But if I’m going to help, I need to ask questions.”

I suddenly felt crowded. Taking a breath, I turned and walked away from him. When his desk blocked my retreat I stopped and rested my hands on its edge.

After a moment I turned back to him. I spoke slowly, like a diver checking the temperature of freezing water. “A man named Kryx Tarque took me in his flycar once.”

Tager stayed where he was, not crowding me. “That’s a Highton name.”

“He was a Highton man.” My hands felt cold. “He picked me up off a street on Tams Station. I was working undercover there. I was—I—” I made myself say it. “I was his provider for three weeks. Every night, for most of the night. Sometimes during the day too.”

Tager was good at making appropriate responses. Very good. The man could have faced an oncoming hovertrain and not flinched. But even he couldn't hide his reaction. He spoke in the same calm voice he had used since we met, but underneath it I felt his shock. "How did you escape?"

My voice cracked. "I strangled him while he was fucking me."

Tager came over to me. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"That you had to go through that."

"It was my job."

"That's a hell of a job."

"Look," I said. "It happened ten years ago. I've been fine for a long time. There's no reason for it to make problems for me now."

"The man you almost stabbed—does he look anything like Tarque?"

"No." That actually wasn't completely true. Hilt did have dark hair and a muscular frame, like Tarque. He was tall too, like Tarque. And when he walked into my apartment that night it had reminded me of the arrogance I had so hated in Tarque, who had believed he had a right to do whatever he pleased to people he considered inferior. But it was only a surface reminder. Hilt was abrasive, yes, but even after knowing him only a few hours I could tell he was basically a decent human being. "They aren't at all the same."

"What about the singer in the cafe?" Tager asked. "Did he have any resemblance to Tarque?"

I snorted. "You're looking for something that's not there. That man was the polar opposite of an Aristo. He had golden brown eyes and a golden voice. I doubt he would have hurt a shimmerfly."

"You sound angry."

"Angry?" I stared at him. "Why should I be angry? I didn't want to hurt him. I wanted to make love to him."

"Tell me about him."

"I don't know anything about him."

Tager waited. I scowled and crossed my arms. After a moment he tried a different tack. "Then you have no husband?"

Was it that obvious no one wanted me? "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You strike me as someone who wouldn't consider a person as a potential lover if you were already committed to someone else."

"Oh." How had he known that? "So what? You expect me to be married?"

"Why does that anger you?"

"Stop being a heartbender and answer the damn question. You want me to be honest with you, then you be honest with me."

He spoke gently. "Yes, I'm surprised you're not married."

I always got the same garbage: *How could you be lonely?* "Lose it, Tager."

"Why does that make you angry?"

"I'm not angry. Quit asking me that."

"You look furious."

"Sure," I said. "Right. Get that sexy Primary into bed. What a catch. Or else they want what Hilt wanted, to punish me for it." My fist clenched. "Maybe I should scar my face and wear rags and see if anyone wants me then."

He kept on in his maddening gentle voice. "Who is Hilt?"

I was furious at Tager now, with his stupid questions. "Hilt is the bastard who shoved me up against the wall and called me an Old Money Ice Bitch."

"You're not."

I felt like a hovertrain that had just run into a brick wall. "What?"

"The reason I'm surprised you're not married is because so few empaths with your sensitivity can bear to live alone."

"I have the sensitivity of a cement block."

He smiled. "An unusual block."

"I'm not making a joke."

"Neither am I."

I couldn't believe him. "What makes you think you know anything about me?"

Tager spread his hands. "I go on experience, training, gut-level reactions. I'm also an empath."

"Oh." Of course. In his line of work he had to be an empath. "I don't think I want to talk anymore." Telling him about myself was more exhausting than walking back from JMI. I just wanted to go home and sleep. "I don't know if I'll come back."

"I think you should," Tager said.

That stopped me cold. I hadn't expected it. I had thought he would say what Kurj had implied, that I was just overworked, that I should go out and try to live a normal life. Relax. Rest. I had expected Tager to tell me, tactfully, that there was no reason for me to waste his time with my self-indulgent worries about my inability to relate to people.

Instead he wanted me to come back.

But talking to him took too much out of me. "I don't know if I have time."

"I don't think it would be wise for you to stop."

I stared at him. "Why?"

He had that look again, like my mother. "I need to see you more before I can really understand why you're so angry. But this much I can tell: if you don't deal with it, something is going to give."

I tensed. "You think I'm going to hurt someone?"

"It's possible."

I knew it. I had known it all along. I forced myself to say it. "You think I'm going to lose control and kill someone, don't you?"

"I don't believe you're capable of killing without provocation." Then, with no warning, he lifted my hand and pulled off my glove, revealing the bandages underneath. "How did you do this?"

How had he guessed I was hurt? Was he that empathic? Could he read my body language that well? I jerked my hand away from him. "I told you. I broke a glass."

"How?"

"None of your goddamned business how." I wanted to shake him. "What does it *matter* how I did it?"

He spoke with his unbearable compassion. "The person I fear you're going to hurt is yourself."

I was so mad my voice cracked. "You don't know anything about me."

"I can't force you to come back," Tager said. "Even if I could, it would do no good. I'm sure you can make me believe whatever you want about your mental state. But you wouldn't have come here if you didn't want help."

I spoke bitterly. "I'm a malfunctioning machine. I need an overhaul."

Kindness softened his expression. "You're no machine."

I pulled off my other glove and held out my hand, palm up, so he could see the socket in my wrist. "Machine."

"Your biomech web doesn't make you less human. All it does is extend the gifts you were born with."

"Gifts? *Gifts*?" I dropped my arm. "Every time someone I know hurts, I hurt. Every time someone wants to hurt me, I feel it. Often I don't even know where it comes from. Do you know what it's like to live that way?" The words escaped before I could stop them. "Do you have any idea what it's like to fly in a Jag squadron? What it's like to feel Aristos when you go into combat? They *like* to kill us. It's better than sex for them. Or else the pilot is a slave given his one chance to make his life better. And I have to kill him." I couldn't keep my voice from shaking now. "I feel every Trader I kill. I've died a thousand times and more out there. There's nothing I can do to myself that hasn't already been done."

"I can only know a part of it," Tager said. "But I've seen what it does to empaths to endure the life you live. That any of you survive it at all is a miracle."

After that I didn't know what to say. I was tired. Tired. I couldn't talk anymore. "I have to go now."

“Will you come back?”

“I’ll—think about it.”

“I’m here every day. You can reach me any time. Day and night, any day.”

I nodded. I didn’t know what else to say. I didn’t know if I could bear to come back.

It was midmorning when I left the embassy. I walked home along the harbor, watching the ships in their docks. Sailors crowded the piers, strutting in their white pants and striped shirts, their blue caps pulled jauntily down to shade their eyes. Couples and families and singles strolled the beach, or played in the water, or lay in the golden sand under the golden sky with its shining span of rings. Children ran everywhere in bright clothes, waving puff-cube balloons, laughing and yelling and teasing the street musicians. The smells of food from concession stands mixed with the salty tang of the air. The place was *alive*, alive and thriving, human, booming and vibrant.

For a long time I stood by a wooden rail on the boardwalk watching the commotion. Gradually I became aware of an odd sensation, a feeling that crept up on me.

Relief.

For some bizarre reason, knowing that Tager thought I was in trouble gave me an incredible sense of *relief*. Why? Why should I be glad to know I was a mess?

Because if I was sick, I could be cured.

That was the crux of it. A problem could be fixed. If no problem had existed, that would have meant that the way I had been feeling was normal, not something I could change. And I didn’t think I could have lived with that.

Maybe, just maybe, I could go back to see Tager.

Eventually I started to walk again. I looked forward to getting out of my uniform and relaxing in the quiet of my apartment. The harbor was only a kilometer from the building where I lived so it didn’t take long to get home.

As I neared the building, I saw a group of people standing on the steps outside. It wasn’t until I had almost reached them that their identities filtered past my preoccupation and I understood why they were staring at me. It was Jarith and his friends, including Rebeka and Hilt. I had forgotten Jarith invited me to the beach.

I stopped in front of them, standing awkwardly. “I’m sorry I’m late. I hope you haven’t been waiting long.”

Jarith was staring at the bands on my jacket. “No, not long.”

I pushed my hand through my hair. “I’m afraid I wouldn’t be much company today. Perhaps you should all go without me.”

They nodded. No one seemed to have any idea what to say. Jarith’s embarrassment practically shouted at me; he felt like an utter fool, an idiot who had been lunatic enough to ask an Imperial Primary on a date.

This is no good, I thought. I smiled at him. “Would you like to come up?”

Jarith blinked. “You mean to your apartment?”

“Yes.”

He reddened. “Oh.” Then he smiled. “Okay.”

The others looked at him, then at me. Rebeka finally spoke. “Well. We’ll—um—see you later, Jar.”

When Jarith nodded, the others bowed in my direction and left. All of them except Hilt, who was the one I most wanted to disappear.

“I’d like to talk to you,” Hilt said. He glanced at Jarith, then back at me. “In private.”

Given what I had almost done to him, at the least I owed him a talk. “All right.”

I walked with him to the other side of the steps and stood in the shade of a tree. “What is it?” I asked.

“Are you going to tab us?” Hilt asked.

Tab them? “What do you mean?”

“For the things we said. On the hike.”

Then I understood. He wanted to know if I intended to report them. It was a legitimate question. I

knew officers who would add their comments to their files.

“No,” I said. “I’m not going to do anything.”

“Why not?”

I shrugged. “You have a right to voice your opinions.”

He spoke bitterly. “Do we?”

I wanted to say, “Of course you do.” But it wouldn’t come out. So instead I said, “You talked about things I needed to hear. None of it will go farther than me.”

“Swear.”

I frowned. “What does that mean?”

“You Jagernauts claim to live by a code of honor. So swear to me on that code that you’re telling the truth.”

Who was he, to question my word? “The hell with you.”

He snorted. “I figured as much.”

Stop it, I told myself. “All right. I swear it on my honor as a Jagernaut.”

He blinked. But his stiff posture eased. After a moment, he glanced at my hand. “How is it?”

“Fine.”

“You could have killed me, couldn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you?”

I stared at him. “You must really think I’m a monster.”

He shook his head. “Believe it or not, I respect people who are willing to fight for what they believe. But to me, you represent the worst of the oppressor. My parents spent ten years in prison when Ruth-2 was first absorbed into the Imperialate. Their only crime was that they protested having Imperial Space Command descend on us when we had done nothing but live productive, peaceful lives.”

No wonder he didn’t like me. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry won’t give back those years to them.” He swallowed. “Or to me.”

Something in his voice made my heart lurch. “How old were you when they took your parents?”

He spoke tightly. “Four.”

I stared at him. I knew ISC dealt harshly with its critics, but what Hilt described was beyond reason. “You’re right, I can’t give you back those years. But I won’t forget what you’ve told me.”

“So what? What will that change?”

“Maybe more than you know.”

He shrugged. “Maybe.” He didn’t sound convinced.

After Hilt left, Jarith and I went inside to the lobby. We crossed to a set of doors made from double panes of opaque glass. I took out my pass, a square card with my fingerprints etched on it, and slid it into a slot on the doors. A whir sounded as a scanner read the patterns produced when a laser swept over the card. Then the doors glided open.

We stepped into a glass-enclosed room. “Top floor,” I said. The doors closed and the room lifted silently. The liquid crystal between the double panes rearranged in response to the electric fields produced by the lift, changing the polarization of the glass so we could see through it. Below us the lobby spread out in an elegant view of plush carpets and gilded furniture. Then the lift rose through the roof and up the outside of the building, giving us a spectacular view of the treetops and the countryside.

Jarith and I stood in silence. His nervousness hung like mist in the air. After a moment I said, “How did your test go?”

“I got a pass plus.” His face relaxed into a smile. “With high marks on the music theory section.”

“Well. Good.” I wasn’t sure what else to say. It had been over a quarter of a century since I had worried about tests.

The lift opened onto a corridor. There was only one door on the hall, an old-fashioned wooden portal with a copper knob. When we reached it, I slid my card into a slit under the keyhole and waited while the scanner checked it. Then a click sounded and the door swung inward.

As we walked inside, Jarith’s mouth fell open. “This is beautiful.”



I smiled. The room no longer seemed dark. Amber sunlight and ringlight poured in through the windows, making the giltwood shine. "I like it." I closed the door and went to the bar. "Would you like a drink?"

He came to the other side of the counter. "Do you have rootberry juice?"

"Flaming rockets, no. How can you drink that stuff?"

He laughed. "It's good."

My heart melted at his angel's smile in his angel's face. For him, I would have Pako order rootberry juice.

"How about mineral water?" Jarith asked.

"That I have." I poured him a glass, then pulled out the whiskey for myself. After looking at the flask, I changed my mind and poured myself a glass of fizzy water instead.

Then we sat together on the sofa. I managed to keep my hands off him until he finished his drink, but that was my limit. When he leaned forward to put his glass on the table, I trailed my fingers through his hair. He glanced at me with a start. Then he sat back and reached for me, sliding his arms around my waist. As I put my arms around his neck, he bent his head to mine. And that was when I found out how rootberry drinkers kiss.

No wonder they all guzzled so much of that stuff.

Eventually we paused and just sat there hugging each other. I laid my head against his shoulder, filled with an incredible relief. Gods, but I had been lonely.

Jarith murmured against my ear. "You don't feel like a Primary."

I nuzzled his neck. "How do I feel?"

"Good."

I sighed. "Ai, Hypron, it's been so long."

Jarith went rigid. After waiting a moment for him either to relax or to say something, I leaned back in his arms. "What's wrong?"

He watched my face. "Why did you say that?"

I tried to recall what I had said: *It's been so long*. "I haven't had much company lately."

He looked at me as if he were searching for an answer. Then he reddened. "I guess I'm just nervous. I can't believe I'm here like this with you." I touched his face. "I'm glad you are."

He took my hand, curling his fingers around mine, and drew me into another kiss. When we came up for air, I smiled. "I think this is where I ask if you want to see my etchings."

Jarith looked intrigued. "Ask away."

So I asked. He didn't demur.

My bedroom was like an atrium, airy and full of plants. Windows arched in the walls, with giltwood frames and copper fittings, and a skylight above the bed let in more light. Lying on the bed, with all of its white fluffy pillows and blankets, was like being enveloped in clouds.

Jarith and I curled together, bare skin against bare skin, and explored each other, taking our time in the afternoon light that slanted through the windows. He fit perfectly into me, his hips stroking my thighs and his hands stroking my skin. I moved with him, then slowed down, holding myself at the tantalizing edge, hanging there with him again and again, until finally we both gave in and surged to a crest that broke with gratifying intensity.

Afterward we lay among the comforters, Jarith on his back with his eyes closed and I fitted into the curve of his arm.

"Soz?"

I stirred drowsily.

"Soz, wake up."

"Hmmm ... ?"

"It's dinner time," he said.

I made a protesting noise. But he nudged me again, sliding his hands over me. At first he was trying to wake me up, but his motions soon turned into caresses. I sighed. "Ai, Hypron ..."

His strokes stopped with an abruptness that jolted me awake. I opened my eyes, startled by the draft

of cool air against my side. Jarith was sitting next to me, staring straight ahead.

I tugged his arm, trying to get him to lie down again. "What's wrong?"

He looked at me. "That's the second time you've done that."

"Done what?"

"Called me Hypron."

My pleasant drowsy feeling vanished. "I called you Hypron?" But yes, now that I thought about it, I *had* said Hypron. I shivered in the cold air. "I'm sorry."

He lay next to me and drew the comforter over us both. "Who is Hypron?"

Lying under the blankets, cradled in his arms, I felt safe, maybe safe enough to tell him what he wanted to know. I edged up to that hidden place in my mind as if I were edging open a drawer. A sun floated in there, dimmed and dark. I closed the drawer again.

"Soz?" Jarith regarded me with an odd look, like a person who thought he had won a sweepstakes, then learned it had all been a mistake.

"Hypron was my husband," I said.

"Was?"

I spoke gently. "I wouldn't be here with you now if there were another man in my life."

The tension in his arms eased. "Why did you leave him?"

"What makes you think I left him?"

"Who in his right mind would leave you?"

I swallowed. "I'm glad there's someone in the universe who feels that way."

"Soz—" His mind brushed mine. "Why do you hurt so much?"

"Hypron died three years ago." There. I had said it. The world hadn't ended. "It was less than a year after we married."

"I'm sorry."

I tried to shrug, which was my usual response, but it was hard to shrug with Jarith holding me so close. So instead I gave a far more honest reply. "So am I."

He hesitated. "May I ask what happened?"

It was a moment before I answered—but I did answer. "My squad was checking on a colony in T-Hea sector. Hypron was an agriculturist there." Hypron. He had made me smile from the moment I saw him. And I hadn't been able to keep my hands off him. It wasn't that he was particularly handsome, though to me he had always looked irresistible with his mischievous grin. Something about him made me feel good, that deep-down good that warms you everywhere.

"We were married two weeks after we met," I said. "Neither of us had any idea he was sick. The colonists had lousy medical care and no one knew that the immune system treatments he received for colonization hadn't taken properly. By the time we realized he was in trouble, it was too late." I spoke softly. "So he died."

"I'm sorry." Jarith rested his head on mine, holding me in his arms under the blankets. And finally, finally, I opened wide that mental drawer with the dim sun inside of it. The memories were all there, recollections of so much joy and so much pain. But I could look at them. Today I could look at them.

After a while I said, "You know when I first met you, I thought you were an empath."

"I am an empath." He paused. "Actually, Empathic Healer is my official designation in the Kyle registry."

I lay warm in his arms. "I thought so."

He spoke softly. "When other people hurt, emotionally, I can't bear it. I have to try to reach them, to sooth away their pain. But I really don't know if I do any good at all."

I kissed him. "You do."

He smiled. "You're all three."

"Three what?"

"Empath, healer, telepath." He touched my hair. "I feel like I'm standing in a nova when you let down your barriers."

"I let down my barriers?"

“When we made love.”

“Oh.” I would have to watch that. Then again, maybe I shouldn’t watch it. Maybe there should be a time in a person’s life when they could relax their defenses.

A disembodied voice cut into our conversation. “Soz.”

Jarith nearly jumped out of the bed. “Who is *that*?”

I laughed. “Just my computer.” I spoke to the air. “Pako, not now.”

Pako’s voice came out of a console built discreetly into the wall across the room. “Qox is about to broadcast a speech.”

For pugging sakes. I had told Pako to let me know when news involving Qox came on. So of course the confounded Emperor had to give a speech when I was in bed with Jarith.

“All right,” I grumbled. “Play it.”

The holoscreen across the room came on, projecting an image of the shimmering puma crouched to attack. The Trader anthem began to play, its haunting strains filling the room. How could such a hideous people create such a beautiful piece of music?

Jarith shuddered. “What do you want to watch this for?”

“I have to. I have to know what they have to say.” It was true, however much I hated that fact.

“Every time I see one of them, or hear them, I feel like I’m—” Jarith paused, searching for a word. “Like I’m being—”

“Raped?”

He gave me a startled look. “Yes.”

The puma re-formed into an image of two people. But neither was Ur Qox. The man who stood on the left was Kryx Quaelen, the Highton Trade Minister.

The speaker, the man at the podium, was Jaibriol.

Jarith got out of bed and pulled on his pants. “I can’t watch this. Not here. I’m sorry. I’ll wait for you in the living room.”

Why did Jaibriol have to trespass into my life again, now, just when I had a chance to forget him? I got up and went to the closet, grabbing the first thing I touched, a simple shift. “You don’t have to go.” I pulled the dress over my head. “I’ll leave. You can stay here.”

“Why don’t we both go into the living room?”

Then I understood. He didn’t want the Hightons in our bedroom, the place where we had made love. “All right.”

I missed only a few minutes of the speech. I sat on the sofa watching the holoscreen while Jarith made himself a drink. There wasn’t much substance to what Jaibriol said, just the usual Trader business about how wonderful they all were. It didn’t sound like Jaibriol. But it wasn’t the way he sounded that chilled me. To someone who didn’t know him, which meant most of the galaxy, he must have appeared like a normal Highton. I knew differently. I had seen him from the inside, that night on Delos in his bedroom. The man giving this speech was drugged.

Jarith sat down next to me, holding his drink. He had poured himself a glass of whiskey. He took a long swallow of it, watching the screen like a man in a trance, unable to look away. But he hardly even noticed Jaibriol. It was Quaelen who kept him mesmerized.

What power did the Hightons have, that they could terrorize us even through a broadcast? Was it the language of their bodies, the way they stood, the cadence of their voices, the flexing of their hands? At some level, one more subconscious than conscious, we *recognized* them. Just hearing Quaelen’s name was enough to give me chills. Why was he standing there with Jaibriol? What connection did he have to the Highton Heir?

A horrible thought came to me. Perhaps Ur Qox had put Jaibriol in Quaelen’s care. The Emperor of Eube, the monstrous leader of the Traders, carried the recessive genes of a psion. He was only half Rhon, getting the genes from his mother, so none of his Rhon traits could truly be manifested. But he had the genes for *all* of them, every last one. Was it possible that he felt some trace of empathy? Did it make him human enough to have compassion for his son? Perhaps he gave his heir to Quaelen because he couldn’t force himself to make his son take on the role Jaibriol had been sired to play.

I didn't want to imagine what Jaibriol's life would be like with Kryx Quaelen as his "mentor." I could guess what had happened; Jaibriol refused to give the speech and Quaelen drugged him to make him do it, perhaps using threats or physical force as well. What made it even more chilling was that I doubted Quaelen needed drugs or violence. He was probably around Jaibriol a great deal. He could easily get enough data to create a convincing computer simulation of the Highton Heir that would give whatever speech he wanted—if it were only Jaibriol's words he desired to control.

Next to me Jarith sat staring at Quaelen, his face growing more and more pale. Finally I said, "Pako, turn off the broadcast."

The screen darkened. Jarith glanced at me, relief washing out from his mind. "You really have to watch every speech they give?"

I nodded. "'Knowing your enemy' and all that."

"It was bad enough before, when Qox had no heir. At least then we could hope he would be the last Highton Emperor. But now, with his heir materializing out of nowhere—" Jarith shuddered. "Sometimes I wonder if it will ever end."

How could it end? If Qox had never produced an heir, another Highton would have claimed the title. The new Emperor would have been no better than Ur Qox, perhaps worse. The hope that the Hightons would evolve into a gentler people was the fruit of desperation. Aristos were genetically programmed to be Aristos. Nor would time dilute their gene pool. Their obsession with the purity of their bloodlines came from far more than arrogance. They truly were a pathological strain of life; when they reproduced in a way to expand their gene pool, having children with their providers, they bore offspring they were driven to destroy.

And now Jaibriol stood there, drugged and vulnerable, the one person in this star-spanning war of hate who could end it, either by coming to the peace table ready to talk—or by bringing Imperial Skolia to its knees.

## 11. A Time to Speak

There are people who survive far worse," I said. "I only lived through three weeks of it."

Tager regarded me. "You think that because you endured it for three weeks instead of three years that makes the scars you carry less valid?"

I watched him from the safety of my post near the bookshelf. In the five times I had come to see him, I had never sat down. It made me feel vulnerable. He usually stood as he did now, near his desk, neither crowding nor pressuring me.

"Look," I said. "Most providers live their entire life in captivity. What happened to me was nothing."

He came over to me. "You're wrong."

"I'm trained to—"

"Bullshit."

I blinked, startled as much by his intensity as his reaction. Both were out of character, at least as much of his character as he had shown me. "Why do you say that?"

"No training in the universe could make you impervious to what Tarque did to you," Tager said. "Yes, your armor is strong. But a human being lives underneath that armor. You were physically and sexually abused, and the fact that you're a Primary, that it was only for three weeks, that you're trained to endure hardship, that other people have had it worse—none of that lessens your injury."

"It was ten years ago," I said. "I should have been over it a long time ago."

"Why?"

Why? There was that maddening question of his again. "Because time heals wounds."

"Only if you treat the wound." Tager's voice gentled. "Repressing the experience is a survival mechanism, a way to keep functioning. But no matter how much you deny it, what happened still affects you. It can hurt your self-esteem, hamper your ability to function, make it hard to maintain relationships."

"You think I have problems relating to people because of that?"

"It's possible."

I stepped back from him, feeling crowded. "I'm just overly sensitive."

"Why do you say that?"

I snorted. "I went to a holomovie last month. It was one of those 'Jagernaut goes insane' things. It made me furious. I walked out and ruined it for the rest of the people with me. Then I almost busted someone in the face just because he said my attitude annoyed him. You don't call that overreacting?"

"No," Tager said. "Not given the combat experiences you've had."

"The people with me thought I was crazy."

"The fact that they didn't know why you reacted that way doesn't invalidate your response."

Why couldn't I make him see? "You don't understand. I almost stabbed a man in the heart just for being obnoxious."

"You almost stabbed him," Tager said, "because his actions reminded you of a hideous experience where you were repeatedly and violently assaulted."

Did he really believe Hilt had triggered my memory of Tarque? Did that Highton have so much power over me even now, years after he was dead and buried? "No. That can't be true."

Tager spoke quietly. "You had no control over what happened when Tarque kidnapped you. If you had been robbed of material possessions, you could have recovered or replaced them. But if you've been robbed of your self-respect, of your sense of worth and security, where do you get those back?"

"I knew the danger when I went to Tams. I should have been more careful." I voiced the thought that had pressed on me for so long. "What happened was my own fault."

Tager shook his head. "The problem was never yours. What Tarque did to you was wrong. Period." He regarded me steadily. "It's not your fault. No matter what he said to you, what he called you, what anyone has ever said to you about it—*it's not your fault.*"

I was testing mental ground I had left untrodden for years. "But why should it all stir up now, when I've been fine for so long?"

"What makes you think you've been fine?"

"Well, of course I've been fine."

"Then why," Tager asked, "was it seven years before you were able to have a serious relationship with a man?"

"You mean Hypron?"

He nodded. "Seven years is a long time for anyone to stay alone. For an empath it's almost unheard of."

I almost objected. I had always avoided large groups, or situations where I had to deal with the emotions of people I didn't like. But I knew what Tager meant. In love, empathy was a gift, especially with another empath who could feel me the way I felt him. The lack of that intimacy created a loneliness so intense it hurt like a deep wound. Jarith and I shared a bond that fulfilled me on a level I couldn't reach with a normal person.

I thought of the locked file in my mind, festering in the dark. I knew what had shaken it, releasing a barrage of memories I so wanted to hold back. Jaibriol Qox.

All I said was, "It can't all be Tams."

For once Tager didn't disagree. "Going into combat against Aristos, feeling people die—that's got to be a nightmare." He regarded me with that compassion of his that seemed to have no limit. "You've lived through hell a thousand times. That you've survived, psychologically intact, is miraculous."

I stared at him. There was nothing miraculous about me. I was a mess. "Everyone has troubles in their life. They don't all go around pointing Jumbler's at their own head."

"Primary, it's—"

"Soz," I interrupted.

"Soz?"

"That's my name. Soz."

"Well. Good. Soz."

That was his only outward reaction, a pleasant nod. But I caught his true reaction even though he thought he had masked it. His pulse leapt. He had made a breakthrough with me, a big one. And that

mattered to him. It *mattered*.

“Why?” I asked.

He blinked. “Why is your name Soz?”

“No. Why do you care what happens to me?”

“Because I think you’re a remarkable person.”

“How can you think I’m remarkable? You hardly know me.”

He smiled. “I’m trained to understand people.”

“It’s more than training.”

He looked at me curiously. “Why do you say that?”

I hesitated, trying to find the right words. “I think you naturally care about people. I’m not used to that. I’m used to Traders. Or ISC politics.” I grimaced. “Both get pretty vicious.” I thought of Rex, of Hypron, of my first husband, Jato. “When I do find love, it doesn’t ... stay. The only person I’m capable of maintaining a relationship with is a boy less than half my age who has no political opinions and looks as different from an Aristo as is humanly possible.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s not normal.”

“Why not?”

“I should have a more mature lover.” Like Rex. But Rex didn’t want me anymore.

“Why?”

*Why* did he always ask me that? “I don’t *know* why. Because it’s embarrassing when doddering old Jagernauts fawn over beautiful young boys, that’s why.”

Tager actually laughed, as if I had made a joke. “I would hardly call you doddering.”

“I’m almost forty-eight.”

“I would have guessed younger. But even forty-eight is young for your rank.”

I shrugged. “I’m good at what I do.”

“Why does that make you angry?”

“Angry? It doesn’t make me angry.” That was a lie and I knew it and Tager knew it. Yet until this moment I had never consciously thought that my rank made me *angry*. Why should it?

I spoke slowly, like someone reading a book they had owned for years but never before summoned up the courage to open. “He sent me to Tams knowing what could happen. He sent me out there on the front lines with the Traders, for years, far longer than most officers, and he sent out my brother Althor, and he sent out my brother Kelric.” I forced myself to go on. “And Kelric never came back.”

Tager spoke with his quiet compassion. “Who is ‘he’?”

“My brother.”

“Althor?”

I shook my head. “No. My half brother. Kurj. The Imperator.”

Tager’s face paled. I had more than shaken him this time, I had thrown him into an earthquake. But he was right. I was angry. *Angry*. Now the words were coming, breaking out of the dam I had put around them.

“I lost my first child,” I said. “The only child I’ve ever dared conceive, because Kurj told me that if I left active duty I abdicated my claim to his title. I lost my first husband because of it, I lost Rex because he didn’t want to be my crippled consort, I lost my baby brother to death and my older brother to distrust, I lost my ability to relate like a *normal* human being—” My voice shook. “Kurj would take my *soul* if he could. *He has no right.*”

Tager stared at me. It was a long moment before he answered. That he spoke at all was a marvel. His position was the nightmare of every heartbender, knowing he could bring the Imperator’s wrath on himself by one wrong word. I never intended to tell Kurj I had seen Tager, but no matter how strong an empath Tager was, there was no way he could ever be sure of that. Yet he didn’t back down, not even now, when he knew the danger. In that he earned my respect forever.

“Why does he ask so much of you?” Tager asked.

“Because if I can’t give it to him, I’ll never be strong enough to face Ur Qox.” I spread my hands.

“It’s not like I can say, ‘Oh, I changed my mind. I don’t want to do this anymore.’ If neither Althor nor I becomes Emperor after Kurj, who else is going to do it? Who else has the military training, the Rhon traits, the knowledge, all of that combined? A thousand worlds, Tager. And how many people on each? A hundred? A million? Ten billion? Do I have to carry the burden of every damn one of their lives?”

Tager spoke quietly. “You’re the Imperial Heir.” He made it a statement, not a question.

“One of them. There are two.” Two left. Out of three. “How do you like that? The future of the universe may be in the hands of a crazy woman.”

“Do you think you’re crazy?”

“Aren’t I?”

He spoke as if he were walking through a forest of fragile, crystalline trees with branches that might break at the slightest touch, their fractured ends sharp and deadly, ready to shred his skin and pierce his body.

“Injured, yes. You’re suffering from so many forms of stress disorder I’m not sure I could count them. And even for a psion you’re extraordinarily sensitive, so much so that you’ll probably never be able to endure crowds of people or their uglier emotions without withdrawing emotionally. But crazy? No. To have experienced what you have and still function takes a phenomenal strength of mind.”

I swallowed. He stood there watching me with that empathy of his and I didn’t know what to say. So I just looked at him. And he let me look. He didn’t push, didn’t crowd, didn’t retreat, didn’t turn away.

Finally I said, “Well.” It wasn’t the most articulate response, but it was the best I could do. Tager smiled as if I had said something intelligent.

I walked over to a corner of his office where the walls met at an acute angle. Outside the tinted glass I saw the halls of the embassy stretching away. Here on the inside, a mirror sat on a shelf, an old-style mirror with silvered glass inside a frame of jade. As I looked at my reflection, I could almost see Kurj behind me, always watching, always waiting, never satisfied.

Watch carefully, brother, I thought. Or I may surprise you.

When Jarith came into the bedroom I was just waking up. I lay in the warm sheets, absorbing the sight of him walking across the room. It was a nice view. He wasn’t wearing anything but his snug pants. The down of hairs on his muscled chest caught the sunlight and glistened like gold.

His face was flushed, though. Red. Really red. In fact, he looked frantic. He was staring intently at the pile of our clothes on the floor by the bed. When he reached it, he searched rapidly through the clothes, throwing them here and there.

I peered over the edge of the bed. “What’s wrong?”

He jumped up. “You’re awake.”

I smiled. “Just barely. Come on back and make us sleepy again, hmmm?”

“Soz.” His face turned even redder. “We have company.”

“Company?” Why was he so rattled? “What do you mean?”

“Out there.” He motioned toward the living room. “When I woke up, I went out to get a drink—and she was *there*. Reading a holobook.”

I stared at him. “Someone is *inside* my apartment?” What the hell? I scrambled out of bed and scooped up the underwear and jumpsuit Jarith had tossed on the floor earlier, after he peeled them off me. “Who is it?”

He finally found what he was looking for, his sweater. “She says her name is Cya Liessa.”

I stopped, and straightened up. “Ah.”

He pulled his sweater over his head. “Ah?”

“That explains your reaction.”

“It does?”

I laughed. “Jarith, she has that effect on everyone.” I finished putting on my clothes and headed for the living room.

I saw her as I came through the archway that connected the hall from my bedroom to the living room. She was standing by a window now, looking out at Jacob’s Shire. Gold hair poured over her shoulders, her arms, her back, her hips, shining, curling hair that looked like spun sunlight, or spun gold, or both

mixed together, with copper highlights. When the ringlight shone on that glorious mane, it glistened.

She was wearing a rose-colored dress, Foreshires style, with the same lace and straps that had felt so awkward on me. On her it didn't look awkward. Nothing about her looked awkward. She had the face of an angel, the body of an erotic holomovie goddess, and the grace of a ballet dancer, which was what she used to do for a living, performing under the assumed identity of Cya Liessa.

"My greetings, Mother," I said.

Jarith made a strangled noise behind me. "*Mother?*"

She turned to face us. "Sauscony." Her gaze shifted to Jarith, who was standing behind me, a little to my right, as if for protection from this apparition that had shown up in my apartment. A smile tugged up her lips. "I've already met your friend."

Even at my age, I felt guilty having my mother find me with my lover. "How did you get in?"

"Pako let me in."

Pako? Before Jarith and I had gone to sleep, I had told Pako we weren't to be disturbed. Why did it let her inside? True, its Evolving Intelligence was supposed to anticipate my wishes as best it could.

But even I wasn't sure about my wishes in this case. "What did it tell you?"

"That you weren't available, but I should wait." She glanced at Jarith. "I can come back later ..."

"No. Don't do that." I motioned toward the bar on the other side of the room. "You want a drink?"

*Sauscony.*

Her thought came as clear as sunlight into my mind, bringing the smells and views and sounds of Lyshriol, my father's world, the place where I had grown up. Home. I saw the silvery plains rippling from the city of Dalvador all the way to the horizon in the east and south, to Rider's Forest in the west, beyond that to the Backbone Mountains, and in the north to the huge mountain range we called Rider's Lost Memory. Shimmerflies flitted through fields, their gauzy wings iridescent in the sunlight. Home, with all of the love and the pain, the joy and the loss, the place where in my dreams I retreated to the safety of childhood, to the nurturing arms of the golden woman who had given me birth.

Behind me Jarith made a soft noise, as if he had been shown a beautiful picture. He touched my shoulder. "Soz, I have a music lesson this afternoon. I should go practice."

I turned to him. He was smiling now, no longer red-faced. But sad too. Why was he sad? And why did he have to practice? He had been playing his lytar all morning.

"Can I call you this evening?" he asked.

"Yes, of course." I started to kiss him, then remembered who was watching us and decided to leave the kissing for later. "I'll talk to you then."

Jarith gathered up his things from the bedroom. But when he tried to leave my apartment, he ran into my mother's bodyguards, two Jagernauts hulking outside the door. As they searched him, Jarith gave me a puzzled look.

*Sorry, I thought. She's a dancer. A celebrity. They're just being careful.* It was a lame excuse. Although my mother was a lovely dancer, she was too curvy to be considered among the best. Ballet wasn't a profession that came with all that much celebrity unless you were at its top.

I hid the real reason for the search from Jarith. More than one "friend" of our family had tried to smuggle out holofilm or audio-tapes of our private lives, information that brought a phenomenal price on the media black market. But explaining that would have also meant explaining why, and I had no intention of telling Jarith I was Rhon.

When Kurj chose an heir, that person would spend the rest of his or her life the way Kurj, my aunt, and my parents lived now, guarded day and night. I wanted neither Kurj nor the Assembly forcing that on me any sooner than necessary. Perhaps someday I would have no choice, but for now I made sure I did nothing that might make anyone decide the risk of my being assassinated outweighed my refusal to accept bodyguards.

"All right." The older guard bowed to Jarith. "You can go on through."

Jarith blinked at her, seeming more surprised by the bow than by the search. Then he smiled at me. "See you tonight?"

I nodded. "Tonight."



After Jarith was gone, I went to the bar and poured a glass of ale. Then I glanced at my mother. “Want some?”

She shook her head, setting her masses of hair rippling like liquid. “No, I’m fine.” Ringlight glimmered on her gold skin, reflecting off its metallic sheen the same way light reflected off Kurj’s skin. Her eyes had gold irises and black pupils, just as did Kurj’s eyes under the shield of his inner lids. She hadn’t inherited the inner lids from my grandfather, but other than that she and Kurj could have been fraternal twins rather than mother and son.

But where Kurj was hard, my mother was radiant. I longed to go to her, to lay my head in her lap the way I so often had when I was a little girl looking for her comfort. Except that I wasn’t a little girl anymore, I was a grown woman, and I had no intention of running to my mother every time I stubbed my toe.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

She smiled. “Well, I happened to be on Forshires, so I thought I would—”

“Mother.” I clunked down my glass on the counter. “You have absolutely no reason to be on Forshires right now. So why are you here?”

She came over to the bar and sat in one of the tall chairs, sliding onto it easily despite its height above the floor; at 180 centimeters she was taller than me, taller than my sisters, as tall as my father. She spoke with the same gentle voice that had always comforted my fears at night when I was little. “Kurj told me about Rex. I’m sorry.”

I ran my finger around the top of my glass. “He chose to be a Jagernaut. He knew the risks.”

“Sauscony. I’m not Kurj.”

I looked up at her. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re hurting. I can feel it.”

“It’s personal.” When she started to speak again, I put up my hands. “I mean it. Leave it alone.”

“All right.” She watched me with that casting expression of hers that I knew so well. She was casting around for a subject that wouldn’t make me edgy, trying to find a way to talk to her daughter. The older I got, the more often I saw that look on her face.

“Your friend Jarith is very handsome,” she finally said.

I shrugged. “I guess.”

*Young, though*, she thought, reaching for the intimacy of a mental link.

Leave it, Mother.

Sauscony, I’m not your enemy.

*Block*, I thought. The synapse-and-wall psicon flashed, taking away her concern.

My mother bit her lip. She didn’t say any more, just watched me with her sweet concern. I scowled and stuck my glass under the fount, refilling it with ale. Then I stalked out from behind the counter and went to sit on the couch. After a moment my mother came over and sat in one of the armchairs. She looked like a picture, an artist’s vision of beauty, her body relaxed in perfect lines, her angel’s face pensive, a golden woman with a mane of hair that fanned out all over the chair. I wondered if she had any idea how hard it was being her daughter.

“What’s it like?” I asked.

She smiled. “What is what like?”

“Being loved by everyone who meets you.”

Incredulity. It broke over me in waves. “Where did you get the idea I’m loved by everyone who meets me?”

“Aren’t you?”

“No.”

I exhaled. “Can I ask you something personal?”

“That’s a bit of a double standard, isn’t it?”

I stiffened. “Fine. Never mind.”

“Sauscony.” She spread her hands. “Go ahead.”

“What’s it like to be loved by a Rhon psion?”

The change that came over her face was as spectacular as it was subtle. I hadn't realized how tense she had become during our conversation until I saw it ease out of her posture like water running out of a cup.

She spoke gently. "Your father completes me. Fills me."

"What about sex?"

She reddened. "I think that's enough personal questions for today."

"Sorry."

The corners of her mouth twitched upward. "Let me put it this way. Having ten children was easy."

Can I ask you something else? I thought.

She smiled. That depends.

It's about Kurj.

Suddenly she was stiff again. *What about him?*

Was it really an accident?

Was what an accident? Her agitation rippled against my mind. How can I talk to you, Sauscony, if you keep asking me half questions ?

*Grandfather's death, I thought. Was it really an accident?*

My mother practically snapped out of her chair, like a coil pulled too taut, until it released in a burst of energy. She went to the window and looked out at Jacob's Shire. "Of course it was an accident."

"Kurj must have known he could overload the link." That had been fifty-five years ago. Now, today, he was one of three minds in the circle of power that kept the Skol-Net alive: Kurj, my aunt, and my father. The Fist, the Mind, and the Heart of the Web. It was more than coincidence that their minds were so different. If the three in that link were too similar, it set up a resonance like a driven oscillator, forcing their minds into bigger and bigger fluctuations until the link shattered.

Fifty-five years ago, my grandparents had been the only ones in the link. Kurj had tried to become the third.

"He must have known," I said. "The odds that both he and grandfather would survive were too low. Kurj knew that. He *knew* it. And he was younger. Much younger. Much stronger. The chances of him surviving were far greater than for Grandfather."

My mother whirled around. "Stop it!"

I couldn't stop. My life might someday depend on knowing the truth. "Why is he so intent on setting Althor and me against each other? Because he thinks we'll be too busy fighting each other to turn on him?" I forced out the words. "Because he fears one of us will try to assume his title of Emperor by committing fratricide? Just like Kurj committed patricide?"

My mother came over—and slapped me across the face. She was shaking, her entire body trembling as she sank into her chair. I put my palm against my cheek, over the smarting skin, hating myself for what I needed to know.

Her eyes were wet with tears. "You will never, *never* say those words again. Not your filthy accusations and not your filthy insinuations. Kurj's *father* was an ISC scout, a good and decent man who died in the line of duty."

I swallowed. "Mother—I've seen the files."

She stiffened. "What?"

"The files. The records. The same ones Kurj found the day he killed the man who fathered him."

"What are you talking about?"

Gods, I hated this. Kurj was right; we learned to survive—not only against the Traders, but against each other as well. The same talents of mine that Kurj had utilized so many times when he had me spy against the Traders had worked just as well against him. "Kurj's legal father couldn't have sired him. The man wasn't a Rhon psion."

She looked away from me. "My first husband carried at least one copy of every Rhon gene. The doctors selected the proper ones from him. Then we made a baby. Kurj."

How many times had I heard that "official" explanation of why Kurj was Rhon even though his father wasn't. The Imperialate needed Rhon heirs and we were their breeding stock. But our dangerous

recessives made inbreeding risky, and clipping out those recessives also cut out what made us Rhon.

After a long search a man was found who carried variants of the Rhon genes. His were different enough to decrease the probability that recessives would kill or deform the children he had with any woman of the Imperial family. He didn't have two of every gene so he wasn't a Rhon psion, but he had at least one copy of each. So with the help of gene surgery he could sire a Rhon child. My grandparents arranged a marriage between him and my mother.

Never mind the almost zero probability of finding such a man. Kurj was considered living proof that he had existed.

I regarded my mother steadily. "Those records include the analysis of your first husband's DNA. He had almost none of the Rhon genes. You know that. You know Kurj can't be his son."

"What difference does it make now?" Tears ran down her face. "It's done. Over with."

I wanted to hide in shame, to pretend it had all been a mistake, that I was wrong. The last time I had seen her cry openly, where others could see, had been at the memorial service for my brother Kelric. But denying the truth wouldn't erase it. Kurj trusted neither Althor nor me, and I needed to understand why. I had no illusions about Kurj; if I ever made a wrong move with him, it could mean my life.

I spoke softly. "Please. I need to know."

My mother wiped her face with her hands, and wiped her hands on her knees. Then she sat staring at the floor in front of her chair, her eyes clouded with tears.

Finally she looked at me. Then she began to speak. "When my father was Imperator, he chose Kurj as his heir." She exhaled. "Kurj coveted that power. The only thing that kept him from trying to depose my father was family loyalty. Family love. Values he learned from the man he thought was his father, a man he had loved deeply."

"Your first husband."

My mother nodded. "He was a good father. A good husband." She spread her hands. "My parents chose better for me than I did for myself. I wasn't like you when I was young, Sauscony, so strong and sure of yourself. I made stupid mistakes. Several years after my first husband died, I remarried. But I ... there was violence. I didn't know, before I married him, what he was like. When I found out, I was ashamed."

"So you left him?"

"Imperial heirs don't divorce."

I thought of my first marriage, the one I had failed so miserably at. "Tell that to Jato."

Her voice softened. "I was a fool for feeling that way, I know that now. But at the time I thought I had no choices." She swallowed. "Kurj was so young then, so vulnerable. He saw everything and he felt helpless to stop it."

Kurj, vulnerable, helpless? "It's hard to imagine."

"He was just a boy." She paused. "At first my husband left him alone. But when Kurj reached puberty, it changed. He was growing so fast, already as tall as me. My husband thought—I don't know. Yes, I do. He saw Kurj as—as—"

"A competitor?"

She stiffened, watching me with her large eyes, like a dove startled from her hiding place. "Yes." Her voice hardened. "That man beat my child. So I left him."

"What happened to him?"

"He went to prison."

"And Kurj?"

"After that he hated anyone he thought might hurt me in any way. What I didn't understand was why he hated *himself* so much. Back then I didn't realize how my ... presence ... affected him." She rubbed her arms as if she were cold. "Or maybe I just couldn't acknowledge it. Sometimes I think his only stability came from his memories of my first husband. For nearly a quarter of a century, while Kurj gathered his power as Imperial heir—during all that time he held onto his memories of his father as if they were a lifejacket."

I was beginning to understand. "And then he found those files with the identity of his true father."

She nodded. “Gods, he was enraged. He’s never believed it was a lab error with my mother’s and my eggs. He felt betrayed by everyone he loved.” Her voice shook. “In his view of the universe, the man who had what he so wanted—the title of Emperor—had also stolen by force the only thing he coveted as much as the power of the Emperor. A thing that was forbidden. To both of them.”

Her hands trembled as she pushed a curl out of her eyes. “Did he say to himself, ‘I will kill this man?’ I don’t—I don’t believe that. But he knew the risks ... and still he forced himself into the Net link.” A tear ran down her face. “I found him kneeling by our father’s body. He was crying.” Her voice broke. “Despite everything—when Kurj was a baby, I held him, nursed him, loved him. Ai, Sauscony, he was such a pride for me, my first born, my shining light. But he changed. Bit by bit, day by day, year by year, decade by decade.” She closed her eyes, opened them again. “Until finally I lost him.”

I spoke softly. “I’m sorry. For all of it.”

Tears traced their glistening paths down her cheeks. “So am I.”

## 12. A Time to Plant

Do you want to be Emperor?” Tager asked. Dangerous ground. I continued to study the figurines on his shelf, picking each one up, turning the glass statue over in my hand, and placing it back on the shelf. He had a collection of country pieces, each formed in minute detail and color, even down to the eyelashes and the fingernails. The tiller was bent over, holding a hand plow in his gnarled grip. The planter wore a layered dress that feathered down around her calves. She held the front up, making a bowl with her skirt to carry seeds. The harvester was walking along a row of top-heavy graincob plants as tall as she, their heads bending over under the weight of their ripe cobs. She held one cob in her hand and carried a bag bulging with more.

“Where did you get these?” I asked.

“There’s a community of Cammish farmers who live south of Jacob’s Shire,” Tager said. “Aside from farming, they support themselves by making the statues.”

I turned to face him. He was standing by his desk, half sitting on the edge of it. “They’re beautiful,” I said.

He had that look again, as if he were trying to decipher my non sequiturs. “Yes. They are.”

I walked around the office, looking at his other knickknacks. “We can till and plant and harvest. Live by the land and the seasons, become part of life’s cycle.” I stopped and regarded him. “Or we can skip all that and put in a food-processing plant.” The way Kurj processed. Peoples. Cities. Planets. All were unfinished material he fitted to his needs. “Growing food from the land is inefficient.”

Tager smiled. “It tastes a lot better.”

“Maybe taste is a luxury we can’t afford.”

“Why?”

“We don’t need it. Food is nourishment, not art.”

“We evolved our sense of taste for a reason. Just like we learned to live off the land for a reason. The fact that we have other options now doesn’t invalidate the desire some people still have to live in the old ways.” Tager watched me. “Maybe there is more to it than tilling and planting and harvesting. Maybe it satisfies a deeper part of what makes us human.”

“Then again,” I said. “Maybe it’s all just a big waste of time.”

“Is that what you think?”

I went back to pacing. “I think Skolia needs both. Tillers and processors.”

“Which are you?”

I stopped in front of him. “Both.”

He spoke quietly. “That answers ‘How.’ But not ‘Do you want to?’”

Did I want to be Emperor? I knew the answer—but I wasn’t ready to meet it yet. My mind danced around it, coming close, moving away, unwilling to commit.

After a moment, during which I just stood there, Tager tried another tack. “What about your brother Althor?”

I crossed my arms. “What about him?”

Tager spoke as if he were walking on a layer of eggshells. “What if Emperor Skolia never makes the choice? What if he dies leaving the question of his heir unsettled?” He paused. “Or what if he waits to let the answer sort itself out?”

“Althor is my brother.” My *brother*, one I had loved when I was a child, still loved even now, despite everything Kurj had done to drive us apart.

“So is the Emperor,” Tager said.

“In name.”

Tager sat quietly, patient, not pushing. After a moment I said, “Althor is my parents’ second child. Number two out of ten. He left home when he was eighteen. He went offworld to attend DMA.”

“So he’s a Jagernaut.”

I nodded. “I was eleven when he left. I didn’t see him again until he came home to visit.” My face relaxed into a smile. “He was so happy to see Lyshriol again.”

“Lyshriol?”

“My father’s home world.”

“I don’t think I know it.”

There was no reason he should. We kept it private. “It’s one of the ancient colonies. It was isolated for four thousand years before the Imperialate rediscovered it. We think it started out as a small farming settlement. By the time they were found again they had backslid so far they no longer remembered their origins.”

“It sounds primitive.”

“I suppose. The only computers on the entire planet are the ones my mother had installed in the house.”

“House?”

“Where we lived.”

Tager smiled. “Do you mean palace?”

“No. House. The place barely even has electricity.”

He blinked at me. “That’s where you grew up?”

“That’s right. My mother had a school and a hospital built near the village, but other than that she didn’t change anything.”

His curiosity lapped around me in waves. “Why not?”

“Why should she meddle with it? It’s an idyll. You can’t even go there without permission from my family.”

“Do you miss it?”

I sighed. “Sometimes. But I was so out of place. I always knew I wanted to be a Jagernaut. When I was ten years old I could take apart a Jumbler and tell you how it worked. By the time I was twelve, I could derive the equations for inversion. This on a world where armies used to fight with swords and bows.” My brother had essentially ended warfare on Lyshriol when, at the age of sixteen, he had ridden into battle carrying not only a sword, but also a laser carbine. “I think it was also like that for Althor.”

“Tell me about him,” Tager said.

My memories unfolded like a scrap of handwritten parchment found in an old-style book bound in leather. I saw Althor in his Jagernaut uniform, a Jumbler on his hip, kneeling on one leg before my father with his head bowed in respect, the traditional greeting that a son on Lyshriol gave his sire when he returned from war. Our father stood there, so proud he looked ready to shout it to the village—and so confused, struggling to understand this son who came home out of the sky.

“I was seventeen then. I thought Althor was the most glorious person I had ever seen. I wanted to be just like him.” I spread my hands. “Then one day, somehow, somewhere, I passed him by. I was a Primary, he a Secondary.” Now Kurj watched to see what we would do, Althor and I circling each other warily, so much between us left silent, unspoken.

“Do you see him anymore?”

“Not much. We don’t have a lot to say to each other.” Too much distrust existed between Althor

and me now for us to share the closeness we had known as children. But too much memory of that love existed to let our situation push us apart any farther. Kurj was wrong. Althor and I would never plot against each other until only one remained. If Kurj was waiting for us to make his decision for him, he would wait forever.

In the end, my mother was the one who suffered, forced to watch the ugly game of power and death played by the children she loved so dearly.

I started pacing again. "My mother came to see me."

Tager switched gears smoothly. "How did you feel about that?"

I peered at a vase on one of the shelves. It was exquisite, made from rose glass with gold swirls looping through it. The surface glimmered, reflecting different colors when I looked at it from different directions. It was so finely made, so delicately spun.

I frowned at Tager. "Why do you put this out here? If you brushed up against the shelf, you could knock off the vase." Then that work of beauty would shatter on the floor, destroyed by the person who valued it most.

He was watching me with his look again, as if I were a cipher he wanted to decode. "I'm careful with it."

"How do you know someone else won't destroy it?" I shook my head. "Some treasures are too precious to put where they can be touched."

"Because they might get hurt?"

"Yes."

"The vase is stronger than it looks. It's fallen before. It didn't break."

I folded my arms, rubbing my hands up and down them as if I were cold. "That doesn't mean it didn't hurt. It can only fall so many times before it breaks inside. It should be cherished. Protected." I pointed at the vase. "Suppose someone comes in here and fights with you for this, someone obsessed with it beyond all reason and sanity? And during the fight the two of you knock over the vase. What will you do when it shatters on the ground? How will you put it back together?"

"I wouldn't fight."

Although I tried to smile, it didn't feel right the way it stretched so tight over my face. "But you're not Rhon."

"No," he said softly. "I'm not."

I went back to pacing. Tager watched me, giving me time, giving me space. Eventually I said, "Kurj thinks my father is a simpleton."

"Your father is the Emperor's stepfather, isn't he?"

That stopped me. I stood in the middle of the room and laughed. But it wasn't funny. "My father was eighteen when my mother married him. Eighteen. Kurj was thirty-five. The wedding took place just days after my grandfather died." Just days after Kurj had become Emperor. "Kurj hates him."

"Your father?"

"Yes." But however Kurj felt, he hadn't committed patricide a second time. He had held himself back. And now he needed my father, who could power the Skol-Net effortlessly, with no danger to the rest of the Triad.

The Fist, the Mind, and the Heart of Skolia. Just as no two particles could have the same quantum numbers, so no two minds could occupy the same regions of psiberspace. Kurj's mind was too much like my grandfather's had been, raw and blunt. My aunt's mind was delicacy, intellectual brilliance, an intricate lace of complexity. Almost no overlap existed between she and Kurj in psiberspace. They could use the same functions, go to the same "places," but how they existed there was so different that their presences never interfered.

The Imperialate needed three in that link. Skolia had been smaller before my father joined the Triad, but even then Kurj and my aunt had been struggling to meet their duties. Kurj commanded a military that now protected almost a thousand worlds. My aunt was the liaison between the Assembly and a computer network that spanned not only Skolia, but Allied and Trader worlds as well. That was in addition to the demands made on them by the Skol-Net itself, which never rested, never paused, never

eased, only grew larger and larger each year, filling a voracious ocean as deep as the stars.

Neither of them would ever have willingly relinquished those positions. But no one, no matter how ambitious, dedicated or strong, had the resources to manage that balancing act for long. Eventually it would have killed them, as it had been doing, slowly and relentlessly, before my father made them a Triad.

Regardless of my family's problems, we had to keep the Skol-Net functioning. The alternatives were unbearable. I would rather die than live in a universe where everyone except a handful of Aristos were servers or providers.

I suddenly felt tired. I went to a chair and sat down, sinking into its cloth cushion. Leaning forward, I rested my elbows on my knees and stared at the floor.

Tager came over and sat in the chair next to me, on its edge so that he was even with me. "What are you thinking?"

"About my family." I looked at him. "We're a mess."

He spoke gently. "You're like people without skins trying to live in a universe that makes no accommodation for that. Most everyone else has protection, so they have no way to know how damaging their normal mode of living is to you. To survive, you either have to isolate yourselves or else develop drastic coping mechanisms."

I thought of Jaibriol and his life of solitude. He was probably the only Rhon psion alive who was normal. But the price he had paid for it, that punishing loneliness, was too high for me. "Those coping mechanisms are tearing us apart."

"You've had the responsibility of defending an empire thrust on you, not because you're better equipped to do it, but because the same traits that make it so hard for you to cope are also the source of our only defense against the Aristos. Gods, that would strain any family."

I thought about that. "When we were all living together, my parents and us children, we had something. I don't know what to call it. A Rhon community? We were happy. Then we all grew up and left home. Reality intruded." I regarded Tager. "My parents have each other. But the community is gone. They live: the rest of us survive. I want more than survival."

"If you mean a Rhon mate, a Rhon society—"

"Yes, I know. I'm not going to find it." The image of Jaibriol flickered in my mind. If only you knew, Dr. Heartbender. "My parents are people, not breeding machines. They aren't going to provide fodder for the Skol-Net forever. You think they want to watch all of their children die? What if both Althor and I end up dead? Then what?"

"I don't know."

I got up and walked over to the shelf with the Cammish figures. "Neither do I." I turned to face him. "I don't want to die. I want to find an answer. To all of it. To the pain, the anger, the terror. To this war that never ends. I want an answer to the Aristos." I took a breath. "I want an answer to Tams."

"Do you think you can find it?"

"I think I have a better chance than Althor." *Or Kurj.* Bitterly I added, "And yes, I want the power for its own sake. It's a hell of a lot better than being a victim." I regarded him steadily. "Yes, I want to be Imperator."

When I walked into the lobby of the building where I lived, I found a visitor waiting for me. She was sitting in an armchair reading a holozine, her feet propped up on the onerously expensive table in front of the chair. At the same moment that I saw her, she looked up from her reading.

"Helda!" I strode over to her. "What are you doing here?" She stood up, a grin spreading across her wide face. "Heya, Soz."

"I almost walked by you." I wasn't used to seeing her out of uniform. Of all the bizarre outfits—she had on blue jeans. She must have bought them in one of the import shops that sold Allied jeans and coffee, Earth's most popular exports with my people. That, and their hamburgers. I doubted there was a major city on any well-populated planet that didn't have one of their hamburger places. Sometimes, in my more cynical moments, I was convinced that while we and the Traders were busy hurling world-melting armies at each other, Earth would quietly take us all over by flooding us with "fast food" and convincing

us we couldn't live without it.

Helda chuckled. "Some people walk by me on purpose. I just scared away a golden boy." She tilted her head upward. "Said he would wait up there."

Had Jarith come to see me? But where did he go? Although the lobby was open during the day, there was no way he could go farther into the building without a pass. And I hadn't given him one.

"Come on upstairs." I smiled. "Maybe we can find this mysterious fellow."

As we walked to the airlift, I spoke carefully. "How is Rex?"

"Good. He has some contraption for his legs. It makes it possible for him to walk as soon as he learns how to use it."

"Is he happy?" What I really wanted to know was did he have a woman in his life. But I couldn't ask that.

"Ya, he's fine." Helda chuckled. "The usual. All of his nurses are in love with him. There is one he asks for often."

I told myself that didn't hurt. After all, I had Jarith now. Then I thought, *Oh, cut it out*. You know it hurts. So let it hurt. You aren't going to die from it. And you're right, you do have Jarith.

When the lift opened on my floor, I saw Jarith down the hall sitting by my door with his satchel in his lap, reading a holobook. We went over to him, our feet padding on the carpet.

When he looked at us, I smiled. "How did you get the lift to work?"

He stood up, watching Helda. "I don't know. Pako just let me up."

That was interesting. I had never told the computer to let Jarith into the lift. Not that I had any objection. Pako could let him into my apartment if it wanted.

Helda grinned at him. "Heya, hoiya. We meet again."

Jarith reddened. "My greetings."

"This is Helda," I said. "She flies in my squad."

"Used to." Helda gave me an annoyed look as I opened the door. "We fly nowhere for months now."

I glanced at her. "Kurj hasn't sent you and Taas out with another squad?"

Jarith dropped his satchel, his holobooks and holosheets spilling all over the floor. He flushed, dropping down on his knees to scoop up his things.

Helda and I knelt down, helping him gather up the mess. But when I gave him a questioning look he wouldn't respond. What had I done to upset him? Sometimes it was hard to understand his moods.

Helda thumped the last book into his arms. "He sent Taas out with Eighth squad." She stood up with Jarith and me. "Put me in a think tank. Military strategy. But I miss flying."

I closed the door. "I also."

Jarith walked across the room, leaving the two of us alone. Helda watched him unload his books on the table. Then she spoke quietly. "Imperator Skolia asked me to give you a message."

A message? Why would Kurj send it by courier? Using the Net would have been far more efficient. If he had wanted the message secured, he could have patterned it to my brain with a lock only I could release.

I glanced at Jarith. "Perhaps we should wait."

"It's only twelve words."

"What?"

He said: "Come back to Headquarters immediately. Quietly. Tell no one I ordered it."

"That's it?"

She nodded. "That's it."

So. Kurj reached out his long arm and pulled me back. I could see him, metal in a uniform, calculating in his shielded mind, setting us all on trajectories that ended in places only he knew.

But maybe it was time to face him. Maybe it was time to calculate my own trajectories. "Why did he send you to tell me?"

"I don't know." Helda's gaze flicked over my shoulder and her voice changed. "Want to go sightseeing?"



I turned to see Jarith headed our way. When he reached us, I smiled. “Want to come sightseeing with Helda and me?”

He regarded Helda warily. “All right.”

So we went to the boardwalk. We strolled on the piers, bought puff-cube balloons, let them go, laughed a lot, and ran on the beach.

But the entire time I had an odd feeling, the inexplicable sense that I was seeing an end, though to what I didn’t know.

Jarith sat on my bed. “I like your friend.”

I gave my sweater to the closet robot arm, which hung it up in the closet. “I thought you were going to run like a wind-antelope the first time you saw her.”

“I was.” He smiled. “But she’s all right.”

“Is that why you dropped your books this afternoon?”

“Oh. That.” He averted his eyes. “No. I was just clumsy.”

I came over and sat cross-legged next to him. “That’s not the reason.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Something was wrong. I felt it.”

“I—it was nothing.” He studied the pattern on the comforter that covered my bed.

“Jarith.” I put my hand under his chin and turned his face so that he had to look at me. “What’s wrong?”

“What you said startled me. That’s all.”

I dropped my arm. “What I said? What do you mean?”

“That name.”

“What name?”

“Kurj.”

I stiffened. That wasn’t a name I wanted to discuss, not with Jarith, not with anyone. Tager had taken all of what I had to spare on that subject. “What about it?”

“In the context of your conversation it could have only meant one person.”

“I’m a soldier. He’s my commanding officer.”

He gave me an incredulous look. “Even Primaries don’t call the Emperor of Skolia by his *personal name*.”

That stopped me. Of course I never called Kurj by that name when he was acting as my CO. But in a casual conversation with Helda it hadn’t occurred to me to use his title any more than I would have called one of my other brothers Prince Whatever.

“You live in a penthouse rich even for an Imperial Primary,” Jarith said. “You have a rank as prestigious as an Admiral even though you’re barely thirty. And you call the Emperor by his personal name.”

I got off the bed and walked to the window. Outside, Jacob’s Shire rolled out like a fairyland country, golden in the setting sun.

“Soz?” Jarith asked.

“I don’t know what you expect me to say.”

Jarith took a breath. “Emperor Skolia—are you and he—have I presumed—?”

Flaming rockets. He thought Kurj was my *boyfriend*. I almost laughed. But instead I went back to the bed and sat next to him. “No. You haven’t presumed on anything. I’ve just known Lord Skolia for many years, that’s all.”

“You’re older than you look, aren’t you?”

“I’ll be forty-eight in a few days.”

His mouth fell open. “You’re *kidding*.”

“No.” I squinted at him. “Does that matter to you?”

Jarith shifted his weight on the bed. “I don’t know. You’re older than my mother.”

Gods. The next thing I knew, the ISC ethics squad was going to come looking for me. *You’re under arrest, ma’am. For cradle theft.*

But what he said hurt in another way. I had yet to have a child, and a woman younger than me had a son old enough to father his own children. Although my extended lifespan let me delay childbearing longer than most women, I couldn't wait forever. But I hadn't wanted to start a family while I was flying with the squad, not after what happened the first time, not knowing my children could lose their mother every time I went out.

Jarith watched my face. "Soz?"

I exhaled. "I'm not sure how to say this."

He tensed. "Just say it."

"Helda brought me a message from my family. I have to leave for Diesha tonight."

"You're going offworld? *Tonight?*"

"As soon as I pack."

He put his hands on my shoulders. "Was it what I said? I can learn to handle the age difference. Really?"

"It's nothing you said."

He started to add more, then stopped. I felt what he didn't say. He wanted to go with me. And part of me wanted him to come. But it would mean asking him to start all over on a strange world where he knew no one. I couldn't press him to make that change unless I was willing to offer him more than what we had now. And I wasn't. Too much was unsettled in my life.

"You mean a lot to me," I said.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Say things that sound like a preface to 'I think you should start seeing other people.'"

"I think you should."

Jarith swore under his breath. "Soz, stop it."

"Do you really understand what I do for a living? Every time I go out, I could die. Do you want to live with that?"

"No. But I'm willing to try."

I spoke softly. "I don't know if I am."

He exhaled. Then he drew me into his arms. "Will you come back to Forshires?"

I laid my head on his shoulder. "I hope so."

We held each other for a long time. Finally Jarith lay down on the bed, pulling me with him. We made love in the clouds, floating together one last time.

## III. Diesha

### 13. Fist of the Web

Helda and I took a commercial flight to Diesha, traveling like civilians, doing nothing to attract attention. Although Kurj had made no stipulations about how I was to arrive, it was obvious he wanted a low-key approach. Why? What was he up to?

Our ship landed on a pad far from any terminal at the starport. When we were down, I got out of my hammock and went to the cubicle that some generous person had dubbed the ship's lounge. It had three chairs and a table bolted to what served as the deck when the ship was in a gravity field. I looked out a porthole and saw a flybus approaching from the distant terminal, speeding on its cushion of air like a bullet of silver and black metal.

"Prepare to disembark," the steward said over the com, his sensual tone a pleasant contrast to the clipped computer voices on the military transports I usually took to Diesha.

As we queued up at the airlock, the steward appeared, a young man in a crisp blue uniform. When he opened the airlock, fresh air flooded the ship, a blissful relief after our days of canned air during the flight.

The flybus pulled alongside the ship. As it rose up, I saw an officer standing inside its open door, a

woman in the dusky red uniform of ISC security police. She carried a laser carbine.

An accordion bridge unfolded from the flybus and came to rest in the airlock. After the steward clamped it into place, he smiled at us. "Welcome to the Diesha Air and Starport, Civilian Terminal. We hope you enjoy your stay here."

The security officer checked each of us as we entered the bus, running her scanner over our bodies and our luggage. She never even glanced at our faces. When we had all boarded, the bus retracted its bridge, closed its door, sank down toward the ground, and headed for the port buildings. We all sat in the nervoplex seats staring out the windows or at the floor, anywhere but at each other.

A second flybus met us halfway to the terminal. While the two vehicles sat on the tarmac like giant bullets conferring with each other, we disembarked from the first and boarded the second, going through the whole frigging security check again.

Helda grumbled as we waited to be scanned by the security officer. "Never again," she said under her breath.

The second bus took us to within ten meters of the terminal. We walked the rest of the way between poles that blinked and beeped as we passed them. The path ended at a security arch which framed the doorway to the terminal building.

The counter beyond the arch was staffed by a burly man and a heavysset woman, both in ISC uniforms. The woman stood at a computer console behind the counter and the man stood in front of it, his concentration intent on our group. As I walked through the arch, he motioned for me to stop. "Baggage check."

I slung my duffel up on the counter. The woman touched a panel on her console and holos appeared above it, rotating slowly to show the interior of my bag, every last detail, including my underwear and other private belongings.

"Open it," the man said.

Did every civilian who came into Diesha have to go through this? I undid the flaps and the bag fell open. As the man ruffled through my things, data scrolled across the woman's console screen. "Valdoria, Sauscony," she read. "Jacob's Shire, Eos, Foreshires Hold." She glanced at me. "Far from home, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said.

Someone nudged my shoulder, pressing me into the counter. I glanced back to see another passenger pushing past me to enter the terminal. Although she was dressed as a civilian, the patches on her shoulders indicated her commission in the military. I recognized her; she had been on the ship, and had been at the end of the line when we queued up to enter the terminal. Outside, other civilian passengers stood in line, squinting in the harsh sunlight as they waited.

I turned back in time to see the security officer take my wallet out of the duffel. He flipped it open and the minialbum activated, cycling through its holos. An image of Jarith came up, followed by several of the two of us together, then one with Helda and Jarith, and finally one of my mother. The man stopped the display, leaving a miniature image of my mother floating above the holoscreen sewn into my wallet. He was holding the wallet flat in his hand, so it looked like he had my mother standing on his palm.

"Who is this?" he asked.

"My mother."

"You're kidding." He handed the wallet to the woman behind the counter, his arm creating ripples of light when it pierced the security field around her console. "Can you get an ID?"

She set my wallet on a horizontal screen. The holo of my mother floated there, smiling and golden. Then it blurred as a laser played over it.

"Correlation complete," the computer said. "Name: Cya Liessa. Occupation: dancer, Parthonia Imperial Ballet. No address given."

"Ballerina, huh?" The man smiled. "She's pretty."

Pretty? That was all he had to say after they invaded my mother's privacy as if it were just some page in a holozine they were reading?

The woman dropped my wallet into my duffel and closed up the bag. "All right. Move along."

I clenched my fist around the bag and slung it back over my shoulder. Then I went on into the arrivals gate. People crowded the chrome and glass area, standing and talking, sitting in chairs, watching the holovid in the corner, boarding speedwalks.

Helda came up next to me. "Pah."

"They give you a hard time too?"

She scowled. "They are lucky we are under orders to be as quiet as mumblemice."

I smiled at the image of Helda as a mumblemouse. "How long until you have to make your connecting flight?"

She tilted her head, the familiar blank look flashing across her face as she accessed her spinal node. "About twenty minutes."

Twenty minutes. Then she was off again, on leave. "I wish you were staying."

Helda laughed. "Heya, Soz, you getting sentimental?" She motioned at a speedwalk. "Come to my gate with me."

I didn't want to go with her. I had no idea why, other than an odd sense that if she left now I would never see her again. As we boarded the speedwalk, I spoke quietly. "You and Rex, and Taas too at the end there—I was used to being around you day and night, all the time. Half the time we were one mind. Now that's gone." I struggled to express feelings that swirled like mist at the edges of my vision. "Something's ending, Helda. But I don't know what."

"Ending?" The wall behind her slid by us as the speedwalk sped toward her departure gate. "You sound strange today."

I made myself smile. "I guess so."

We didn't talk much more on the way, just light conversation. She told me what she knew of Taas, who was flying with another squad now and making a reputation for himself as a skilled pilot.

"When you see him again, wish him well for me," I said.

"If you want." She shrugged. "It is more likely you see him first, here at Headquarters."

"I know. But do it for me anyway. Just in case."

"In case what?"

I didn't know the answer to that. So instead I forced a laugh. "Well, you never know what diversions I'll run into."

When we reached the gate, the passengers on Helda's flight were already queued up for the flybus that would take them to the ship. After Helda went through the security arch, she waved at me. I stood inside the gate, in front of the bullet-proof, laser-proof, shatter-proof, fist-thick wall of tinted glass and waved back. Then she got on the bus. Within moments it was just another bullet humming across the tarmac like all the other chromed bullets speeding across the airfields out there.

I got back on the speedwalk. This time I strode along it, adding my velocity to its own so that I was moving at over ten kilometers per hour. I had no idea I why I was in a hurry, just that I wanted to get away from the starport, from this place of leavetakings and endings.

It only took me a few minutes to reach the MagRail stop outside the terminal. The platform perched on a casecrete tower as tall as the starport. Giant rails arched out of the sky down to the platform, ran level with it for several meters, and then swept away again, up and over the port in a great curving sweep of silver like a sculpture of rails.

I could see the MagTrain in the distance, a line of bullet cars chromed in blue. The train hummed into the platform where I stood with a handful of other travelers, and its doors sucked open like camera shutters, letting us board. Within moments we were rushing back up the Rail, speeding out and over the port.

Most of the civilians disembarked in the suburbs. At the perimeter of ISC Headquarters, we stopped at a platform secured by armored guards with laser carbines. The armor encased their entire bodies, making them eight feet tall, like giants constructed out of mirrored black and silver metal, faceless, with opaque screens where their eyes should have been.

By this time I was the only "civilian" on the train. As the guards entered the car, we all stood up. One giant strode over to me, boots ringing on the metal floor. He or she—I didn't know which—spoke

through a voice filter that made it sound like a machine. "Identification."

When I turned my hand palm up and tensed my wrist, my ID chip slid out of its sleeve pocket into my palm. The socket on my wrist showed clearly, marking me as either a telop or a Jagernaut. It was impossible to read the officer's reaction; the armor hid body language and facial expressions, and the filter took all emotional nuances out of the voice. It slid my card into a box attached to its waist. Although I had been through these checks often, the procedure felt strange today, as if I were being distilled into a small square card.

Everyone in the car received clearance to enter Headquarters. That was no surprise. Only someone very naive or very foolish would have tried to get into the city without proper ID.

The train took us into the heart of Headquarters. I got off at a platform near the city center. As the train pulled away, a swarm of automated taxis swooped in, vying for fares. I ignored them, going instead to an airtube at the edge of the tower. It lowered me down, using air jets to slow my descent. Getting blasted with air that way unsettled many people, to put it mildly, and few trusted the tubes not to drop them. But I liked it, probably for the same reason I liked doing loops and rolls when I piloted a plane, something about the risk and the challenge of it, or maybe just the boost of adrenaline.

Right now I needed a boost. The oddness of my brother's summons, the impersonal security procedures coming into Diesha, Helda's leaving, and then the faceless guards in their armor—it all left me with an uncomfortable sensation, as if I were turning into a machine myself, my humanity strained out and condensed into an ID card.

At the dispenser in the bottom of the tower, I bought a mirroredvisor. It was translucent on my side, letting me see the city through an amber tinge that muted the harsh Dieshan sunlight. Anyone looking at me would see only a dark, mirrored strip across my eyes.

Heavy traffic hovered along the cascrete streets, but I rode the speedwalks instead of flagging a taxi. Pedestrians were everywhere, military personnel. Their visored eyes were blank masks, unreadable, like Kurj's face when his inner lids were lowered.

The tower where I lived had no lobby, just a door that whisked open in response to my ID chip, admitting me into a glass-enclosed shaft. The lift took me to the top floor, to a corridor with walls made out of amber glass. Outside, Headquarters spread out in every direction, a relentless pattern of squares and rectangles both horizontal and vertical, with no softening touches of green anywhere, just black and silver and white. A flier appeared from behind the tower, winging so close that the glass vibrated. Then it curved away and out above the wide stretches of cascrete.

Only two people had quarters on this floor: myself, and a retired general who was now one of my brother's chief advisers on espionage. My door checked my ID chip, fingerprints, and retinal patterns before it finally opened. The living room looked the same as always, all chrome and glass, with white furniture and gleaming tables.

"Welcome home, Primary Valdoria," a voice said as the door closed behind me.

"Heya, Mak." The name was the closest I had come to personalizing the ISC-MA4K EI that took care of the place. I dumped my duffel on the floor and collapsed onto the couch. "Do I have any messages?" Although Mak had been forwarding my netmail during the five months I had been on Foreshires, everything might not have come through yet.

"Two messages," Mak said.

"Is either from Emperor Skolia?"

"No."

Maybe he didn't know I was here yet. That didn't seem likely, though; if he wanted me back as badly as Helda had indicated, he had probably kept track of my arrival. Given his extreme measures to keep his summons secret, I doubted he wanted me to announce my presence.

"Mak, send a message to my parents at the palace." They weren't there; neither liked coming to Diesha. But Kurj probably was unless some crisis required him to stay close to Headquarters. The palace was the only place secure enough to let him dismiss his bodyguards. High in the mountains and surrounded on all sides by unsettled land and hidden security installations, its functions were completely automated. It needed no human staff. It was the one place where Kurj could find what we all treasured:

privacy—complete, utter privacy.

“Text of message?” Mak prompted.

“My greetings, Mother and Father. I’m back on Diesha to visit Rex. Let’s get together while I’m here. Love, Sauscony.’ End message. Send.”

“Sent.”

Belatedly, I remembered the girl, the one from the hospital that Kurj had “invited” to the palace. What was her name? Cyliessa? No ... Charissa. That was it. Charissa Deirdre. If she found the message, she might actually have it forwarded to my parents. “Mak, who is living at the palace right now?”

“Imperator Skolia.”

“Anyone else, either now or in the previous five months?”

“A woman named Charissa Deirdre stayed with him for one hundred and six days.”

One hundred and six. She must have pleased Kurj. I wondered how she felt about it. Did he repulse her? Had she grown to like him? Love him? I supposed it was possible. Love was a bizarre enough emotion to strike in even the most unlikely places.

“Where is Deirdre now?” I asked.

“She works in the nursery of the ISC Hospital maternity wing and lives with her parents in Suburb Fourteen.”

Her *parents*? “How old is she?”

“Seventeen.”

Gods. She was three years away from being a legal adult. I wondered if Kurj cared about all the laws he had broken by taking her up there. Had her parents know why she had vanished? It was hard to imagine which would have been harder for them, not knowing what had happened or knowing she was a prisoner of Skolia’s ninety-year-old warlord.

But Deirdre was free now, and besides, none of this was my business. She had resumed her life, after all. Maybe she even liked Kurj.

Then again, maybe not.

“Mak, do you have any more information about Deirdre?”

“Checking.” Then: “Prior to her stay with Imperator Skolia, Charissa Deirdre was an honor student at the Vocational College in suburb twenty-three, where she was studying to become a caregiver for small children. Earlier this year she won a college award for outstanding academic performance. She was secretary of a community services club and also belonged to an athletic club. A boy named Jayms Procal applied for a permit to marry her when they reached their twentieth birthdays.”

It sounded like she had nothing in common with Kurj. “What happened after she went to stay at the palace?”

“She was expelled from the college for absenteeism and refusal to respond to administration summons. The expulsion was changed to ‘missing person’ status after her parents contacted the school. At the Imperator’s request, she was reinstated to the college when she returned home. She has made failing grades since then, and is currently doing work below the level considered acceptable for continued attendance. However, no attempt has been made to dismiss her.”

No sane person was going to dismiss a student who had been reinstated by order of the Imperator. “What about her other activities?”

“She lost her job at the hospital, then was reinstated by Imperator Skolia. Her community services club membership is still active but she has let her athletic membership lapse. I have no record of her participating in either club since her return home. The boy who applied for the marriage permit had his application denied.”

“Did her name also appear on it?” He could have applied without her knowing, hoping to have an approved permit to offer if he were the one making the proposal. But without both their signatures, the permit was worthless.

“Both names appeared,” Mak said. “The permit was initially approved. However, the approval was revoked the day after her tenure at the palace began.”

“What’s its status now?”

“They reapplied eleven days ago. The permit was denied.”

“On what grounds?”

“That the previous permit had been denied.”

Well, that was no surprise. If Kurj had meddled with the first one, no one was going to risk putting through a second.

I wondered if Kurj had any idea of how badly he had screwed up the girl’s life. I couldn’t heal her emotional wounds, but there was one thing I could do. “Mak, link into the Marriage Bureau and have approval sent to Deirdre and her young man, on my authority.” Of course Kurj could override it. But I knew him. If he had grown tired of the girl, he wasn’t going to pursue it, particularly if she had left him with fond enough feelings that he was willing to intervene on her behalf at her school and job. I was the one he was going to come after.

“Approval sent.” Mak paused. “Even a brief analysis of this situation suggests Emperor Skolia will not appreciate your intervention in his private life.”

I grimaced. I had certainly found a far more effective method for letting him know I was here than pretending my parents were at the palace. I put my feet up on the table in front of the couch, trying to relax. But it didn’t work. I was wound up as tight as a coil. “Read me the two messages in my mail queue. Don’t bother with headers.”

“Message one.” A click sounded, followed by a bland voice. “Attention all residents. Air lifts will be turned off on 383.6.30 from one to three hundred hours for maintenance. Do not attempt to use the lifts during this time.”

“Mak, delete it.” The message was several months old.

“Deleted. Message two.” A man’s voice floated into the air. “My greetings, Primary Valdoria. I wasn’t sure where to send this, so I posted it to General Inquiries on Diesha. I hope it reaches you. I thought you might like to know that my interview with you and Secondary Blackstone did the trick. The university at Athens gave me a grant to come to Parthonia for testing. And guess what? I’m 7.2 on your psi scale. Of course, I don’t really know what to do with it yet. But the Parthonia Institute admitted me for training. Anyway, thanks. My pleasure at your time. Tiller Smith.”

“Well, how do you like that?” I said.

“I have no emotional reaction to the message,” Mak said.

I smiled. “I do. A pleasant one. Why didn’t this get forwarded to me on Foreshires? How long ago was it sent?”

“It reached General Inquiries fifty-three days ago. General Inquiries routed it to Military Inquiries, which routed it to Officer Inquiries, which routed it to Unsecured Documents, which routed it to Civilian Documents, which routed it to General Inquiries, which—”

“Mak, can you abbreviate it a bit?”

“The message cycled through General Inquiries three times, after which a watcher flagged it, and sent it to Investigations. From there the sender went through a security check—”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You mean Security did a check on Tiller just because he sent me a letter?”

“Yes. Do you wish the results of the investigation?”

“All right. But keep it brief.”

“Tiller Smith, age thirty-two; citizenship, Allied Worlds of Earth, Delos resident. He has no record of subversive activities. However, he was ticketed two years ago for parking a flycar in a noparking zone at the Arcade during a parade, and when he was four years old he had to be removed from the premises of an Arcade bar he had wandered into.”

“For pugging sakes.” Didn’t Investigations have anything better to do? “When did they finally get around to letting me know I had the message?”

“After Investigations approved it, they routed it to Central Military, which sent it here. It arrived four days ago, at which time I submitted it to Offworld Clearance for transferral to Foreshires. I’m still waiting for the release. Shall I cancel the request?”

“Yes, of course.” I considered a moment. “Can you access the data banks of the Parthonia Institute?”

“Yes. What do you wish me to find?”

“I want to know who is sponsoring Tiller.”

“Connecting to offworld-transfer telops,” Mak said.

I didn't know details of Institute procedures; I had received my psiber training as a child, from private tutors. But I was pretty sure Tiller needed patrons to attend the Institute. Unfortunately, as an Allied citizen, particularly one with little or no standing even among his own people, let alone among mine, he wouldn't get many sponsors. Without them, he wouldn't last long on Parthonia. The psibernet was power—political, military, academic, social, and economic power—which meant anything concerned with it involved high stakes and a set of unwritten rules. Tiller was way out of his league.

“Information received,” Mak said. “Tiller Smith has one patron, a woman called Marya Pulivok, the tester who determined his rating.”

One patron? And one with no political clout. They would eat Tiller alive and spit him all the way back to Delos. “Add me to Tiller's list of sponsors.”

“Message sent.” After a pause Mak added, “And acknowledged.”

“Good.” With an Imperial Heir as a patron, Tiller would have them fighting for the honor of taking him on as a favored student.

I went over to a bookcase against the wall. The book Tiller had given me stood snug between a jade dragon and a ponderous text on mystimatical theories of alternate dimensions. I pulled out *Verses on a Windowpane* and opened it to the page Tiller had been reading that day in his office, the poem he had marked with the Arcade ticket:

A frame of stone.  
Silvered glass  
frosted with icy tears.

My fist closes  
on the mirror;  
flesh traps ice.  
Brittle snaps  
of breaking tears.  
I see you now  
standing behind me;  
always watching,  
always waiting,  
never satisfied.

I sheath my heart,  
its bare softness  
guarded by ice.

What had Tiller been thinking of when he looked up this poem? Was I doing that, guarding my heart with icy fortifications that would grow colder and thicker until someday I truly became like Kurj?

I closed the book with a snap. No. I wasn't Kurj. I wouldn't become him.

Would I?

I didn't have the energy to wrestle with that nightmare. Although it was only midday on Diesha, I was exhausted. The flight had thrown off my internal clock.

I left the living room and went to what I called my memory place, a corridor with hologram screens on the walls. As I walked down the hall, my footsteps activated lasers that played across each screen, making holos appear. They showed scenes of the countryside around my father's house: blue-capped mountains jagged against the sky like the backbone of a giant; fields of silver-green grass that rippled for kilometer after kilometer under the great dome of the sky; forests with trees that grew wide and stout in the heavy gravity, their foliage forming a canopy that speckled the ground with light and dark patches.



Home.

Then I was at the end of the hall and the holos behind me were gone, vanished after I had passed. I touched a panel on the wall and the door opened onto my bedroom.

Within moments after I went to bed, I was asleep.

"I'm sorry," the nurse said. "Secondary Blackstone isn't here."

She "stood" on the dais in my holobooth. Behind her, holoscreens curved around the booth and fiberoptic cables connected them with my computer. I sat on a much smaller dais where lasers played over my body, producing interference patterns that my computer sent to hers. It would let her holobooth produce just as detailed an image of me as mine did of her.

I had no desire to look at her image, detailed or otherwise. She was too damned pretty. What was Rex doing with such a beautiful nurse?

"Do you know when he'll be back?" I asked.

"Sorry, I don't." She smiled. "He went to the park. Shall I tell him you called?"

What if he didn't want to see me? What if he were really right there with her, but asked her to say otherwise? Oh, hell. This was getting me nowhere. "Yes. Tell him Soz called, that I'm staying at my quarters here."

"All right. I'll do. Bye." Her image faded from the booth.

Bye? *Bye*? What was it with these young people nowadays, saying things like "bye"? What was wrong with proper Skolian phrases, like "My pleasure at our discourse, ma'am"? "Bye" was an Earth word, for pugging sakes. Young people had no appreciation for their culture. What was Rex doing with a nurse like that?

The console beeped, calling my attention to a blue light that now glowed in one corner. When I touched the light, a familiar voice came out of the speaker. "My greetings, Soz."

My pulse jumped. "Rex?"

"Blossom paged me about your call."

"Blossom?"

"My nurse."

It figured she had a name like Blossom. "Are you there with her?"

"No. I'm in the park."

The park. But which one? True, Diesha didn't have many. Water was too valuable to spend on growing nonessential plants, so each suburb was allowed only one park. But there were nineteen suburbs, which meant he could be nineteen places. Maybe he didn't want me to know where he was.

"Soz?" Rex asked. "Are you still there?"

I flushed. "Yes."

"When did you get in?"

"Yesterday. I came to—" To what? My cover was that I came to see him. "I was wondering—I mean, I know I've been gone a long time ..."

Rex's voice relaxed a bit. "It does seem like more than five months."

"I was just wondering ... well, how you were doing."

"Better."

"I'm glad." What would he say if I asked to visit him?

"Soz ... ?"

"Yes?"

"Perhaps you might—I'm over in Park Fifteen. If you'd like to come down." Quickly he added, "If you're too busy, I understand."

I closed my eyes, so relieved that for a moment I couldn't answer. Then I said, "Yes. I'd like to come see you."

It was hot in Fifteen, white glaring heat. Broad avenues of casecrete marked off lawns the color of dying leaves. As I rode a speedwalk through the park, people in uniforms strode by me, their eyes protected with mirrored visors.

Rex was exactly where he had described, sitting in the shade of a cac-tree. I left the speedwalk and

walked toward him across the lawn, my boots crunching on the stubbly grass. He looked so relaxed and healthy. The only indication of anything different was a silvery mesh that molded around his body from the waist down like trousers made from a metallic net.

He was scanning the speedwalks and lawns. When he saw me, he raised his hand. As I waved back, he put his hand against the cac-tree. Then he jerked it back, and I felt the puncture from the needle as if it had jabbed my own palm. He tried again, this time leaning his weight into the tree without mishap.

Then he stood up.

I stopped and gaped at him. Then I set off again, striding across the last few meters that separated us.

He nodded as I came up to him. "Soz."

"You're standing up!"

His face relaxed into a smile. "Seems so."

"How?" No, that sounded stupid. "I mean—I thought—"

He turned and put his free hand around his back, pointing to the base of his spine. I looked closer and saw a psiphon attached to the mesh. Its prong was plugged into his spine.

"It goes in above the broken sections," Rex said. "Connects to optical threads that run to my brain."

I peered at the prong. "The doctors said it could hurt you if they tried any more manipulations with your biomech web."

"There was risk. But I decided to take it because the procedure was so simple. All they did was repair the threads and grow another socket higher up in my spine. I was lucky. It worked."

He tapped a tiny disk woven into the web at his waist. "When the chip on this intercepts a signal from my brain, it shunts it to the mesh." He took a stiff-legged step away from the cac-tree and held out his hands. "The mesh moves and takes me with it."

"You're walking!" I couldn't contain my delight.

He grinned, took another jerky step—and lurched to the side. I tried to grab his arm, but he shoved me off and fell to one knee, his face knotting with—what? Anger? Pain? Frustration?

Slowly, carefully, he stood up again. For a moment, when he didn't say anything, I thought I had offended him past the point where he would want to see to me. Then he exhaled. "Its action should give me smooth movements. But I'm still learning how to make it work."

"You'll have it obeying you in no time," I said.

"I hope so."

Then we stood, looking at each other. I said, "How's it been here?" in the same instant Rex said, "How was Foreshires?"

We laughed, a brief explosion of sound that quickly died away. Then I said, "It was good," while he said, "Just fine."

This time my laugh felt more natural. "My mother came to see me."

He smiled. "I'll bet that shook up everyone around you."

I laughed again, remembering Jarith's reaction—and immediately tried to block the memory. But it was too late. The image of Jarith had already jumped into my mind.

Rex spoke quietly. "It's all right, Soz."

"We said goodbye." I was talking too fast. "He stayed on Foreshires."

"You don't have to apologize."

"Rex ..." Rex, what? Why did I have to be so stupid and clumsy with words?

"Want to go for a walk?" Rex asked.

I almost said, *Can you?* But I caught myself before it came out. "Yes."

He took a step, his legs jerking forward. Pause. Another step. I walked next to him, peering down at the mesh. It contracted around his right leg, carrying that limb forward, then contracted around his left leg and moved it forward. "That looks more comfortable than mechanical legs."

"Not as strong, though. I thought about getting the mechanicals."

I tried to imagine him with his legs sheathed in exterior bio-mechanicals. It would have given him use of his legs similar to what the mesh gave him now. "What made you decide against it?"

"I'm not sure." He took another step. "My body is already so full of biomech systems. The idea of putting more on the outside just didn't feel right."

"A biosynthetic marvel."

"What?"

"Someone called me that once. I wished they hadn't."

Rex nodded. "Yes." He motioned toward a bench about ten meters away from us. "Want to sit?"

"All right."

It took us a few minutes to reach the bench. When we finally got there Rex sank down onto it. "I never knew that just walking could take so much energy."

I smiled. "Well, you've got to do something with all of that energy."

As soon as I said it, I wanted to die. It was a joke we had shared a hundred times before, a reference to his many girlfriends. It had come out before I thought about it. Gods, I was a dolt. Under the circumstances it was like hitting him with a sign announcing, *Hey, look how insensitive I am!*

Don't be so sure, Soz. Rex grinned. I have a lot more energy than you think.

I blinked at him, elated he would trust me with that, but embarrassed by what he had picked up from me. *Are you eavesdropping?*

It's hard not to, when you shout at me like that.

I reddened. I wasn't shouting.

You most certainly were. At the top of your lungs.

Pah. I glared at him. You're as ornery as ever.

He laughed. So my nurse tells me.

"You're referring to the esteemed Miss Blossom?"

"Miss? What does that mean?"

"It's an old-fashioned Earth word." After all, Blossom was the one who liked Earth words. "It refers to a woman's marital status." I squinted at him. "Or lack thereof."

"If you want to know, just ask."

"I just—I don't mean to pry. It's none of my business."

"Would it make a difference to our friendship?"

Yes, damn it. No, that wasn't fair. Why shouldn't he have a lover? Because. Why did he want her and not me?

Rex watched my face. "Soz—she's what I can deal with right now."

Like Jarith. After a long silence I said, "I understand." Then I snorted. "But can't she do something about that awful name?"

"I like it."

"You would."

He laughed. "Still the same Soz."

Despite myself, I smiled. "I guess so." But I wasn't. Forshires had changed everything.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in the park, sitting, walking, talking. Neither of us mentioned anything more about Jarith, or Blossom, or Delos. Someday we would sort it out. Right now it was enough just to have his companionship again.

It was late when I got home. The living room was dark, but the moment the door opened I knew someone waited inside. My hand dropped to the belt of my jumpsuit, where I had hidden a needler.

"Lights on," I said.

The walls and ceiling lights came on, revealing my visitor: Kurj stood by an inner doorway, his arms folded, his shielded eyes directed toward me.

I closed the door. "Sir."

"Why did you send approval for Charissa to get married?" Kurj asked.

That threw me off. I had expected a game of maneuvers and stealthy attacks. Not just a simple 'Why.'

"No one would have ever let that girl get married," I said. "Not unless the approval came from one of us."

“One of who?”

“The Rhon.”

He shrugged. “She could have come to me. I would have taken care of it.”

“Given your—former relationship with her, she probably didn’t feel she could ask.”

“But what advantage did you see in helping her?”

Advantage? “I didn’t.”

“Who is Tiller Smith?”

“He worked in the Delos police station. He was the one who took our first report about Qox.”

“And?”

And what? What was he looking for? “That’s all.”

Kurj raised his eyebrows. “Then why did your spinal node flag on a book he gave you, overriding your preparations when you were getting ready to go into battle at Tams?”

What was he doing, keeping notes on everything I did? “It was a book of poems. It made me think about how combat affects me.”

He stood silently for a moment, like a machine crunching on the information, analyzing it, filing it. “That doesn’t explain why you became his patron at the Institute.”

“If I hadn’t, they would have eaten him alive there.”

“Probably.”

“I didn’t want that to happen.”

“I can see the advantage to him. But not to you.”

“I don’t get your point.” I did, in fact, get it perfectly well. But it angered me enough that I had no intention of acknowledging it. So what if there had been no advantage to me in helping Tiller or Charissa?

Kurj went to the bookshelf and pulled out *Verses on a Windowpane*. It fell open to the page marked by the Arcade ticket. As he stood reading, I could almost hear him filing the words in his brain: *Always watching, always waiting, never satisfied.*

He spoke dryly. “Poetry like this would inspire me to send him as far away as possible.”

A joke? Was Kurj making a joke? No, it couldn’t be. But why not? He might have a sense of humor buried in there somewhere. Just in case, I smiled. “It doesn’t thrill me either.”

He put the book back on the shelf. “But you helped him anyway.”

“Yes.”

“Did he please you?”

“If you’re asking did I bed him, the answer is no.”

“Did you want to?”

“No.”

Kurj frowned. “I assume he has no holds over you?”

“Of course he doesn’t.”

“Does Charissa?”

I stared at him. “I’ve never even met the girl, aside from that day at the hospital.”

“You don’t have to meet people for them to affect your life.”

“You’re looking for something that isn’t there. I helped them because I felt like it. Not for any other reason.”

Kurj spoke quietly. “Then you’re a fool.”

“I don’t see it that way.”

“Why?”

This was getting stranger and stranger. I felt more like I was being interviewed for a job than called to task for my actions. “There was no disadvantage in it either. On balance, then, it’s better to have a citizenry that is as satisfied as possible with their lives. It makes them more productive.”

“It isn’t your job to see to the happiness of every Imperial citizen.”

“These were situations where I could make a difference without inconvenience.”

“Tiller Smith isn’t an Imperial citizen,” Kurj said. “Not only is there no advantage in training him, but it could be our disadvantage. He will take his knowledge back to the Allies.”

“Not if we give him reason to stay here. Then we get use of his talent instead of the Allies.” Who wouldn’t know what to do with it anyway.

Kurj considered me. “Very well.”

I waited, but he said no more. That was it. No warnings to leave off with his personal life, no reprimands, no nothing. Instead, he went to an armchair and settled into it. Then he motioned me toward the couch.

I sat down. Kurj’s head turned toward me, but his inner lids remained over his eyes like gold, opaque shields. He waited there, silent and appraising, saying nothing. I shifted in my seat. What was going on?

I want to take no risks, Kurj thought.

I almost jumped up again. His thought was remarkably clear and strong, suggesting he had prepared in depth for this silent discussion. But why?

*Security*, Kurj thought.

He already had the best security in the empire. What was there about Tiller Smith and Charissa Deirdre that was so sensitive it could only be discussed in a face-to-face psilink?

This has nothing to do with them, Kurj thought.

I formed a picture in my mind, showing him Helda giving me the message to return to Diesha.

*Yes*, Kurj thought.

What’s wrong?

He paused. We have a guest.

That made no sense. I already knew he was the only one staying at the palace.

*Not that kind of guest*. His thoughts had an odd flavor, a taste of triumph.

*Who?* I asked.

The smile that came onto his face brought to mind the look of an executioner who took a grim satisfaction in his job. Then he showed me an image of the man who was our “guest.”

Jaibriol Qox.

My first reaction was a reflex I had coded into my spinal node, a program set to run whenever I heard Jaibriol’s name. My mind initiated a procedure that hid my reactions, selectively blocking in a manner designed to be inconspicuous. But my thoughts rocketed wildly: how had they caught Jaibriol, where was he, what did they know?

Even with the node working furiously, I couldn’t hide the intensity of my response.

So instead of trying to suppress my reactions, I reorganized them, leaving only appropriate ones where Kurj could input them. *The Highton Heir is here?* I asked. *At Headquarters?*

Kurj watched me, interpreting, filing. *Yes. He is ours now.*

*But how?*

He was in a ship, alone, without a single Solo or Escort, traveling in inversion at several trillion times LS. Kurj leaned forward. One of our supraluminal sentries registered the ship and sent notice through the Net. The Sixth Squadron threw him into stasis and dragged him here.

I stared at him. What was Jaibriol Qox doing alone, without a single guard?

We don’t know. He’s told us nothing. The shields over Kurj’s eyes glinted. Yet.

I didn’t want to imagine what the interrogators were doing to Jaibriol. I had already been in the place they wanted to invade; that night on Delos when Jaibriol and I melded, he had let me enter the innermost sanctums of his mind. I knew what his interrogators would soon discover, if they hadn’t found it already. Blocks even stronger than a Jagernaut’s guarded the Highton Heir. On Delos, for me, he had relaxed those defenses. But if his were anything like mine, then under duress his conditioning would take over, stopping him from lowering his barriers even if he wanted to do it.

I had tried to forget why his blocks so easily dissolved for me, tried to forget the longing in his voice, the feel of his arms. But one thought of it and I wanted him again. Like knew like. I remembered him and my pulse raced. Even though he was the Highton Heir, even though he was one quarter Aristo. I wanted a Rhon mate. I wanted *him*. Damn. Damn!

Kurj was watching me. *What’s wrong?*

Careful. Dangerous ground. I was thinking about my last meeting with a Highton.

*Tarque.*

I didn't answer and he didn't probe. It was the way we always interacted on the subject of Tarque. I phrased my next question carefully. *Why so much secrecy? Capturing the Highton Heir is a triumph. Making it public will cripple Trader morale and send ours flying.*

I don't trust this good fortune, Kurj thought. It may be a trap. Until we know more I intend to take no risks.

Purpose indeed. What had Jaibriol been doing, hurtling through space alone, with no protection? Was he crazy? There was no way anyone outside the Skol-Net could have found him. Even with the Net, we were lucky to have caught him. At the speed he had been going, he could have traveled for years and only an instant would have gone by for the rest of us. Fast enough, and he could have lived his entire life and died before anyone even knew he had disappeared.

Then it hit me. That was exactly what Jaibriol had intended. He had been committing suicide. Except it hadn't worked. The Skol-Net had caught him like a shimmerfly in a mesh.

On the outer levels of my mind, I let a question surface: *What have you found out from Qox so far?*

Nothing. Kurj's frustration simmered. He responds as if he has a biomech web in his body programmed to help him resist interrogation. But we've found no trace of any web. His only implant is the cyberlock in his brain.

They were so close to the truth. *What are you going to do?*

*Find an interrogator who can disrupt his conditioning.*

Did he realize yet what that meant? Jaibriol's mind had been conditioned so that under duress it blocked the neural processes that let him communicate his emotions and thoughts to others. In extreme cases—like interrogation—the effect would become so widespread he couldn't communicate by any means, even speech. I knew that conditioning because I had it too. My biomech web let me control it; I could program it to enhance or suppress any mental training, psi or otherwise. But I doubted Jaibriol had any control over the process. He *couldn't* answer his interrogators even if he wanted to.

Breaking that conditioning was no different than breaching any other defense; it required a battering ram stronger than the defense, in this case a psibernaut with a stronger mind. Kurj could do it, but his blunt power would smash Jaibriol's mind like a battering ram that leveled the fortress instead of breaking the gate. My brother Althor had more subtlety, but I doubted it was enough. My aunt was the one with the finesse, more than enough. But she didn't have the strength. Although my father probably had both the strength and the finesse, he had none of the specialized military knowledge needed to perform the interrogation. None of us had it except Kurj, my brother Althor, and my aunt.

And me.

I made myself stay calm. Why did you call me back here?

Kurj watched me with his shielded gaze. *I've assigned you to Qox's case.*

*You have other interrogators far more experienced.*

None of them can break him. None of them. Think about what that means.

He has a strong mind.

Too strong.

I sat still, afraid even to breathe for fear it would give me away.

He is a psion, Kurj thought.

He can't be. He's Highton.

*Nevertheless. He is a psion. One stronger than our best minds.*

I don't see how that's possible.

Nor I. Kurj frowned. But I've also worked on him, Soz. Even I can't break him.

*You can break any mind.*

The only way would be to use so much force that I would reduce him to a vegetable.

I didn't know what was more disturbing, knowing Kurj was on the verge of the truth, or feeling his grim satisfaction when he contemplated Jaibriol as a screaming lump of flesh. It was the first time in my

life I had felt the brunt of Kurj's hatred and I hoped like hell I never felt it directed at me.

*I'm not sure what you think I can do, I thought.*

I want you to break him. Get into his mind. Tell me what's there. Kurj stood up. Meet me in the morning at the palace at 0600. Make it look as if you came for a personal visit.

I wanted to cry out that I wouldn't do it. But all I did was stand up. *Yes, sir.*

After Kurj left, I dropped back into my chair and put my head in my hands. Then I lifted it again, wondering if my apartment was monitored. I didn't dare show signs of the turmoil going on in my mind.

I understood why Kurj thought Jaibriol's presence was a trick; it was the only way Ur Qox could gain direct access to Kurj. My brother wouldn't have taken the same personal interest if we had caught anyone less than the Highton Heir. It was a horrible thought, that Ur Qox would send his own son to be tortured in the hope Jaibriol could assassinate Kurj. Yet if anyone appeared capable of that, it was the Trader Emperor.

But I was sure Qox hadn't done it. Jaibriol was too valuable to him, and not only because of his Rhon genes. I was convinced that in his own way, Qox loved his son. I had no facts to back that opinion, only my intuition. But regardless of the flimsy evidence, I believed it. Ur Qox would never send his son on an assassination mission. The only person Jaibriol had meant to kill was himself.

I got up and walked around the couch. Although the wall behind it looked opaque, it was actually a double-paned window. When I touched a panel on a nearby table, the window's polarization changed to let me see through the glass. Today I lightened it just enough to show the buildings below. Fliers glided through the air, their sleek lines the only curves in a city of corners and edges. Beyond the suburbs, red desert rolled out to the horizon.

Where had Kurj put Jaibriol? In a vault under the city? An installation buried in the desert? Some remote base elsewhere on the planet? I had no idea. But he would be guarded by the layer after layer of security. What was I going to do? Even if I did find him, I couldn't send him back to Ur Qox and Kryx Quaelen.

I could do what Kurj wanted, but make it easy on Jaibriol. I could "discover" the Highton Heir was insane, or had the mind of a child, that his father had repudiated him and his only choice was suicide. If my brother believed Jaibriol had no useful knowledge to give us, that he wasn't even capable of understanding why he was being tortured, Kurj would most likely let him die. The advantage of publicly executing the Highton Heir would outweigh any satisfaction Kurj might gain from keeping him alive to punish him.

Except I didn't want Jaibriol to die. I wanted him to live. In freedom. With me.

I pressed my hands against the glass. The only way Jaibriol and I could live together was in exile. How could I even contemplate it? It was true what Tager had said, that I had never asked for the responsibilities of my heritage. But I wanted the title of Imperator so much I could taste it. Turning my back on that much power—well, Rex was right, I was no saint. Who in their right mind would walk away from the chance to command an empire?

Jaibriol, that was who.

Maybe he was a better person than I. Or wiser. Or weaker. I didn't know. For some reason Tager had the notion I was something more than what I saw when I looked at myself, more than a bitter warrior with a heart sheathed in so much ice she had nothing left to give anyone. He treated me as if I had a value above and beyond my heritage. He even made me believe that maybe, just maybe, he was right.

But I still heard my mother's voice, soft and hurting, as she spoke about Kurj: *He changed. Bit by bit, day by day, year by year, decade by decade. Until finally I lost him.* How long until she lost me as well?

No. *No.* I didn't have to end up that way. I could have Tager brought here, to Diesha—no, that was Kurj's style. I would invite Tager. If he didn't want to leave Foreshires, I would go to a heartbender here. But I hoped Tager would come. I knew him now, trusted him as much as I would ever trust a heartbender.

And there was Rex. With enough time, enough effort, perhaps we could pick up those ends we had left dangling after Delos. With Rex by my side and Tager to keep me sane, maybe, just maybe, it would

be all right.

What my parents had done, creating a Rhon community—that was a fluke, a dream that couldn't be repeated. Jaibriol and I could never give it to each other. I couldn't go into exile with him.

Even so. I could still free him. The problem of where he would go still remained, though. He couldn't ask the Allies for sanctuary. No one would have the Highton Heir. No one would believe he was as much a victim of the Aristos as the rest of us.

Unless.

Unless I vouched for him. If the authorities on Delos didn't keel over from the shock, it ought to work. But first I had to get Jaibriol to Delos, in secret, without implicating myself.

I pushed up my sleeves. I had a lot of work to do.

## 14. Mind of the Web

It stood in the middle of a cascrete plaza, the building we called, simply, the Hub. It was deceptively plain, just a two-story structure with white cascrete walls. Muted lamps lit the area even this late at night, their light reflecting off the surfaces of the plaza and the building.

The only entrance was a featureless door. When I pressed my fingers into its lock, a scanner read my fingerprints and the door opened, revealing a cubicle that looked like an airlock. Except instead of air, this lock kept in secrets.

As soon as I stepped inside, the outer door closed. The walls glowed with just enough light to let me see a psiphon resting in a cradle on the wall by the inner door. I plugged the prong into my wrist and waited while the computer node connected to it scanned my brain.

The inner door slid open.

A corridor with glass walls stretched out before me. There were four offices on either side, each with one person sitting inside. Telops. They wore full psiphon exoskeletons, structures even more extensive than the ones on our Jags. These covered their wearers from hip to chin, plugging psiphons in at the wrists, spine, and neck. Some of the telops also wore helmets that covered their eyes, or their entire heads. Telops didn't need to move. Just think. Most of them sat completely still, though a man on my right was slowly rocking his head back and forth with his eyes closed. Farther down the hall a woman was leaning back in her exoskeleton watching a cluster of holos rotate in the air above her head.

*Security menu, I thought. Personnel, Security telops, Hub, current.*

The face of a woman with gray hair and lean features formed in my mind. Stats appeared under her image: name, age, security clearances, other pertinent data from her ISC file.

Simultaneous displays. I thought.

The woman's image shrunk until it filled only an eighth of my mindscape. Seven more images appeared, all of them telops who monitored security for the Hub. As I walked down the hall, my spinal node matched the images with the men and women in the offices, giving me stats on each of them. I stored the data in a memory file. Although I had learned to deal with the "double exposure" created when my mindscape produced images at the same time that my eyes were viewing a scene, it was still disorienting to see the telops inside my mind while I was looking straight at them.

The hall ended in another security airlock. I entered as before. This time when I plugged in the psiphon inside the cubicle, a metallic thought came into my mind.

Name?

Sauscony Valdoria, Primary.

Purpose?

I kept my mind as smooth as the surface of a lake on a windless day. *To recode T12.*

The inner door slid open.

I walked out into a circular lobby with white walls and a blue carpet. Blue chairs sat against the walls like molded beanbags. In the center of the room a white metal staircase spiraled up to the ceiling.

The carpet muffled my footsteps as I walked to the stairs. Even when I started climbing, going around and around, the sound of my boot heels on the metal sounded subdued. A blank wall faced me at



the top, with only a psiphon in its cradle there breaking the flat expanse. I took out the psiphon and plugged in its prong.

A new voice entered my mind, cool and impersonal. I have no record of your assignment to work on computer node T12.

*Override and open.* I stood relaxed, using preprogrammed routines in my biomech web to keep my muscles from tensing. The lobby below, the white walls, the stairs—I knew what those blank surfaces hid. Monitors were checking everything from my breathing rate to my brain waves. Any questionable reaction would sound the alarm.

An alarm might sound even if I didn't alert the monitors. This door opened only to users on the access list Kurj gave it. Sometimes I was on the list, sometimes not. My spinal node calculated a 76 percent probability that he had me on it right now, in case I needed to come here during my preparations for Jaibriol's interrogation. But I couldn't be sure.

So I waited.

The wall opened like a high-speed camera shutter, revealing a tunnel over a meter long. I ducked my head to enter, then straightened up and walked through to the end. I stepped out into another room with white walls and blue carpet. Behind me, the wall snapped closed again, leaving a featureless surface.

This room had no furniture. Nothing but computers. Each stood in its designated place on the blue carpet, some isolated, some connected by hardware. The acoustics muted the hum of their operation the same way the lobby had muted my footsteps.

The computer network dedicated to Imperial Space Command was distributed throughout military locations within the Imperiate, with built-in redundancy and multiple back-ups, making it as invulnerable to compromise as possible. There were ten computers here. EM16 was a cylinder made from black glassplex that stood near the center of the room. It was two meters high, a meter wide, and the thickness of a finger. Muted lights glowed inside of it, some blinking, some shining. There was an opening in one side of the cylinder, a "doorway" half a meter wide. Stepping through the doorway, I entered a cavity with a domed roof and a bench running around its inner surface. I took off my boots, then peeled off my jumpsuit and underwear, leaving my bare skin vulnerable to the cool air. When I went to stand in the center of the cylinder, a tube rose up around me, going higher and higher until it locked into the dome above my head. The silvery walls of the tube were just translucent enough to let me see my clothes as a shadowed lump on the bench. I couldn't make out my boots at all.

A metal framework rose up out of the floor, whirring as it closed bands around my ankles and snapped psiphons into the sockets there. When the framework reached my torso, a belt locked around my waist, its psiphon snicking into the socket at the base of my spine. Bracelets closed my wrists, inserting their psiphons. The framework rose higher and a collar fastened around my neck, plugging a psiphon into the base of my brain stem.

I tried to ignore my vivid mental image of being trapped here, held immobile and naked inside a coffin-size tube. I had to hide my fear. Anyone with a valid reason for linking into EM16 had no cause to feel threatened by a cage designed to imprison intruders. The only reason it would refuse to release me when I finished was if I gave EM16 cause to be suspicious.

The room faded from my awareness. I seeped darkly into EM16, sliding along the potential hills and valleys of psiberspace like a ghost drifting over a virtual countryside.

System privileges, EM16 thought.

I exhaled. It had worked. My gamble in coming here had paid off. Only two ways existed to gain system privileges on the Net. One was to be a member of the Triad. The other was to enter through the Hub.

I wrapped a security cloak around my mind and maintained a mental silence on the Net that was the equivalent of standing motionless. Today I saw it as a grid of translucent fibers flashing with iridescent sparks in colors ranging through the visible spectrum from red to violet. Psiware stretched across the grid squares like filmy lace that sparkled each time a user accessed it. Those sparkles were too faint for most users to detect, including Kurj. But I saw them clearly.

Tonight I didn't feel the immense flux of power Kurj generated in the Net. He had been here earlier,

though; his operations had left a potent signature. But he would be sleeping now, alone with his security systems and bodyguards in his tower in the city. Mak's claim that he was staying at the palace had to be a cover; until Kurj finished with Jaibriol, he would stay as close as possible to his center of operations.

No, the danger here wasn't from Kurj. A much subtler signature permeated the web, one that was always present, including times like now when it's owner wasn't in the system. My aunt—the oldest member of the Triad—was far more dangerous here than Kurj. Kurj was a giant trawler rumbling through psiberspace, using the Skol-Net to catch what he wanted. My father was the ocean that supported it, rocking it in its waves. But it was my aunt who had woven the Net into the far reaching web of power it was today. She had, in the delicacy of her operations, what he had in the force of his. Had I not known to look I would never have realized she had been through here at all.

She had security monitors everywhere. Almost nothing escaped her attention. The moment EM16 acknowledged me, one of my aunt's watchers had caught that information and stored it in a security cache. I actually saw it happen; the words System Privileges sparkled in a grid square, caught like a moth in the lace, and then vanished.

I concentrated on the square that had caught the data about my intrusion. It swelled in size, moving to fill my field of view while the web streamed past me like a tunnel of pearly rose filaments. When I "stopped" at the square I saw its captured data lodged in a cell inside of it, under a pearly film of lace, trapped in that location of memory. I slid into the cell, taking care to disturb none of the filmy psiware that floated lazily around me like sealace under water. Then I wiped the memory clean. My passage back out was so smooth that not one glitter marked my progress.

Next I erased all record of my entrance into the Hub. Then I brought up my file of the telops and used it to find them in the Net. By manipulating the grid, I created false memories to make them forget what they had seen. It was harder to erase memory in telops than in conventional computers, but I had enough experience to set it up so that unless they specifically searched for the tampering they wouldn't detect it. Had my aunt rigged EM16 to look for my actions, I probably couldn't have hidden. But she had no reason to suspect I would do anything as illogical as skulking around in EM16 with the deliberate intent to violate the security around Jaibriol Qox.

*Sauscony?*

I froze. *My father?* What was he doing here? The color of the Net warmed and I had an odd sense that the strands *smiled*. Nothing on the grid actually moved, but the sense persisted.

My father was the last person I had expected. He was home on Lyshriol now, his native world. He and my mother were visiting the multitude of grandchildren they kept reminding me I had yet to contribute to. It had never occurred to me he would link up to the Net from there. The only way he could do it was by using the console room, that truly incongruous addition to his ancient homestead that my mother had had built. It was in a stone-walled chamber at the top of the north tower. The room, which could only be reached by a rough-cut spiral staircase, had been used for storing broken farming implements before my mother's time.

My father hated those consoles. Although psiberspace itself fascinated him, he wanted as little to do as possible with the machines that allowed him to access it. He used them only when he had to, which certainly didn't include visits to his grandchildren.

He was definitely here, though. I hadn't noticed him before because he was filling psiberspace, surrounding every strand and film and sparkle. If I hadn't known better I would have thought he was here on Diesha, jacked straight in through one of the central nodes that the Triad used to power the Net.

I hid from him, drawing security routines around my presence like a deep black cloak. He searched for me, the grid rippling with his efforts like a net in the ocean rocking up and down with the swells. Gradually his certainty that he had felt me faded to doubt, then to embarrassment that he could have made such a mistake. Finally he turned his attention elsewhere.

I moved on, careful now to avoid him while I sought out the data I had come to find. But it didn't appear. I found no path, no pipeline, no hint leading to information about our capture of Jaibriol.

What I finally discovered was an inconsistency. It was one psicon among hundreds grouped in a section of the grid dedicated to our trade agreements with the Allies. Each psicon represented a world.

Set innocuously in with the rest of them was the colorful image of an island on Earth, a place called Delos.

Well, that was reasonable. We used that symbol to represent the Allied planet Delos, which had been named after an island on Earth. Except we had no trade agreement with the planet Delos. I was one of the few people who knew Kurj had dissolved the treaties because he didn't like their policy of offering asylum to Imperialate citizens. He kept his actions a secret to avoid igniting a controversy should people find out he had acted to block citizens from seeking sanctuary.

I concentrated on the Delos psicon, and it grew until I could see every detail of the island, from the gray and brown rocks that jutted along the shore to the turquoise waters of the Aegean lapping on its beaches.

*Open*, I thought.

The island split down the middle and opened like a pair of doors. The smell of salt and sealace tickled my nose, and the sound of breakers murmured in the background. A display of psicons showed me what functions I could use while I worked with the Delos records.

I turned my attention to a small scroll tied with red ribbon. *List files. Written records only.* It would have been easier to view the records using an interactive simulation of their contents. But the more I required the node to do, the more likely I was to draw attention to myself. Reading files on EM16 was like using swords to fight a war when battlecruisers were available. But swords were far less conspicuous than battlecruisers when you were trying to hide.

The ribbon whisked off the scroll and the parchment unrolled with the crackle of old paper, filling my field of view with a list of available files. It was written in my aunt's script, a font with well-formed letters and just enough flourish to please the eye. Then the font changed into the amber text I preferred.

Damn. EM16 might just as well have turned on a speaker blaring my presence to the next person who opened the file. *Undo font change*, I thought.

The list re-formed with my aunt's font.

*Psicon*, I thought.

The display winked out, leaving me in the grid. The island psicon waited in the lower corner of the mindscape, a green dot glowing on it to indicate it was still active.

I pulled out of the Net. Brilliant strands of light streamed past me, layer after layer, sparkling, glimmering, changing hue and color and texture. Even the smells varied: metallic, sharp, sweet, acrid.

Finally I reached the outer layer I wanted. A cluster of master psicons waited here, each representing a specific function of the programs that ran under the grid environment. I concentrated on the doctor holding a surgical laser ...

My mind went black: no images, words, sounds, smells, tastes, textures. Specify memory location, EM16 thought.

*'Delos' psicon, most recent font change, I thought.*

A string of numbers and letters appeared, white in the black space. Specify change.

*Replace the third A with 0.*

The A changed into the digit 0, erasing all record of the fact that EM16 had changed the font when I opened the Delos file.

*Changes complete. Delete Record.* I followed the Delete command with the password EM16 required to execute it.

The Net reappeared. In the process of returning me to it, EM16 deleted all record that I had doctored its memory. My aunt had installed the Delete Record option as a precaution, so that she could interact with EM16 and leave no trace of her activities. I knew about it because she had me use it when I reprogrammed EM16's security systems last year.

I descended back down to the trade psicons. When I opened the Delos psicon, I heard waves breaking against an invisible shore. A cool wind blew against my cheeks as the scroll unrolled again. I remained "silent," simply reading the files listed on the scroll. But the Net knew I was there; the list rolled upward at exactly the right rate to let me see new data when I was ready for it.

The files looked exactly like what they purported to be, a record of trade negotiations with Delos. I

opened *A.Secretary-S* and found a VR-gram from the Allied Trade Secretary trying to convince our Trade Secretary to reestablish the treaties. I closed the file and continued to scroll through the list. What should I look for? Opening every file would take too long. Kurj rarely spent more than a few hours sleeping and I had to be out of EM16 by the time he awoke.

A file caught my attention. *Artemis*. The name came from Allied mythology. Artemis was a goddess born on the island Delos with her brother Apollo. It was a perfectly reasonable name to find here; these were, after all, files about the planet Delos.

But Artemis had a special meaning for Kurj, one only I knew. Earth's mythology had always fascinated him, particularly the Greek tales: *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. *Hercules*, *Medea*, *Agamemnon*. *Oedipus*. During one of his visits to see my mother when I was a child, he had seen me riding in the woods around my father's house, a fourteen-year-old girl practicing with a bow and arrow. He told me later he never forgot that image, the wild, bare-legged girl shooting at trees. He called me Artemis then, after the goddess of the hunt.

Open Artemis, I thought.

The scroll vanished, replaced by a holoscript of my arrest on Delos. Pah. This was the last thing I wanted to look at. *Close*, I thought.

Closed, EM16 answered.

I continued going over the files. But nothing looked out of place. Finally I thought, *Close Delos*.

Close—

*No! Wait*. What was a file about my arrest doing with the records of our trade negotiations? Yes, all right, if a highly placed Imperial officer alienated the Delos government, it could damage any talks we were conducting with them. But the behavior—or misbehavior—of military officers was Kurj's concern. And he was unremittingly literal with his file organization. He would have put the file on my arrest in the same place where he put all of his other files about arrests of highly placed officers who could damage negotiations with the Allies.

My aunt must have made this copy of it. I could see why she would want a notation of the incident here. But the complete record? Whatever for?

Open Artemis, I thought.

The holoscript activated, re-creating the police station on Delos so vividly in my mind that I felt as if I were there. Again.

I went through the entire mortifying file. Every last detail was there, even the fact that Zabo, the computer on my ship, had intercepted the satellite transmission about my arrest while the Delos police were sending it to Imperial Space Command. But that was it. The file was exactly what it claimed; a report of my unplanned visit with the Allied police on Delos.

Something kept tugging at my mind, though. A small point ... Taas? Yes, now I remembered. When Zabo had dumped that satellite transmission into my mindscape, the data had spilled over to the computer on Taas's ship. What had happened? Taas tried to get rid of the transmission, but—what? He used the wrong commands. That was it. He tried every command he could think of to get rid of the spillover and none of them worked.

I checked my spinal node. It still had the list of commands Taas had given me: *Stop*, *Cancel*, *Break*, *Quit*, *Exit*, *Bye*, *System*, *Chop*, *Stomp*, *Flush*, *Dump*, and *Curse*. And I had told him—what? To use the Erase command. Yes, now I remembered. Erase had finally done the trick.

I frowned. This file should have included a report of the spillover. But it wasn't here. I went through the entire record again, detail by detail, with the same result. No mention of the spillover existed anywhere. I had come looking for information and instead found a lack of it.

The data couldn't have disappeared by accident. All four fighters in my squad recorded it and I found it hard to believe that the identical omission would crop up in all four of our reports. But I couldn't imagine Kurj deleting it either. In his view of the universe such an omission would be sloppiness, which he avoided to the point of obsession.

It had to be my aunt. But why would she delete such trivial information? She was too smart to have done it by accident. She was just too damned smart period. Trying to follow her mental processes

always made me feel like I had the brain of a slug.

I closed the Artemis file and searched through the other Delos records, looking for anything related to Taas. Nothing came up even marginally promising. I was running out of time and I knew no more than when I had started. Taas. Artemis. Delos. Satellite. Spillover. What was I looking for?

The *psicon*. After Taas had used the Erase command to get rid of the spillover, he sent me an image of his Erase psicon, a scantily dressed woman with a big bosom whose scraps of clothing disappeared when she painted them. She *disappeared* whenever she *appeared*. Of course! That was it. What better way to hide data than to make it self-vanishing, so that the act of calling it up erased it. It was exactly the kind of solution that would appeal to my aunt.

Now I knew where she had hidden Jaibriol's files. It wasn't in EM16. She had left Kurj a pointer here as a precaution, in case he came looking for the files. It was an effective pointer too; only someone who knew those facts were missing would know the pointer existed. But the information I wanted was on the key to the cyberlock in her brain.

Anyone could have a cyberlock put in their brain. You didn't need to be a psion. That was why we called it "cyber" instead of "psiber." Every member of my family who had gone through the operations to have a biomech web implanted had also had a cyberlock put in. The Assembly insisted on it. That was why I had recognized the rainbows around Jaibriol's mansion on Delos. Its shimmering veil of colors warned that the cyberlock was active.

None of us liked them. The field disrupted brain function and could cause damage if used too often. The key to mine was on a psiberchip, a card with neural tracings created from my own brain cells. For most people such a chip was useless. No one could activate it unless they were a psion. But when I linked to it through psiberspace, it became a functioning part of my brain. If another psion tried to link to it, the chip would know it wasn't me the same way I would know if an intruder began thinking in my mind.

My aunt had designed the psiberchips because implanting keys in our brains was too risky. A head injury could damage the key or its lock, or both. Separating the two decreased the chance that the system would malfunction when we needed it most. Although that also made it easier for someone to steal the key, using psiberchips solved that problem. A chip recognized its owner's brain—so it could be set to erase itself if a foreign mind tried to access it.

What better place for my aunt to hide the information about Jaibriol than on her psiberchips? If anyone tried to steal the data, the chip would erase itself. It was an ingenious warning system too, since if her chips erased, it would trigger an alarm in her spinal node.

But if I couldn't access the information, neither could Kurj. So what was the purpose of leaving him a pointer that pointed to a place he couldn't go?

Wait. Maybe the data weren't on her chips. Maybe she put it on *his*. But how? They were as thoroughly protected as hers, and would erase if she tried to access them.

The Skol-Net. Of course. Boosted by the Triad psilink, she and Kurj could meld their minds even more completely than Jaibriol and I had done on Delos. With their minds intertwined as one, she could have accessed his chips. I doubted he could do the reverse; it required too much delicacy. Only my aunt had the necessary knowledge, finesse, and Triad access. She had probably managed it without Kurj even noticing.

But that did me no good either. I couldn't join the Triad psilink. The huge flux of power it generated increased exponentially with each Rhon psion in it. Two minds posed no danger. Three worked only if the minds weren't too alike. Add a fourth and it would overload the Skol-Net in one giant, star-spanning short circuit.

I understood why Kurj feared Althor and me. If either of us ever tried to follow in his footsteps, forcing our way into the Triad link with no warning or preparation, we would kill not only him but everyone else in it as well.

So now what?

An unsettling thought came to me. What about my chips? Kurj had access to them. He claimed it was for my protection, but I knew better. He wanted control over my cyberlock. It was another in his

precautions meant to minimize the chance that one of his heirs would turn on him. So my psiberchips also included neural tracings cultured from his brain cells to ensure that my keys wouldn't erase if he accessed them.

Suppose I linked to one of my chips and merged with the piece of his brain on it? Would that meld be enough to fool one of his chips into thinking I was him? I doubted he would notice my meddling unless he happened to access the chip at the same time. And he had no reason to do that while he was sleeping.

But the risk of being detected wasn't what disturbed me most about the idea. What if I couldn't dissociate from his mind when I finished my work? The prospect of being imprisoned in Kurj's rigidly controlled paradigm of existence scared the hell out of me.

I needed to get away from here, to think this through.

I closed the Delos files and deleted all record that I had worked in EM16. After setting the Hub's monitors so they wouldn't record my departure from the building, I withdrew from the Net. Then I stood in the dark, waiting for the psiphon cage to release me.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Sweat beaded on my temple. No, I couldn't show fear. That, more than anything I had done on the Net, would give me away.

The psiphon collars snapped away from my body. The tube that had surrounded me slid back into the ground, letting cool air waft across my bare skin.

I took a breath. Then I put my clothes back on and left.

The psiberchip lay in my hand, a simple square the size of my palm. I sat in front of the console in my bedroom and stared at the chip. Taking it out of the safe here had been easy. But that was as far as I could make myself go.

Alive. This card was alive. Nano-meds tended the neural tracings on it, keeping them primed to link to my brain. I had ten chips, two in my father's house, three on Forshires, four at Headquarters, and this one here in my quarters.

The console waited. All I had to do was insert the card. My spinal node calculated a 94 percent probability that I could merge my mind with the piece of Kurj's brain on it—a piece that, ironically, he wanted there for his own protection. Whether or not that would allow me to access his chips was another story, but I wasn't going to find out until I tried.

If. If I could force myself to do it. I stared at the card in my hand. One minute passed. Three. Five. The few precious hours of time I had to work with while Kurj was sleeping were leaking away.

Ten minutes.

Fifteen.

I took a deep breath. Then I slid the card into its slot on the console and logged into my personal account, the one I used for private rather than military matters. I reached the Net's outer shell first, the electronic network anyone could use. From there I entered psiberspace.

My mind expanded onto the four nodes that served the civilian arm of the psibernet on Diesha. They worked together like one machine, swapping back and forth among themselves according to whichever happened to be free when the user entered a command.

Today I started on Alto. The subgrid was subdued, a faint gold color. There was no sign of my father. The whole Net changed character when he withdrew from it, becoming less vibrant. Nor did I pick up the delicate sparkles of my aunt's presence or the immense flux of Kurj's power. Right now Alto just felt like Alto, one of four simple voices singing together with no Triad soloists to jazz up the tune.

Greetings, Soz, Alto thought.

Greetings. Connect me with my psiberchip.

Chip activated.

I felt nothing. No reason I should have, though, given that it was part of my own brain. *Locate Lord Skolia's neural tracings.*

Soprano answered. Located.

Match my brain activity with his.

Attempting match, Soprano thought.

I waited, watching the Net flicker. It was lovely, an eerie beauty that never appeared the same way twice. The infinite gold mesh hung in a shimmering atmosphere, one more liquid than gas, pale gold and sparkling. It undulated around me, soft and sensual. The sounds of the civilian nodes were gentler than those in the Hub, sweet melodies that rippled like ocean swells. Its smells were honey-corn and spice.

Soprano? I thought. Is anything happening?

Tenor answered. Your brain resists.

That was no surprise. Although I had never melded with Kurj, I had shared enough thoughts with him to know our mental processes were basically foreign.

Keep trying, I thought.

I continued to wait. The grid exhibited a well-ordered pattern of squares, but far too many defects showed on it. I knew those discontinuities. They came from poorly maintained connections and negligent users. Fluctuations appeared in the quality of its environment as well, concentrations of color and light in asymmetric patches. Civilians were inefficient. Our organization of the military grids was far more ordered.

Tenor was taking too long, using valuable time. *What is the status of matching procedure?* I asked.

Bass answered. Matching complete.

Complete? What percent difference exists between my brain activity and Emperor Skolia's, as determined by his tracings on my chip?

1.6 percent, Bass answered.

I felt nothing. But the fact that I perceived no difference wasn't proof of its absence. However, a 1.6 percent discrepancy wasn't negligible. The possibility still existed that his chip would erase if I tried to access it, leaving irrefutable evidence that I had been in violation of security procedures.

I needed to rethink the risks of tampering with Kurj's strategy for the Qox interrogation. Qox had put himself far too close to the brain of the Skol-Net. If he escaped, he could carry out exactly the function he had been bred to execute. By gaining access to the Hub he could overload the Triad psilink, thus assassinating the Triad and crippling the Skol-Net. If he managed it without killing himself as well, he would then be perfectly positioned to take over the functions of the murdered Triad. It would put him in control of the Imperial Space Command, of Diesha, and of the Skol-Net.

Bass, Stop matching.

Stopped, Bass thought.

I withdrew from the Net in proper format, rising through its levels until I reached the interface with the electronic system. After I pulled out, I considered my next move. If I went to Kurj now and told him what I knew, I risked execution for the treason I had committed by hiding the truth about Qox. But Kurj needed the information. The best procedure would be to interrogate Qox, break his barriers, and then inform Kurj that the Highton Heir was Rhon. I would present the information as if I were also learning it for the first time. That way, I protected both myself and the Imperialate.

I would have to be careful when I broke Jaibriol's barriers, though, to make sure I didn't hurt him.

I rubbed my eyes. The drain from my work tonight had pulled me down both physically and mentally. And now I was about to make Jaibriol's suicide attempt into reality.

Suicide. *Suicide*. Why had I forgotten that? What was wrong with me, thinking that Jaibriol had come here to kill us?

I got up and paced out of the room, trying to clear my head. A moment ago I had been thinking with what I believed was perfect clarity. Yet now I felt as if a stranger had been in my head. My intention was to *free* Jaibriol, not betray him to Kurj. How was I going to get the information I needed to find Jaibriol, if the process of getting it made me refuse to take it?

I picked up a piece of paper and wrote: It's not your mind. If you listen, you will regret it. Get the data.

The maze of halls under the ISC Records complex went on for kilometers. Its stark lines and dim lighting had long ago earned it the name Catacombs. My psiberchips were in a Catacombs vault secured

with an EI called a beta scanner, which analyzed retinal patterns, fingerprints, voice patterns, height, weight, body chemistry, skeletal structure, and brainwaves. It opened only to me or Kurj, who kept one of his own chips there as well. That vault stood inside a larger vault secured with a beta scanner, inside a room secured with a beta scanner, at the end of a hall secured by a beta scanner. It was the best security the Imperialate had to offer. Breaking in was impossible. I glanced at the paper in my hand. *It's not your mind.*

Incorrect. It was imprecise to state that merging with Kurj's brain made my mind his. A more exact definition was that it altered my mental process, giving me insights I otherwise lacked. But my mind remained mine.

*If you listen, you will regret it.*

No. The only source of regret I would find in these actions were the actions themselves. It was time that I stopped this treason.

*Get the data.*

The data weren't available to me. My aunt had protected the information with her customary brilliance; even if someone came this close to it, they would go no farther because in the process of reaching it they came to understand why it must not be reached.

*It's not your mind.*

My mind had been under a strain. I knew that. Tager had made this clear in my talks with him.

But seeing Tager had been a weakness.

No!

I clenched the console so tightly that my knuckles turned white. The paper crumpled in my hand, its edges sticking out of my fist. Seeing Tager had *not* been a weakness. My mind was sound. If I had written the words on this paper, they were sound.

I picked up Kurj's card and placed it in the slot on the console. His chip resisted me, like the human body rejecting a transplanted organ. I tensed, waiting for that sense of *deletion* that would come when it wiped itself blank.

Instead I felt a curious relaxation. And then I remembered where to find Jaibriol.

I reentered EM16 as before, once again cloaking my operations. This time I went straight to the security subgrid. I toggled visual mode and the grid blinked out of existence, replaced by the desert. Parched land surrounded me for thousands of kilometers, red and mottled with upjutting rocks that cut the landscape like angular fingers. Prickly gray stubs of dustbrush poked out of the sand. Only far in the north, where the plains rose into a haze of dark mountains, did the line of the land soften. The sky above me was a blue tablet of stone washed clean of clouds.

No one made their home out here. The ISC had other purposes for this desert. We had honeycombed it with underground installations, including Block Three, a complex that lay only a few meters to my right, hidden under the surface.

Reduce to psicon, I thought.

The desert retreated like a cloth backdrop pulled away by a giant hand, growing smaller and smaller as it receded into the distance. It came to a stop when it was no more than a small image within a glittering square of the grid.

I opened the file in my spinal node where I had stored the data about Jaibriol. Guards: three units watched his cell, six guards per unit. Each unit knew the location of only one other unit. I reprogrammed EM16 so that on the next shift, units one and three knew about each other and unit two knew about itself. Then I reassigned unit two to a new area so that its original location appeared to be another unit. Where unit two was supposed to be, a hole gaped in the security cage around Jaibriol.

I reprogrammed the Block Three warning and defense systems to ignore certain input at a certain time. I reset the medical monitors that watched Jaibriol's cell so at that same time they would start to monitor the guard outside the Block Three cafeteria. I set the sentry monitors to switch to the holography darkroom when the med monitors switched to the cafeteria. I changed work shifts to clear people out of certain areas and off certain computers and I reset the robot stunnice to avoid certain corridors. Then I set up a program that would, minutes after my changes went into effect, undo every one of them, reset



every system to its original state, wipe out the record of my changes, destroy itself, and delete the record of my deletions.

There were going to be a lot of confused people in the morning.

## 15. Chains and Silk

I landed the flier in silence and darkness. No moon shed its softening rays on the desert, only the cold harsh light of the stars, a multitude of stars that glittered above the parched land. I ran across the rocky ground to a point several meters away from the flier. Then I touched a button on the transmitter in the leather guard I wore around my wrist.

A circular section of rock about two meters wide sank into the ground. After it descended for about a meter it swiveled to one side, uncovering a flat metal surface, the safe door for Block Three. Another touch on my wrist guard and the safe door lowered into the ground, sinking in complete silence. Finally it swiveled ponderously to the side, showing itself to be a cylinder of metal more than a meter thick. Below it, I could make out the top of a metal staircase that spiraled down into darkness. A circular shaft almost two meters deep plunged down from my feet to the top of the stairs.

I touched my guard again. In response, a vertical seam opened in the wall of the shaft, uncovering a ladder that stretched down to the staircase below. I climbed down to the landing and then ran down the stairs.

The security airlock at the bottom released to my command. When the inner door opened, light glared in my eyes. Pipes lined the walls and ceiling of the corridor before me: huge tubes big enough to crawl through, smaller pipes the width of my arm, tiny conduits no wider than a finger. I ran down the hall, my boots pounding on the floor. The place might as well have been deserted. I passed through some of the most advanced security systems the ISC had created and not one alarm sounded.

Running in a boosted state, it took me less than a minute to reach Jaibriol's cell. I unlocked it with a laserpick I had set to match the light pattern expected by the lock. The door opened to it immediately, revealing a small room with a ledge along one wall.

Jaibriol lay sprawled on the ledge, asleep.

He was barefoot, dressed only in the gray pants and short-sleeved shirt of a prison uniform. Bruises and welts covered his lower arms, and I also saw the marks of an E-spring, a prong that gave electric shocks. The lacerations on his wrists and ankles looked like they came from chains that had rubbed the skin raw.

I wondered how his interrogators justified their methods, given that we had far less violent ways of extracting information from people than chaining and torturing them. I had no doubt the interrogators were using every method at their disposal. So why include torture?

Then again, they probably felt no need to justify it, given whom they were interrogating. Vengeance had no use for benevolence.

I ran over and shook his arm. "Jaibriol! Wake up."

He jerked, and spoke in Highton. "No more."

I grabbed his shoulders. "Wake up!"

Jaibriol sat bolt upright and struck out with his fist, hitting me in the stomach with a bruising blow that knocked me onto the floor.

I scrambled up to my feet. "It's me. Sauscony."

He stood up, clenching his fists again.

"Jaibriol, it's m—"

"Qox." Although he looked straight at me, his gaze was unfocused. "Qox. Jaibriol Qox."

"I know who you are." I grabbed his arm. "Come on."

He shoved me away with so much force that I stumbled backward and banged into the wall. I forced myself to relax, trying not to think of the time rushing by us. As he raised his arm over my head, I spoke in as conversational a voice as I could manage. "If this is how you greet all of your potential girlfriends, you must have a lousy love life."

He stopped. "What?"

"Jaibriol, it's me. Sauscony. From Delos."

He just stared at me, his face blank. I extended my arms, showing him I carried no weapons. "Sauscony. Remember? We met on Delos."

He lowered his arm. "Sauscony?"

"Sauscony Valdoria. I snuck into your bedroom. Later we met in the harbor."

His gaze focused. "It is you. How did you get in here?"

"It wasn't easy. We have to go. Fast."

He turned his head and stared at the open door. Then he broke into a run. I sped after him. He went where I pointed, stumbling on his bruised feet, almost falling, regaining his balance, stumbling again. But he never once slowed down.

We reached the exit shaft in minutes. Jaibriol ran up the spiral stairs, his bare feet thudding on the metal strips. He made it to the landing and grabbed a rung of the ladder. But when he tried to pull himself up, his swollen hands slipped. He fell, knocking his head against the ladder as he crumpled to the ground. He hit the landing and lay there in a heap with his eyes closed.

No! I grabbed his arm, trying to heft up his bulk. Even on boost I couldn't carry someone his size up the ladder. To have made it this far, so close to freedom, and then to be stopped by a damned ladder—no! I shook him as hard as I could. "*Get up.*"

His eyes opened. He fumbled behind his body and closed his hand around the lowest rung of the ladder. His other hand moved, following the first. As he dragged himself to his feet, I held him around the waist and heaved upward.

It took another minute for us to climb the ladder and run to the flier. If Jaibriol noticed the spiky dustbite weeds jabbing his bare feet, he gave no sign of it. At the flier, he threw himself into the open hatch and sprawled across the deck as I scrambled over him. I slammed the hatch closed and ran to the cockpit.

I taxied across the desert, bumping on the rough ground. I took off with only starlight to show the way. We ran dark and silent, just as I had done so often in the Jag. Now I had no mindscape, no psilink, no connection to the Skol-Net, just training and experience to guide my hand. But it was enough. We left Block Three and soared through the night.

And finally, after the installation had dropped behind us, I dared to relax. We had made it. Jaibriol was free and soon we would be at the starport. I had done the impossible, stealing the Highton Heir out from under the relentless eye of ISC.

I put the flier on autopilot and turned to Jaibriol. He had collapsed into the copilot's seat and was lying with his head against its back, his chest rising and falling with his ragged breathing.

"I have a counterfeit ID chip for you," I said. "You'll need it at the port." The only disguise he would need was the colored eyelenses, visor, and hair dye I had brought. No one would ever dream the Highton Heir was walking around free in the heart of the starport at ISC Headquarters.

He turned to look at me. "What are you going to do to me?"

"I'm taking you to Delos. You can ask the Allies for sanctuary."

He laughed harshly. "Sanctuary? They will put me on trial for war crimes."

"What crimes?" I grimaced. "Giving bad speeches after Kryx Quaelen drugged you?"

He sat up straight. "How did you know he drugged me?"

"I could tell as soon as I saw you speak."

"No one will believe it."

"And what do you expect in return?"

"That you don't try to kill yourself again."

He snorted. "Don't play with me, Sauscony. What is your price for this so-called rescue?"

I considered him. "That when your father dies, you return from exile to become Emperor of Eube." It wouldn't be easy, but with enough planning he might pull it off. "Then you try to make peace with us. I

mean genuinely try. Not the deceptions your father calls negotiations.”

“The deceptions are yours.”

“You think this is a trick?”

His voice was cold. “A brilliant means of torture your brother has devised, I must admit. Make the prisoner believe he is being rescued by a beautiful woman and taken to a place of safety. It should make the reality of my prison all the more painful when we end up back there.”

“You’re wrong.” Even if I were working as Kurj’s agent, he wouldn’t have used such a subtle method. He preferred brute force.

Jaibriol shrugged. “Brute force failed. Why not try subtlety?”

“Why did you say that?”

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“Jaibriol, if I were trying to trick you, why did your barriers just drop to me, when all of Kurj’s interrogators, even Kurj himself, couldn’t force you to lower them?”

He frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I didn’t say anything about brute force or subtlety. I only thought it.”

“I heard you say it.”

“You heard it in your mind.”

He snorted. “Right.”

“You know I didn’t say that about Kurj out loud.”

Silence.

I tried again. “Your barriers are activated by stress, aren’t they? Or pain, or anger, or danger. Any situation that your mind registers as threatening.”

“That’s right.”

“So why would they drop with me?”

He watched me with an unreadable expression. Then he leaned his head back against his seat and closed his eyes. His face was pale in the cabin lights, so pale and drawn. I waited, but he remained silent. Finally I turned back to my controls.

Eventually Jaibriol spoke again. “You are the one who will need sanctuary. The Emperor will execute you himself when he discovers what you’ve done.”

I glanced at him. “I hid my tracks.”

He turned his head and looked at me. “There is no way to hide all of the tracks you must have made getting me out of there.”

“My brother believes your capture was arranged, a trick to get you into Headquarters. He’ll think your people broke you out.”

“This would be unlikely, given his security measures.”

I smiled. “It’s a lot more likely than me doing it.”

There was a faint movement of his lips, the barest raising of their edges. But it was a smile just the same. “This is true.”

My voice softened. “The Allies will find a world where you can go into exile. Somewhere unpopulated, so there’s no one to recognize you. A place where you can stay until it’s time for you to return and assume your position as Emperor.”

“What makes you think I want to be Emperor?”

“You must.”

Why?”

I grimaced. “Because this war is destroying us, that’s why. I don’t see any way to end it without you. Can you imagine your father and my brother ever making peace? I sure as hell can’t.”

“Emperor Skolia will never negotiate with me.” Jaibriol’s voice tightened. “After these past few days, I doubt I could even endure being in the same room with him.”

“Kurj won’t be Emperor forever.”

“So you want me to go into exile and return someday to the Hightons.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Jaibriol—I’m not making it a condition on freeing you. But I ask you to consider it.” I spread my hands. “What will happen if Skolia falls to your father’s armies, or those of the next Emperor, or the one after that? Without us, the Allies won’t last a decade against your military. Is that really what you want? And entire galaxy controlled by Hightons?”

“No.”

“Then you—”

“No.” He held out his arm. “If I go back to them, this is what waits for me.”

Although the sleeve of his prison uniform covered the top half of his arm, the rest of the limb was bare. Bruises covered it, as well as welts and cuts, and E-spring burns. Lacerated skin crusted with blood surrounded his wrist like an ugly bracelet. “You mean interrogation?”

“No. Look closer.”

I peered at his arm. Most of the marks were fresh, but I could see older ones too, thin white lines that looked like healing welts, or scars from older cuts. I touched a line that snaked down onto his palm. It had been there far longer than Jaibriol had been Kurj’s prisoner.

“I don’t understand.” I looked up at him. “You didn’t have these scars on Delos.”

“No. I didn’t.”

“How did you get them?”

He gritted his teeth. “How do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“You of all people should. You’ve been there. What was his name? Tarque?”

I stared at him. “You’ve been a *provider*?”

His laugh was harsh. “Of course not. I am the Highton Heir. No one would dare harbor such a thought about me, let alone try it.”

“It was Quaelen, wasn’t it? Kryx Quaelen, the Trade Minister.”

“He did only what was necessary to train me for my future.” Jaibriol sounded as if he were gritting his teeth.

“Didn’t your father stop him?”

“He didn’t know.” Jaibriol shrugged. “My father cannot endure my presence. Perhaps he hates me, for my failures. I don’t know. I’m not sure I care anymore.”

“Maybe he doesn’t come near you because he can’t bear wanting to hurt his own son.”

Jaibriol flexed his hands, opening and closing them. “He told me never to make a mistake, never to falter in any way that would even hint at the truth about my deficiencies. But I can’t be a perfect fortress all of the time. It’s impossible.”

No one could. My brother came as close as anyone I knew to walling himself away from human contact, but even he had his needs. And Kurj didn’t have to live among Hightons.

“As Emperor, couldn’t you make a more tolerable condition for yourself?” He could get rid of Quaelen, for starters. “You could work with the taskmaker caste. The army—they’re mostly taskmakers, aren’t they? There must be at least some of them you could trust.”

“I don’t know.” He leaned his head back on the seat and stared at the bulkhead above him. “Quaelen is a powerful man, more so than I was even as Heir. Getting rid of him wouldn’t be easy.” He looked at me. “Neither of us need be bound to our heritage, Sauscony. Come with me. We’ll find a place where we never again have to worry about Kryx Quaelen or anyone else.”

Come with me. Just like that. Throw away my life, everything I had worked for.

Alone in my rooms earlier today I had been sure of what I wanted. Now, faced with Jaibriol, my certainties crumbled. Like knew like. I turned away, back to my controls, unable to look at him. The flier was doing fine on autopilot, its routines for maneuvering in traffic kicking in as we approached the city. A few more minutes and we would be at the starport.

“Sauscony?”

I continued to study the display panels. “I can’t go into exile. I have other plans.”

He didn’t say any more. Instead he made a picture in his mind, the two of us making love in a field of

waving grasses.

“Stop it!” I swung around to him. “We can never have that.”

“Why not?”

“You know why!”

He gave me an incredulous look. “You never asked to be an Imperial Heir. You don’t have to martyr your sanity to it.”

“Don’t make it out to be some kind of high-minded sacrifice. There’s nothing noble in my intentions. I want to be Emperor. I want the power.”

“Maybe.”

I scowled at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You think you have a responsibility. That you can’t run away from it.”

“What I think is my business.”

“People aren’t made to carry that much weight, Sauscony. If you try to make yourself responsible for every Skolian alive, the pressure is going to kill you.”

My anger flared. “So you want me to run off and fuck in the flowers for the rest of my life?”

He didn’t back down. “Belittling what you want won’t change how much you want it.”

“I want more than that.”

The flier’s computer spoke. “We are receiving a signal.”

I glanced at the controls. A light was flashing that I had prayed would remain dark.

“What’s the matter?” Jaibriol asked.

“I’m not sure.” I switched on the neutrino com, cycling through the ISC channels. Kurj’s voice cut into the air.

“... south of the city in a class 4B or 4C flier. Stop all craft fitting that description. I repeat, stop *all* craft that fit that description.”

No! Not now. But only a few seconds of listening to Kurj’s transmission told it all. He knew Jaibriol had escaped. A planet-wide cordon was snapping into place around Diesha; every flight was grounded, every passenger suspect. As Kurj reeled off commands, I yanked on the flystick and veered to the east, away from the starport.

We had almost made it. But almost hadn’t been enough. What gave us away? One of my aunt’s watchers on the Net, like the one that had recorded my entrance into EM16? Or maybe a guard decided to do an extra check on Jaibriol, or I had missed a security system, or tripped an alarm I hadn’t known about. Whatever had happened, my plans were shot to hell now.

Kurj’s transmission continued, coordinating search units. At least they were looking for Trader commandos instead of me. We were over the suburbs now, immersed in air traffic, just one among hundreds of fliers that fit the description of the one Kurj wanted. But I knew the efficiency of ISC. Once Kurj set his machine into motion, even I couldn’t escape it. There was nowhere we could go to evade his inexorable grip.

Almost nowhere.

I brought the flier around in a tight circle, the city pivoting below until we were headed north. Within moments the buildings were thinning out, giving way first to suburbs, then to desert.

An ISC flyer appeared on my holomap, matching our course and speed. A voice crackled on the com. “Identify yourself.”

“Read your monitor, mister,” I said.

He paused. “Sorry, Primary Valdoria. Identification verified. Go on through, ma’am.”

“Are you on the city cordon?” I asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Any luck finding them?”

“We think they’re headed for the starport.”

“All right. Carry on. Over and out.”

“Will do. Over and out.”

We were hailed twice more before we reached the mountains. Even after we flew into the foothills, a

flier intercepted us. I hadn't expected Kurj to waste craft out here, given the extensive systems that already guarded this range. They protected the Imperial estate, the only dwelling within thousands of square kilometers. Right now hundreds of installations were monitoring us from peaks and valleys. Satellites sailed in low orbits overhead, one after another, in a pattern designed to cover the area at all times.

All of this, just to guard one empty palace.

As the upper mountains closed around us in protective folds, my com crackled again, this time with a gentle voice I would have taken for human if I hadn't known better. "Please identify yourself."

"Transmitting ID file," I said.

"Greetings, Sauscony," the computer said. "Welcome home."

It took six more minutes to reach the palace. We passed through the best safeguards the Imperialate had to offer without being stopped once. Why should they stop us? I was one of the people they were supposed to protect.

But even here we wouldn't be able to hide long. Sooner or later, Skolia's mighty Emperor was going to come home.

My bedroom in the palace made my apartment on Forshires look plain. The doorknob was solid gold, like the key that unlocked it, an old-fashioned key, the kind that went into the lock and turned, releasing a bolt. The room was blue: ceiling, walls, carpets, even the bed on the raised dais. Gold filigree scrolled around the windows. Tall vases stood against the walls, priceless works of art from some ancient civilization on a planet with a name I couldn't remember. The closet was as big as a living room. Dresses hung there, soft sexy things I had ordered and never worn.

At times I suspected it was more my idea of what I was supposed to like than what actually made me comfortable. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate its beauty. It pleased me as much today as the first day I had seen it finished. But it had never felt as if it were mine.

Jaibriol limped across the room and climbed the steps of the dais. As he lay down on the bed, its silk coverings rustled under his weight.

I went up and sat next to him, my Jumbler dangling in my hand. The weapon was useless here. All of my training, my years of experience—what good was it now? Yes, the last place anyone would think to look for Jaibriol Qox was the Emperor's empty palace. But even the last place would eventually get searched.

I glanced at Jaibriol. "I'm sorry. All I've done is delay the inevitable."

He reached out and touched the Jumbler. "At least this way I don't have to die slowly."

"I'm not going to *shoot* you."

"Even if my only other choice is to be recaptured by your brother? Neither of us can escape now, Sauscony. He'll execute us both."

I looked at the gun. Then I dropped it on the floor. We had come so close. So *close*. Just a little more time and we would have made it offplanet. But close wasn't good enough.

I lay down on my stomach next to Jaibriol. The silk bedspread felt cool against my cheek. He spoke in a softer voice. "When I saw you in my cell, I thought I was having another one of my dreams."

"Dreams?"

"After that night on Delos, when I met you—whenever I was lonely I used to dream you would come to me."

So I wasn't the only one who had struggled with the memory of that night. It helped somehow, knowing that.

I pushed up on my elbows so that I could look at his face. I had forgotten just how extraordinarily handsome he was, especially by Highton standards. It wouldn't have surprised me if Ur Qox had ordered cosmetic surgery done on him when Jaibriol was a boy. Anything to further enhance his son's image as a hero of the Traders. Anything to draw attention away from Jaibriol's inability to function as a true Highton.

Dark circles rimmed his eyes and his hair was ruffled. Shimmering hair, black and glistening. Highton black. It was so odd to see it on someone so unlike a Highton. I touched his lips, running my

fingertip over the top one, then the bottom one. They felt chapped. Dry and cracked. Also warm. So warm. Rhon lips, warm and full. I lowered my head, pressing my lips against his—

Jaibriol pushed me away.

I flushed. What was wrong with me, trying to seduce a man who had just spent days subjected to a brutal interrogation supervised by my own brother? “I’m sorry.”

He watched me, silent. Across the room, the old spire-clock ticked softly, tick-tick, marking off the seconds.

Then he slid his arm around my neck and pulled my head back down to his. I could smell him, a musky scent like a prod, heady and masculine. I closed my eyes as we kissed, letting my lips linger on his mouth. It felt as full as it had looked, as warm, as inviting. But he lay tense under me, more like a plank of wood than a man with a woman he desired.

I lifted my head. “What’s wrong?”

He pushed up on his elbows, bringing his eyes level with mine. “It’s not you. It’s anyone.”

“Any lover?”

“Yes. No. No lovers.”

“You mean you’ve never had one?”

His voice hardened. “That’s right.”

“But why? I would have thought every eligible woman among the Hightons would have thrown herself at you.”

“I didn’t want a Highton lover.” Jaibriol grimaced. “Would you?”

I shuddered. “No.” I could feel him now. His barriers were dropping much more slowly than they had on Delos, but it was still happening. I recognized that same sense of aloneness I had felt the night I met him on the docks, in the dark cover of the sea-lapping night. Lonely. He was lonely, bruisingly, achingly *lonely*. The wound was even deeper now, scarred around the edges, raw in the center.

“Couldn’t you take a provider?” I asked.

“No.”

“You didn’t have to hurt her.”

“I didn’t want one.” He pressed his palm against my chest, between my breasts, as if he were keeping me at bay. “Let someone that close and you become vulnerable.”

“How could a provider hurt you?”

“By recognizing me.”

“Everyone alive knows who you are.”

“Not that way, Sauscony. By recognizing themselves in me.”

Then I understood. “That you are like them.”

“Yes.”

“You had no friends at all?”

His face twisted. “There was Quaelen, my ‘beloved’ mentor.”

“You mean Kryx Quaelen? The Highton Trade Minister?”

“He didn’t like my showing attention to anyone.” Hatred sparked in his voice. “If I did, he found a reason to punish me.”

I swallowed. “Couldn’t you get rid of him?”

“He’s a master at Highton intrigue, even better than my father.” Jaibriol’s voice cracked. “Quaelen is empty, like a hole waiting to swallow me up. They’re all that way—my father, my so-called mother the Empress, all of them.”

“I’m sorry.” Gods, that sounded trite.

He watched me, concentrating, as if he could somehow absorb me into himself. Then, with no warning, he pulled me hard against his body and down onto the bed, wrapping his arms around me, bringing my mouth against his. My lips parted and his tongue came inside my mouth, first questing and then probing with more force.

But still something was wrong. Not with him, but with *me*. I wanted to jerk away from him. What was the matter with me?

He made a noise, a soft, aroused sound. Then he stopped kissing me and slid his lips to my ear. "Sauscony. Sweet Sauscony." His voice murmured in a familiar cadence, a soft rhythm I recognized ...

Then I heard it again, the way I had so often heard it in my mind during combat, thoughts like acid that poured over me from the Aristo pilots I was fighting: *Die, sweet Jagernaut. Die.*

I sat up so fast that my fingernails gouged the scabbed cuts on his arms. He sat up too, a wild chase of emotions flying across his face: surprise, embarrassment, confusion, and desire all mixed in together. "What's the matter?"

"No ..." Highton. Highton. *Highton.*

"Sauscony?" He laid his hands on my shoulders. "What is it?"

"I—it—" I took a breath. Of course he moved and sounded like a Highton. He *was* a Highton. But it was cultural. Only cultural. *Only* cultural. "I don't ... It's—nothing."

"Why did you get so upset?"

"Nothing. It was nothing. I'm just wound up." Across the room, the spire-clock ticked loudly.

Jaibriol nudged my shoulder. "Let's try this."

"Try what?"

"Lie down." He nudged me again. "I'll show you."

Warily, I lay on my stomach. He straddled my hips so that he was sitting on my bottom with his knees on either side of my waist. Then he started to rub my back.

There was a time when I would have loved being rubbed, when it would have had just the result he hoped. But no more. Tarque had often rolled me over this way, exactly as Jaibriol had done it, right down to the smallest mannerisms.

Calm, I thought. Stay calm. He isn't Tarque.

I laid my head down on the pillows and tried to relax. It did feel good. But then he quit.

I looked back over my shoulder. "Why did you stop?"

"I'm just looking."

"At my backside? What's so interesting about that?"

Jaibriol grinned. "Well, maybe it's not interesting to you." He started to rub my hips. "That's because you can see it anytime you want."

Ai. Such a beautiful smile. I had forgotten about that, the way it lit up his face. When he smiled, he wasn't the embittered heir to an empire. Instead, he looked like what he should have been if his heritage hadn't ruined his life, a healthy young man enjoying his first experience with a woman. I sighed, and put my head back down on the pillows.

Jaibriol kept massaging, rubbing me everywhere, his hands moving in firm, sensual circles. Gradually, despite everything, my muscles loosened up. I let my eyes close, basking in the pressure of his hands, soaking in his musky, tantalizing scent that made me want him to rub more private places ...

Then he lay on top of me, his erection pushing the rough weave of his prison uniform against my bottom. He took hold of my upper thighs, one hand on each leg, and spread them apart.

Like Tarque.

Combat mode on, my spinal node thought.

"Jaibriol, *STOP!*"

He lifted his body immediately, holding himself up on his hands. "What's wrong?"

I rolled onto my back. *Combat mode off.*

Mode off, the node answered.

"Sauscony?" Jaibriol had flushed. "What did I do?"

"I—nothing." *Damn* Tarque. Were those scars going to follow me forever?

No. I hadn't spent all those months with a heartbender for nothing. I wasn't going to let Tarque do this. I wasn't going to let him come back to ruin my life ten years after he had died. Jaibriol and I only had a few hours left, hours far too precious to waste.

I cupped my hands around Jaibriol's face and pulled him into a kiss. His smell wafted around us, even stronger now than before. Masculine. Intense. I knew the Rhon produced different pheromones than other humans, but since he was the first Rhon man I had ever made love to, I wasn't prepared for



the force of it. His scent permeated the air as if it had a substance of its own, evoking reactions from my body far stronger than I had experienced before.

Jaibriol sat up and put his finger between my breasts, poking it inside the magnetic seam that kept my jumpsuit closed. As he slid his hand down my front, the jumpsuit fell open, leaving my skin bare to the cool air. When he cupped my breasts and rubbed his thumbs over my nipples, they hardened in response, sticking up like an invitation.

We undressed each other carefully, Jaibriol wincing when his shirt caught on the scabbed gashes in his back. He dropped my boots over the side of the bed and the heels clanged against my Jumbler. We slipped under the covers, between the silken bedspread and the silken sheets, and he stretched out on top of me, bare skin against bare skin.

I reached down, guiding him—there. As he moved against me, I closed my eyes, murmuring against his ear, soft, meaningless noises. And finally we merged into a full Rhon meld, a joining like the one that had come so much easier to us on Delos. It built as we built, growing fuller, tighter, stronger—until finally I surged into my peak, the release coming with unexpected and gratifying intensity.

But it didn't stop there. Jaibriol was still going, his mind blended with mine. I kept building with him even after my own body had spent itself in orgasm. His rising excitement held on to me, pulled us higher and higher. It grew until I couldn't bear it any longer. But I couldn't stop either. We went higher, higher—and his climax burst over us, wringing our bodies with spasms that felt so good I stopped thinking altogether.

I didn't know how long it was before I became aware of the room again. Jaibriol was lying on top of me, his cheek resting against mine, his breathing quieting. His sweat trickled off his chest onto my arms. When I stirred, his head lifted and a second later I felt his lips press against my closed eyes.

"That was worth waiting for," he said.

I smiled. "Yes. It was."

"How long do you think before ... ?"

I opened my eyes. "Before Kurj finds us?"

"Yes."

"Maybe tonight. Probably sooner. Probably in a few hours." I wasn't sure what Kurj would do when he realized just how thoroughly I had betrayed him. It wasn't going to be pretty, though, and I doubted it would be over quickly.

"Sauscony." Jaibriol regarded me. "I don't want them to do to you what they've been doing to me." He leaned over the side of the bed—and came back with my Jumbler. He laid it between my breasts and lowered himself onto me so that the gun made a cold lump between our bodies. Then he took my finger and set it against the igniter.

I stared at him. "No."

"We're going to die anyway. You know that." His voice cracked. "And we both know what it's like to be hurt and hurt until you wonder how you can endure anymore. I don't want to die that way. At least like this it will be in love instead of pain."

I clenched the gun. I knew he was right, but my instinct for self-preservation was too strong. I couldn't do it.

He spoke against my ear. "I can't fire it. Only you can."

I nudged off the safety and set my finger on the igniter. Just one push—

A knock sounded at the door.

I jerked out from under Jaibriol and off the bed so fast that the covers flew into the air. I moved by reflex, grabbing Jaibriol's shirt and yanking it over my head, I didn't want to face the guards in the vulnerability of my nakedness. Then I raised the Jumbler and aimed it at the door.

And when the door opened I almost shot my own father.

## 16. Heart of the Web

He stood watching me, blinking his violet eyes behind his spectacles. He wore glasses because he didn't trust Skolian doctors enough to let them work on his eyes. He still wore his hair long, in the style of his people, the silver-streaked locks framing his face and brushing his shoulders. He was a well-built man, not too tall and not too short, with heart-stopping good looks that the public loved and Kurj found useful for counteracting his own harsh image.

First he blinked at me. Then he blinked at Jaibriol, who was sitting naked on the bed. Finally he turned back to me. He spoke in the language of his own people, which was my first language. "Are you going to kill me, Sauscony?"

The thought that I might have hurt him was so upsetting I could hardly speak. I lowered the gun, clicking on the safety. "No. Never. You know that."

He walked over to me. "That was you I felt in the Net last night, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I hid."

He still had that look, as if he didn't know what to do. "I received a message from Kurj earlier. He told me to stay here at the palace, where it's safe. He believes Trader terrorists have infiltrated the area." He glanced at Jaibriol, who was pulling on his pants. Then he turned back at me. "Is that true?"

"No," I said. "But Kurj thinks it is."

"I see." It was obvious, from his expression, that he didn't see at all.

Fortunately Jaibriol stayed on the bed; my father had enough to deal with right now without the added intimidation of being towered over by the Highton Heir. Outwardly my father didn't show much reaction. He just stood there looking at us. But I felt him grappling with the situation like a wrestler fighting an opponent who far outweighed him.

He finally spoke again, this time in Iotic. The language was almost obsolete, used only by scholars and the uppermost Skolian classes. My father had learned it because it is my mother's native language. I guessed he was using it for Jaibriol's sake; just as I had learned Highton, Jaibriol had probably learned Iotic.

"Sauscony." He adjusted his spectacles. "The man on that bed looks like Jaibriol Qox."

"He is."

"The Highton Heir. That Jaibriol Qox."

"Yes. That one." I doubted there were any others.

He went over to the bed and peered at Jaibriol, who had his pants on now. "Why were you sitting naked on my daughter's bed?" As Jaibriol opened his mouth, my father said, "No. Never mind. I don't think I want to hear the answer."

I went over to him. "What are you going to do?"

"Do?" My father scowled at me. "Before or after I have heart failure?"

I couldn't help but smile. "Before, I hope."

"This isn't amusing, Sauscony."

I swallowed. "I guess not."

He motioned at Jaibriol. "Please explain this to me."

"I helped him escape. That's why Kurj thinks there are Trader terrorists loose on Diesha."

"Kurj captured Jaibriol Qox? And you freed him?"

I nodded. "After the alarm sounded, the only safe place for us to come was here."

"The Emperor's palace."

"Yes."

"And just what prompted this urge of yours to free Jaibriol Qox?"

I spoke softly. "Touch his mind. Then you'll understand."

He didn't even turn. But I felt his attention shift to Jaibriol. Although I wasn't sure Jaibriol consciously realized what was happening, he still responded, raising his blocks more by instinct than by intention.

My father's forehead creased. He sat in a chair at the table by my bed, no longer looking at either Jaibriol or me. He concentrated harder—and Jaibriol blocked him again.

So my father withdrew his mind. Then he came back, changing his approach as if he were trying to catch a skittish lyrine colt. He pressured Jaibriol here, there, and there, subtle nudges that came and went so gently Jaibriol probably didn't even feel them. As closely connected as I was to Jaibriol now, even I couldn't follow my father's exploration all that well.

But it didn't work. So finally my father came questioning to my mind, trying to reach Jaibriol via the link I already had with him. I let my mind relax, my father flowed into the link—and stood up so fast that he knocked over his chair. Jaibriol immediately rose up to his knees, clutching the bedpost as if preparing to jump down and defend himself. I still didn't think he realized his barriers had been penetrated.

My father stared at him. "You aren't an Aristo."

Jaibriol answered in perfect Iotic. "Of course I am an Aristo."

"No," my father said. "You aren't."

Jaibriol clenched the post harder. "Are you telling me you don't consider me your equal?"

My father shook his head. "No. I'm telling you I think you are like me."

"Jaibriol." I sat next to him on the bed and laid my hand on his leg. "He won't hurt you."

He turned to me, his exhaustion falling like a blanket across my shoulders. Although he didn't let go of the post, his grip on it eased enough so that his knuckles were no longer white.

My father glanced at me. "Does Kurj know he is Rhon?"

"Not yet. But when he finds out, he'll be certain Jaibriol came here to break the Skol-Net."

He turned to Jaibriol. "Did you?"

"No."

My father considered him. Then he nodded. That was it. A simple nod. No more questions. No skepticism. No threats. Nothing. Just a *nod*. I couldn't believe it.

*You wouldn't be here with him, like this, if you didn't trust him, my father thought.*

You know, I thought. You're very different from Kurj.

So your mother tells me.

"I thought she was going to meet you back at home." I spoke out loud, realizing how strange our silence would seem to Jaibriol. "See the grandchildren and all."

My father pushed his spectacles up his nose. "My plans changed."

That didn't sound like him. Given the choice of going home and being with my mother, the two things he most enjoyed doing, or coming to Diesha and being around Kurj, I couldn't fathom his choosing Kurj. "Why?"

"I had a convulsion."

*What?* I got off the bed and went over to him. "Aren't you following your treatment?"

"Of course. I don't know why it happened." He paused. "Actually, it wasn't one convulsion. I had several."

My pulse jumped. "How many?"

"I don't know. I felt ... strange. The next that I knew, I was waking up in that little hospital your mother had built near the village. That offworld doctor made quite a fuss about it. She said I had a series of generalized tonic-clonic attacks, back to back. She sent me here. I didn't want to come but she insisted." He scowled. "She contacted Kurj and he sent a ship to get me."

I took his hands. “Are you all right now?”

“I feel fine. None of the doctors found anything wrong.”

“And you don’t know why you had the seizures?”

“They came just after I woke up. Probably the nightmare I had, that’s all.” He squeezed my hands. “Stop looking at me with this worried face. You’re as bad as those doctors.”

I had never heard of a nightmare giving him epileptic seizures before. “What did you dream?”

“Someone was giving me shocks with an E-spring. I couldn’t stop it because I was tied down.” He squinted at me. “It is these machines, Sauscony. I don’t even know names for half of them. Computers and robots and things. They give me nightmares. But it means nothing.”

I hardly heard him finish. One word kept jumping out at me. E-spring. “Who tied you down?”

“I don’t know.” He waved his hand, dismissing the question. “Old soldiers have such dreams.”

About an E-spring? I hadn’t even realized he knew what it was.

He had spent most of his life in what, by Skolian standards, was abject poverty. I doubted there was anything even resembling an E-spring on the entire planet.

“Had you been talking about E-springs with mother?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No. It was nothing, Sauscony.”

“Dreaming about electric shocks is nothing?”

“I dreamed I was being interrogated.”

On the bed behind me, Jaibriol drew in a sharp breath.

Somehow I made my voice stay calm. “Do you remember why?”

My father shrugged. “Someone kept asking me about my father’s army. About their war plans. I don’t know why I would dream such a thing. My father died when I was only a few months old.” He rubbed his wrists, massaging them in the exact same place where, on Jaibriol, the skin had been ripped raw. “It was so vivid. It felt real, even after I woke up.”

Had he tapped into Jaibriol’s interrogation? How? Through Kurj? *Through me?*

I knew Kurj. When he realized what I had done, his hatred would turn on me as well as on Jaibriol. He would have me questioned thoroughly, as much a punishment for my betrayal as to find out why I had done it. If Jaibriol’s torture had caused my father so much distress, what would happen when it was me on that interrogation bench? Despite my father’s claim that his convulsions were “nothing,” I knew better. If he were having status epilepticus—back-to-back *grand mal* attacks—while he was under treatment, he was in a lot more danger than he was willing to admit.

*Sauscony.* My father motioned toward Jaibriol. *You truly want this man?*

I made an image of my mother. What would your life be like without her?

Your mother is not one quarter Highton.

Is what you saw in Jaibriol’s mind so monstrous?

He exhaled. No. Quite the contrary.

He won’t turn on me.

He glanced at Jaibriol, who was plainly trying to figure out what we were doing, staring at each other in complete silence, running through a series of hand gestures and facial expressions as if we were holding a conversation.

My father spoke. “Then the two of you must ask the Allies for sanctuary.”

If only life were that simple. “We can’t get off Diesha,” I said.

“Can’t you have a pilot fly out here from the starport?” He considered me. “Take the ship to Delos yourself. No one but the three of us would ever know you had a passenger.”

How did I explain a planet-wide cordon to a man who understood war in terms of cavalry and foot

troops? “We can’t *get* a ship now, not without clearance from Kurj. And no way is he going to give it.”

“If I had another convulsion,” my father said, “you would have to summon a doctor.”

My pulse leapt. “You think you’re going to have another one?”

He smiled slightly. “It could be arranged.”

Ah. That would certainly *get* someone out here. However much Kurj resented his stepfather, he still needed him in good shape. “But even if we got a ship, Kurj will only clear us for planetary travel, perhaps to a hospital on another continent, somewhere he thinks is safer than here. But he’s not going to let anyone leave Diesha until he catches Jaibriol.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t leave anyway.”

“I don’t see how.”

“You freed Lord Qox.”

“That was before ISC went on alert. I doubt anyone could get out now.”

“I’m not asking if anyone can do it. I’m asking if you can.”

I blinked at him. To say he had never been thrilled with my choice of careers was an understatement. It rarely occurred to me that he might actually have a high opinion of my abilities. “I don’t know if I can do it.”

“Are you willing to try?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then it is decided.”

“It’s not that simple.” As if there were anything remotely simple about what he had just proposed. “Even if we get off Diesha—which will be almost impossible—but even if we manage it, we’ll be running fast and desperate with who knows how many warships after us. They’ll alert every sentry from here to Delos. No way will we ever make it there.”

He pushed up his spectacles. “Then you must already have a place to go when you leave. Somewhere unknown to ISC or the Traders.”

“If the place is unknown to ISC, how are you and I going to find it?”

“Perhaps if we ask the Allies.”

How could I get through to him? “We can’t ask anyone anything. Communications in and out of Diesha right now are blocked.”

“Then I will use the Prime line.”

“You can’t.”

“Why not? My understanding is that Kurj’s security systems won’t report my use of it.”

“They won’t even know. No more than you would know if either of the other two Triad members used their Primes. But that’s not the point. You can’t use it for this.”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Father, you can’t use your hotline to the Allied President to ask for help in solving a personal problem. It’s meant only for crises that threaten galactic stability.”

He spoke quietly. “If the imminent execution of the Highton and Imperial Heirs doesn’t threaten galactic stability, I don’t know what does.”

That stopped me. I had been so caught up in events, I hadn’t had a chance to think through the ramifications of them all. Our executions would tear apart the Rhon. In the midst of that chaos, an enraged Ur Qox would throw his military might against us, seeking vengeance for his son’s death while we were weakened with internal strife. All our efforts to convince the Allies that the Rhon and the Assembly created a just government rather than an unstable dynasty of tyrants would be for nothing. We would justify their worst fears about us, devastating what little trust we had managed to build with them.

My father indicated the table. “You must set up the line for me, Sauscony. I don’t know how to do it.”

I sat down, wondering if he had any idea how incongruous it was to the rest of us that he powered the Net and yet couldn’t log into it. He was illiterate, both with written language and with computers. Sometimes his refusal to learn angered me, other times it worried me, other times I wondered if he had a learning disability he refused to acknowledge for fear of appearing even more deficient than he felt already when faced with my mother’s universe. Psiberspace was his playing field, a place where he didn’t need to read or write, or to understand how computers worked. All he had to do was think.

I pushed a corner of the table and its glossy surface swelled in the center, accompanied by a humming noise. It formed into a sphere about half a meter across that opened into a Net console. A flat section of the table shimmered, clearing to reveal a holoscreen.

I turned to my father. “I need the name and security codes for your Prime account.”

“The account name is Valdor. The codes are the names of all you children converted into code by EMI6’s level-four security file.”

I nodded, managing to act as if what he had just done—revealing the Prime’s prized security codes in the presence of the Highton Heir—was completely normal rather than the act of treason we both knew it to be.

I first accessed his regular account, and from there I set up the protocols that would link him to his Prime. Three Prime computers existed, one for each member of the Triad, each machine independent of the others. As I waited for the security processes to clear, I heard footsteps. Glancing back, I saw Jaibriol standing behind me. But he wasn’t trying to see what I was doing, which is what I would have done in his position. Instead he was watching my father.

My father frowned at him. “Yes?”

“I was wondering why you needed to see doctors,” Jaibriol said. “You look so healthy.”

“I have epilepsy.”

Jaibriol stared at him. “How can that be? There is no hint of it in our files on you.”

“Why should I tell any of you?”

“I’m just surprised our intelligence hasn’t discovered it.”

My father hardly seemed to hear him. He was concentrating again, probing at Jaibriol’s mind. Then he spoke in a gentler voice. “My family died when I was an infant, killed in a rock slide while they traveled. I had my first seizure then. The doctors believe my mind hadn’t yet separated from my mother’s, so that the shock of her death injured my brain.”

I stared at him. What possessed him to reveal that? He rarely talked about it. If the neurons in his brain became overstimulated, they sent out an abnormal flood of electrical discharges, causing him to pass out while his body stiffened and his jaw clenched. Then he turned blue and stopped breathing. When his neurons began to tire his body convulsed, until eventually they all fatigued and he went limp. When he finally woke up, he was always tired and confused.

The first time I had seen it happen, as a child, I had been terrified he would die, or that the wild spasms meant he was in horrible pain. The doctors later told me he turned blue because the vessels in his skin constricted so that more blood could flow to his brain. My father said he never remembered the seizures, let alone felt any pain.

What they didn’t tell me, what I didn’t learn until I was older, was that his attacks were the most violent his doctors had ever seen. The extra neural structures in his brain—those magnificent paras that made him such a gifted telepath—also made him agonizingly sensitive to the neural overload of a seizure. By the time his paras had finished maturing, in adolescence, his attacks had become so severe that without treatment he probably would have died from their intensity and frequency. He survived untreated to eighteen only with the unflagging attention of his guardian. But they had both realized he would probably

never reach twenty.

My mother had only needed to see one convulsion to realize that what he believed were “spirit afflictions” were some kind of brain seizures. Even now, when he knew epilepsy was a treatable condition that didn’t prevent him from living a normal life, he spoke of it only with family members or the few doctors he had come to trust. That he would reveal anything at all about it to Jaibriol astounded me. Something was going on between the two of them, something I couldn’t follow.

“It isn’t hereditary, Lord Qox,” my father said.

Jaibriol spoke quietly. “That wouldn’t change my feelings for Sauscony. But if she and I go into exile, it’s unlikely our children will have access to the kind of medical treatment you receive here. If this could kill them, we should know.”

For pugging sakes. We were about to die and Jaibriol was worrying about our nonexistent offspring. It was a sobering thought, though. Our children, if we were able to have them, would be both Rhon and Qox. Gods only knew what that birthright would mean.

A light flashed on the console, accompanied by the beep of a pager. My father glanced at me. “Is the Prime ready?”

“No.” Damn! “It’s Kurj. He’s trying to reach you.” I activated the com, but left off the visual mode. Then I motioned my father over and pointed at the Acknowledge panel.

He touched the panel. “Yes?”

Kurj’s voice snapped into the air. “Eldri, have you seen Soz?”

My father stiffened. His full name was Eldrinson Althor Valdoria. Eldri was a child’s nickname that only my mother, his former guardian and Kurj used now. My father liked it from my mother and didn’t mind it from his guardian. But Kurj was another matter.

He spoke coolly. “Yes, she is here.”

Jaibriol stared at him like a man betrayed. But as he started to speak I grabbed his wrist and shook my head. The pilots who had intercepted our flier would have reported it. My father didn’t dare deny I was here.

“Put her on,” Kurj said.

I leaned over the speaker. “Yes, sir?”

“I want you to stay there with him,” Kurj said. “Until we find Qox.”

My shoulders relaxed. So. He thought I had come here to protect my father. It was a logical conclusion, or would have been had I known my father was here. Even with the extensive security that guarded the palace, it made sense that Kurj wouldn’t want a Triad member alone right now. What better bodyguard could my father have than a Jagernaut Primary with far more than a military interest in his safety?

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Good. Out.” Kurj cut the connection as abruptly as he had initiated it.

I looked at my father. “He seemed to think I had known you were here.”

“Didn’t you? Your message came in to the palace yesterday.”

I had forgotten about that. “It was a ruse. I was trying to let Kurj know I had arrived on Diesha.”

He smiled. “Well, I was all set to answer it. I was going to suggest we have dinner after Kurj made the announcement.”

“What announcement?”

“Sauscony, you needn’t be modest.”

“Modest about what?”

“He hasn’t spoken to you yet?”

“About what?”

He exhaled. “I’m sorry. I assumed you knew.”

What the hell was he talking about? “Knew *what*?”

“He made his choice of heir,” my father said. “You.”

I felt like a MagRail train that had just slammed into a casecrete wall at three hundred kilometers per hour. “What?”

“I don’t believe it.”

“I’ve seen the documents. He signed them this morning.”

I just sat there, staring at him. Then I put my elbow on the table and rested my forehead against my palm. My mind was like a dry sponge with water running off it. I couldn’t absorb his words. It just wouldn’t sink in.

But slowly, gradually, the sponge responded. Bit by bit the realization soaked into my mind. Choice. Kurj had made a choice. It wasn’t a battle anymore. I didn’t have to fight my brother Althor any longer. I didn’t have to spend every day fearing the time would come when we were forced to make Kurj’s choice for him. It was over. I had won. *Won*.

The timing made sense. I couldn’t image a more effective way to weaken Trader morale than for Kurj to announce he had chosen his own successor in the same speech where he revealed that he had captured the Highton Heir. It would make Ur Qox’s dramatic announcement of Jaibriol’s existence pale in comparison.

Except there would be no triumphant speeches now. Only betrayal, treason, and rage.

“I don’t ...” My voice cracked. “Oh, Gods.”

My father sat in the chair next to mine. “I know I fought your decision to join the military. But you must understand, it was difficult for me to accept.”

I just shook my head. What could I say? Besides, he and I had long ago set that issue to rest. Or more accurately, we had grown tired of arguing about it.

“Sauscony, listen to me.” He took hold of my arm, making me look at him. “I’ve watched you these past years. I’ve seen what your life has done to you. What you’ve done with it. You aren’t Kurj. You never will be.”

I stiffened. “And you don’t think I can do his job?”

“No. That’s not what I meant at all.”

I had to struggle not to grit my teeth. “Then what did you mean? That you think Althor would have been a better choice? Because he’s more like Kurj?”

“Being like Kurj hardly guarantees that a person is suited to lead.”

“Then I don’t see what you’re getting at.”

“What I am trying to say, not very articulately I’m afraid, is that I think Kurj made the right choice.”

That stopped me, really stopped me. Among my father’s people, women had never fought as soldiers, much less become war leaders. It was far different than the more balanced culture of the Imperialate as a whole. Although I had always known my father loved me as much as my brothers, it was in a different way. He saw them as the warriors, me as the oddity. The last thing I expected to hear from him was that he considered me a better choice for Emperor than my brother Althor.

I didn’t know what to say, so instead I hugged him. He held me tightly, resting his head against the top of mine.

Finally I leaned back so I could look at him. “What did you mean, you had seen what my life has done to me?”



“It’s changing you. Hardening you.” He swallowed. “Twenty more years of this and I won’t recognize you anymore. A century of it and what will you be then?”

I thought of the life I had imagined yesterday: guarded day and night by Jagernauts, often by a cyberlock as well, except when I came here, to this cold vault of a palace; living in constant suspicion of everyone, even Rex, who deserved better than to remember why he was crippled every time he looked at his wife. No, I didn’t want it to be that way. But it came with the job—and I wanted the job.

Except the job wasn’t mine to have. Not anymore.

My father scowled. “What, you’re giving up? Deposed rulers have been going into exile since time immemorial. You and Lord Qox would hardly be the first to flee and return when the situation was more in your favor.”

“If we disappear, our right to our titles disappears with us.”

My father exhaled. “I don’t claim it won’t be difficult to return. But each of you *is* legal heir to your position. You have a right to demand it when your predecessor dies.”

I saw the tears in his eyes and heard the words he didn’t say. Come back. Come back so I know you’re alive. My own eyes felt wet. “You’re a very decent human being, you know that?”

He reddened. “I’m a backward farmer from a backward planet.” Then he motioned at the console. “If we don’t reach the Allied President, I will soon be a farmer minus one daughter.”

His account had finished setting up his Prime. I double-checked the link to Earth and then sent the call. It would go straight through the Skol-Net, via telop links, to a nanochip implanted in the Allied President’s body. The psiberspace pathway from Prime to Earth was secured; the telops would never even know they had transmitted a message.

I stood up, offering the chair to my father. As he slid into it, Jaibriol and I stepped back, away from the table, so we wouldn’t be visible when the Allied President came on visual. Then my father plugged the siphon into his wrist.

The dry voice of Prime crackled in the air. “Line activated. Prepare to receive transmission.”

I gripped Jaibriol’s hand. This was it. If the Allies turned us down, we had nowhere else to turn.

“Ready,” my father said.

The holoscreen on the table tilted up until it was vertical. An image appeared, a woman’s face and shoulders. She looked to be in her late fifties, though I knew she was over seventy. A few lines creased her distinguished features and gray hair curled around her cheeks.

I had seen that face hundreds of times, both on the news broadcasts and in person. She looked different tonight, though, tired and drawn, as if she had been sleeping when Prime paged her.

She nodded to my father. “Lord Valdoria.”

He nodded to her. “President Calloway.”

She spoke in Skolian, cutting straight to the point. “What is wrong?”

“Two people here need sanctuary. They must go to a place where no one can find them, somewhere unknown to either Imperial or Trader intelligence.” My father paused. “Somewhere unknown to Allied intelligence as well, if that’s possible.”

“Why?” Calloway asked. “Who are these people?”

“The why is more simple than the who. If they don’t receive sanctuary, they will be executed.”

“How does this concern Earth?”

“If the executions take place, it will drastically escalate our war with the Eubians.”

Calloway considered him. “Lord Valdoria, surely you must realize that I can’t interfere with military matters concerning the Eube-Skolian War. Were I to do so, it would be tantamount to making a

statement of alliance that doesn't currently exist between your people and mine."

"And surely you realize," my father said, "that if we fall to the Traders, you're next."

"You believe the execution of these two people threatens the Imperialate that much?"

"Yes."

"I need to know who they are."

"I can't give you their names until we have an agreement."

"I can't give you any agreements until I understand the problem."

My father was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Madam President, before I give you their identities I need your word that you will reveal this conversation to no one."

Jaibriol's hand tightened around mine. Like me, he must have been present during dealings of his government with Calloway. He would know what I knew: her word was good—which was why she gave it so rarely. What if she refused my father now? As soon as she saw us, she would realize she was being asked to intervene in a matter that could tear apart the Rhon at its highest levels. How could she know it was to her advantage to side with my father?

"You're asking a great deal," she said.

"With reason."

"And if I don't promise my silence?"

He didn't answer immediately. But I felt his turmoil. He was going to tell her anyway, even without her guarantee. If she contacted Kurj with what she knew—no, we couldn't let that happen. He would know that I wasn't the only one who had committed treason, and Kurj had far less desire to see my father alive than me.

*Father, no! I thought. Don't do it.*

He didn't respond. Instead he spoke to Calloway. "If you can't give me your word, people may die. Members of the Rhon."

"And if I do give it?"

"No one but you and I will ever know."

"What about the two people in question?"

"They also. But we'll send them where no one can find them."

She watched him with a guarded expression. "What you're asking is that I enter into a pact with only one member of the Triad, an agreement you intend to keep secret from the others."

"Yes."

"But you won't tell me why until I make this pact."

"I must ask you to trust in my judgment."

"Judgment and politics are rarely easy bedfellows, Lord Valdoria."

"Nevertheless, I must ask for your trust."

Whatever she was thinking, she revealed nothing. If my father picked up anything through the psiphon, he gave no hint of it. I doubted she let down her barriers enough for him to catch even a glimmer. Despite the Allied's "official" position about psibernetics, I was sure their President had been well trained to protect herself against members of the Rhon.

As the silence lengthened, I glanced at Jaibriol. Sweat had gathered at his temple and was running down to his neck. I could feel wetness on my own hand where it gripped his.

"Very well," Calloway said. "I give you my word."

I made a small sound, one barely audible, just a rush of breath through my teeth. My father's shoulders lowered, coming down from a hunched position I hadn't realized they had taken until they relaxed.

He beckoned to us. As we walked over to the console, he moved out of the way. Then Jaibriol and I

were in front of the screen, I dressed only in a prison shirt that was the obvious partner to the pants he wore. We stood there half naked, holding hands, and regarded President Calloway.

Her mouth dropped open. “My God.”

My father stood up next to me, moving back into Calloway’s view. “Will you help them?”

She blew out a gust of air, sending a tendril of gray hair wafting about her face. “I don’t understand.”

“They think they are in love,” my father said.

“I still don’t understand,” Calloway said. “Primary Valdoria, do you truly want to go into exile with a Highton?” She paused. “Could you even survive living with him?”

“He’s not Highton,” I said.

“No?” She turned to Jaibriol. “Then what in heaven’s name are you doing with the title of Highton Heir?”

He spoke quietly. “I’m also a Rhon psion.”

Calloway’s eyebrows went up. It was a good five seconds before she said, “That must have taken some doing.” She glanced at my father. “It seems to me he poses a far greater threat to you alive than dead.” She grimaced. “To all of us.”

My father shook his head. “What Emperor Qox wants from his son may well be impossible for him to give, Madam President.”

“You trust him because he’s Rhon?”

“Yes.” He paused. “I once learned about a fish that is native to your planet. To reproduce, it must swim upriver to reach the place where it was spawned, or die in the process. The Rhon are like that in our drive to mate with our own kind, to form our own community. No matter what the barriers, we fight until we overcome them.” He glanced at me and his voice caught. “Or die trying.”

“Why can’t they go to Delos on their own? Why do you want me to intercede on their behalf?”

“We can’t leave Diesha,” I said. “The planet is on full military alert.”

Calloway gave me a long, hard look. Then she turned back to my father. “You’re asking me to become a coconspirator in an action that directly challenges the authority of the Emperor.”

“I’m asking you to help me avert a crisis that would threaten the stability of three governments.”

“If I help you now, and it ever becomes known—” She let her sentence hang.

My father jumped on the opening. “My daughter is an expert in covert operations. She can remove any trace that these negotiations ever existed.”

Calloway studied me. She had to know he was telling the truth about my erasing the record. Her people would have a dossier on me just as extensive as the ones we had on her highest-ranking officers.

The President leaned back in her chair. She put her elbow on the armrest and rested her cheek on her hand. She didn’t look at us while she thought, just stared at a point somewhere between Jaibriol and me. The deadening silence was broken only by the spire-clock with its ticking. Tick-tick. Tick-tick. Tick-tick. I wished the maddening noise would stop.

Calloway spoke. “I will help you.”

## **17. Until Tomorrow**

The ship landed on the palace roof, a medical racer designed to get people to hospitals fast. It came down in a roar of hot gases, blasting the landing pad with its exhaust. Warning lamps strobed in the night, their lights blinking in patterns tuned to the palace defense systems. Their light caught on the surrounding peaks, the only reminder that we were on the roof of a palace isolated in the mountains rather than at the

starport.

Next to me, Jaibriol and my father shaded their eyes from the glare. We had taken shelter behind a retaining wall on the other side of the roof. As soon as the ship was down, I sprinted toward it, running through a wind that whipped my jacket around my body.

The hatch swung open and light streamed out. A woman jumped down onto the roof. She wore the uniform of an emergency medpilot, a white coverall with a triangular patch bearing the Triad symbol on her left shoulder. The hatch closed behind her, cutting off the light as abruptly as it had appeared. I came to a stop in front of her.

She bowed from the waist. "Primary Valdoria?"

"That's right," I said. "My father is resting."

"Has he had any more convulsions since you reported the first?"

I shook my head. "But he's not too steady right now."

"I have an air stretcher for him."

So far she had given the right answers. "What's your name?"

"Erin O'Neill."

It was the name Calloway had given us. The badge on her uniform said *Lyra Merzon*. A good, solid Skolian name. We probably had a dossier on Lyra Merzon covering her entire life. And it was false. Every last bit of it. This woman was Erin O'Neill from Earth. If I hadn't had other problems to worry about I would have had time to be vexed that the Allies had managed to plant her so securely at Headquarters.

"What were you told?" I asked.

"That I'm to take two people offworld, to a location specified in a file uploaded to my racer by President Calloway."

"Does anyone know your orders besides the President?"

"No, ma'am."

"I'm one of the two people you're taking."

She nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"President Calloway told me that under current Allied law, ship captains can perform marriages in space that are legally binding among your people. Is that true?"

She blinked. "Well—yes. It is."

"Good." Both Imperialate and Trader law recognized Allied marriages. That way, if Jaibriol and I ever had children they would be our legal heirs. I had no idea what that would mean, but at least they wouldn't be illegitimate.

I spoke into the com embedded in my wrist guard. "We're ready."

The lights on the roof went out, leaving us in darkness. The wind ripped at my jacket and sent O'Neill's uniform flapping about her body. I turned and raised my hand. As O'Neill peered across the shadowed roof, two figures appeared, unrecognizable in the dark.

They approached slowly, the shorter figure limping the way my father did when he didn't have his cane. O'Neill squinted into the darkness, but with only starlight to see by it wasn't until they reached us that they were visible. Jaibriol came up next to me, dressed in clothes we had taken from the palace.

O'Neill stared at Jaibriol. Then, remembering herself, she bowed from the waist, first to my father, then to Jaibriol.

I motioned at the racer. "Let's get inside."

She stood aside to let my father climb inside the darkened cabin. Jaibriol stepped up next, followed by O'Neill and then me. As soon as the airlock closed, lamps flooded the cabin with light.

The racer was built similarly to a Jag, designed for speed and economy. Its cabin was crammed with equipment: crates with survival gear patches slapped on their sides; bundles of cloth, nervoplex rubber, canvas, pipe; barrels ribbed with metal; smaller boxes, brown, gray, green, black, all of them with printed labels for computer and medical supplies. A laser carbine was secured against a bulkhead, along with the box that carried its power pack. I saw a survival ax, a box of needle bombs that were more useful for excavating than as weapons, and a box of ISC standard-issue knives. A bunk hung secure against the hull and medical webbing lay across it, ready to fasten around a patient.

Jaibriol sat down on the bunk, closing his eyes as he sagged against the hull.

I sat next to him. "Are you all right?"

He opened his eyes. "Just tired."

My father came to the bunk and stood there frowning. Jaibriol flushed. Then he grasped one of the cables that held the bunk against the hull and hauled himself back up to his feet.

What was this? Another silent communication between Jaibriol and my father, like that business about children? I stood up, looking from one to the other of them.

My father frowned at Jaibriol. "Are you prepared to take proper care of my daughter?"

I couldn't believe it. "For pugging sakes, Father."

He glanced at me. Then he reddened and turned back to Jaibriol. "Maybe that wasn't the most appropriate question." He stood for a moment scratching his chin. Finally he said, "Aren't you a bit young for Sauscony?"

That was almost as bad. Why did he and my mother feel so compelled to comment on the age of the men in my life?

But whatever my father intended with his questions, Jaibriol seemed to understand. "I'll do everything I can to make her happy, sir."

"See that you do," my father said.

O'Neill stood near the cockpit, watching the exchange with her mouth open. When she saw me glance at her, she stood up straighter and closed her mouth.

I turned back to find my father looking at me. He spoke in a much gentler voice. "Goodbye, daughter."

I started to reach for him at the same moment he raised his own arms. Our hands collided, and then I was in his embrace, the same arms that had held me so safe when I was a child. I hugged him tightly, laying my head against his shoulder as I closed my eyes. "Goodbye, *hushpa*."

"Be well," he whispered. "I love you."

A tear ran down my cheek. "And I you." I drew back so I could see his face. "Will you tell Mother that I told you I was sorry about what happened on Foreshires. That I said how much I loved her, and how much I wished—" I swallowed. "How much I wished it wasn't so hard for me to tell her."

He rubbed his palm over his face, smearing his tears. "I will tell her."

O'Neill cleared her throat, a quiet sound, almost inaudible. When we looked at her, she said, "I'm sorry—but we had better leave. The longer we stay, the more the risk of our being discovered."

I made myself nod. Then my father and I walked to the airlock and stood by the inner door, watching each other. Finally he touched the panel that opened the airlock. The lights went out again and no radiance spilled from the cabin out into the night when the doors opened. He let himself back down onto the roof, a silhouette in the darkness.

I lifted my hand. *Goodbye*.

He raised his arm to wave. *Goodbye, Sauscony*.

Then I closed the airlock.

As the lights came back on, I turned to O'Neill, who was waiting by the copilot's seat. The racer didn't have a true cockpit, just a section in the front of the cabin with two seats, one for the pilot and one for the copilot.

She motioned me toward the pilot's seat. "I was told you can get us through the cordon around the planet."

"I'm going to try." Whether I could do it or not was another question altogether.

She nodded and slid into the copilot's seat. Although no strain showed on her face, I felt her tension. It was an odd assignment she had drawn for herself, having to risk her life to help people she was supposed to be spying on. Jaibriol was sitting on the bunk again, leaning against a bulkhead with his eyes closed.

"Jaibriol." My voice softened. "You'd better strap in."

He opened his eyes. Then he lowered himself onto the bunk and stretched out his legs, moving slowly as if each contraction of his muscles hurt.

O'Neill reached over and touched a panel on the exoskeleton that lay open around my seat like metallic petals. "This controls the medweb." She pressed the panel and a rustle sounded from the bunk. I turned to see the medical web fastening around Jaibriol's body. A line snaked to his arm, inserted into it—and his eyes snapped open. He grabbed the line and yanked it out of his body.

O'Neill was watching him on the screen above the pilot's seat. She spoke quickly. "It's just glucose fluid, Lord Qox. According to the monitors on the medbunk, you're seriously dehydrated."

Jaibriol considered her. Then he let the line drop. As soon as it was free, it snaked back to his arm and reattached. He stiffened, but this time he let it stay. The medweb responded to his tension by massaging his body, tightening and relaxing around him in a steady rhythm.

As I slid into the pilot's seat, it folded its cocoon and exoskeleton around me. The psiphons didn't click into place, but as soon as I activated them, they snicked into my neck and spine.

Erin's exoskeleton was also closing around her body.

Medline attending, the racer thought.

Entering the Net from Medline felt awkward and overly formal. The computer on my Jag would have boosted me to psiberspace immediately. I had to walk Medline through the entire procedure, giving it instructions at every junction.

I entered the Net as a wavepacket cowed in black. The grid was alive with cordon activity, its cords shining harshly, like rays of the too bright Diesha sun. Kurj's presence was everywhere, omnipresent. Inescapable? I hid in my cloak.

*VR psiber-simulation, I thought. High orbit.*

The grid disappeared—and I was in space. The planet Diesha hung before me like a ball of turquoise and amber, swathed in dirty cotton. I "stood" in the near vacuum that existed this far out from the planet. Pivoting slowly, I surveyed all of space. The psi-sim used the data gathered by Medline's sensors to create a "reality" so complete I felt as if I were *here*, turning within the cordon, analyzing it as I moved. It gave me a far better reading of the situation than I could have made without a psiberspace linkup, limited to visual displays and screens; a better reading even than with the mindscape I normally used in a psiberspace linkup.

Visual sensors: mindscape: psi-sim—they were three different levels of sensor ability, each more effective than the previous, each more costly. A psi-sim drained its user's mental and physical resources so fast that after a few minutes of it I might well collapse. But to get out of here we were going to need every advantage we could get. If we didn't escape—well, my condition wouldn't much matter then.

A blip appeared over the rim of Diesha. I concentrated, and rushed toward it, the computer supplying data for the simulation faster than an actual ship could have safely traveled this close to the planet. The

blip resolved into an ISC battlecruiser, a ponderous giant big enough to swallow a thousand racers and still have room for more. Weapons mountings covered the surface like craters. Its cannon maws alone were big enough to drive a MagRail train into. A host of smaller ships attended it. Traffic moved in and out of docking bays that opened like huge jaws, with angular struts and up-jutting equipment ringing the mouth like grotesque metal teeth. The scene was eerily silent, the atmosphere far too thin to carry any appreciable sound waves.

I moved closer until the cruiser filled my field of view; closer still and I could see every dent and pockmark. The hull curved above and below me like a cliff of metal. Closer yet, and I could brush my hand across it. I knew I was actually feeling the inside of my exoskeleton cocoon, with Medline using its data on the battlecruiser to recreate the tactile sensations of touching its hull. But that gritty surface looked and felt so authentic that I would have sworn I was there.

I backed away from the battlecruiser and plummeted toward the planet. The view changed with dizzying speed: a ball in space, a curved landscape, a flat one. I plunged through wet clouds, came out below them, dropped closer and closer to the surface until the massive shadows of mountain peaks rose around me. No lights showed anywhere below, except in the valley where the Imperial palace sparkled like a jewel.

I “landed” on the palace roof near the flier I had used to bring Jaibriol here. The racer sat posed, waiting on its landing pad. I passed through its hull into the cabin, where I saw myself in the pilot’s seat with my eyes closed, my body encased in the exoskeleton.

Seeing myself like that was eerie, as if I were having an out-of-body experience. I shook my head and the head of the pilot moved from side to side. I felt the motion rub my cheeks against the exoskeleton and the cocoon. My hair rustled, a noise I heard both with my ears and through the simulation.

“Ready to go?” I asked. It felt odd to speak; usually when I piloted a ship I was in a psilink, making verbal communication unnecessary.

“Ready.” O’Neill’s forehead creased as she watched me.

“Problem?” I asked.

“I’ve never before seen a pilot make flight preparations with her eyes closed.”

“I’m in a psi-sim.”

“Can you actually see the cockpit?”

“Better than just seeing.” I concentrated on her and a translucent display appeared, glowing in red. “You’re sitting 48.32 centimeters away from me, turned at a 23 degree angle relative to a line drawn from your solar plexus to the holoscreen directly in front of you. A lock of hair came free of your braid and is hanging next to your left eye.”

O’Neill blinked, then tucked the hair behind her ear. I took hold of the racer’s flystick, seeing it through the sim and feeling it with my hand. As I shoved the stick forward, I withdrew my awareness from the ship, arrowing back into the night. The racer’s near-planet thrusters fired and exhaust billowed all around me, white and hot, while the roar of our takeoff vibrated against the landing pad. We rose for several hundred meters and hung there, our thrust just balanced by gravity.

*Sauscony ...*

*Jaibriol?* How could he be in psiberspace with me? Not only did he have no connection to the ship, he didn’t even have a biomech web in his body that would let him link up.

*Can’t ... dissociate from you.*

*Try to stay back, then.* With no preparation for this, his brain could end up fried.

*Stay back?*

*Think of yourself as software running on Medline. Try to run in the background.*

A sense of laughter lightened his exhaustion. *I will be as quiet as a node-mouse.* He made an image of

the glove on an old-style virtual reality setup. A tail appeared on the glove, then two fuzzy ears, two eyes, and a mouth. The animal ran under the VR apparatus.

I smiled. Then I thought, *Medline, retrieve flier.*

Our port thrusters fired, moving us over the flier. Hot gases scorched the landing pad and the flier shook with the roar of it all. But its reinforced hull remained sound under our exhaust. With a grinding clank, claws extended down from the belly of the racer. They closed around the flier, seizing it like a hawk capturing its prey, and drew it up against the racer's belly in a cage of metal claws.

Flier secured, Medline thought. Then: The palace defense systems are preparing to fire on us.

What the hell? *Show me.*

Numerous red blips appeared throughout the mountains, flags showing the locations of installations that guarded the palace. Some blips made isolated gleams of red and others glowed in huge fires. As I rushed toward one cluster, it resolved into a line of laser cannons swiveling toward us, the rumble of their motion making a deep growl in the night.

What was going on? I paged the computer dedicated to the palace security systems, an Evolving Intelligence which had named itself Zos.

Zos respond, I thought.

Here, Zos thought.

Let us leave.

I can't do that.

Why not?

It violates my programming.

What was this? I was the one who had programmed it. *Verify my brain patterns. Then execute the command.*

I know who you are. Return to your takeoff point or I'll blow up your racer.

I couldn't believe it. How could Zos refuse to obey my commands? I was its damned mother.

You programmed me to protect your family, Zos thought. Jaibriol Qox's escape endangers them. So I'm preventing his escape.

*Look, if Jaibriol and I don't get out of here, a lot of people may die, including me. If I'm executed it may also kill my father. So quit messing around and let us through.*

No answer.

Damn! What was the infernal computer doing? *Zos, respond.*

The rumbling of the cannons ceased.

Zos?

You may leave.

I want you to erase all record of this exchange.

Done.

I shifted my attention to the computer on board the medical racer. *Medline, show me the cordon.*

A grid of gold lines appeared in the sky. Intersections mark cordon ships, Medline thought.

The grid was laid out in a pattern of squares curved as if they lay on a spherical surface enclosing Diesha. The pattern was perfect, a tribute to the uncompromising order Kurj saw in the universe. Every intersection contained at least one red blip and some had so many they merged into a crimson blaze. When I concentrated on one fiery blur, it resolved into the battlecruiser Maxar with its multitude of attendants. The racer's computer flooded me with data, including intelligence reports that only someone with my stratospheric security clearance could access.

But my knowledge of ISC was no help now. It only made me more aware that no means of escape existed. How would we get through? Those ships were ready to shoot down any craft that gave any



conceivable hint it might try to flee the cordon.

So do the inconceivable.

Medline, I thought. Invert.

Restate command.

*Invert. Kick in the inversion engines and get us out of here.*

That is impossible.

Never mind that. Just do it.

To achieve the speed necessary to invert, we must leave the vicinity of the planet and then accelerate. If we try to leave the vicinity of the planet, we will be destroyed by the cordon.

I didn't say speed up. I just said invert.

To invert, we must speed up.

I had no idea what would happen if we tried to invert while we were at rest here. Popular wisdom held that we wouldn't be able to complete the process and would end up evaporating in a limbo between the real and imaginary universes. Since no one had ever returned from trying it, no one knew if that was true or not.

I've intercepted a message to Command Central, Medline thought. The ship waiting to escort us to the hospital wants to know why we're sitting here. They also want to know why we're holding the flier.

We had run out of time. *Medline, invert.*

We don't have enough speed—

Invert, damn it. Now!

Engines engaged.

Then the twisting started.

Nausea swept over me. I felt like my gut was trying to twist into a Mobius strip. The stars and mountains blinked out of existence. No, that wasn't true. The mountains disappeared but the stars were still there. They smeared across the sky like spots of paint running in a black liquid. Then I realized the mountains were also there, but smeared into the sky, black on black. We hadn't inverted; we were caught somewhere between universes.

I reentered the racer by leaking through the hull. I saw myself in the pilot's seat, my hands clenched on its arms and my eyes clamped shut. The psi-sim was my only link to reality, and I was barely holding on to it. If I lost that last link to the universe where we belonged, we were going to dissipate into this otherworld of melting reality.

But the sim had drained my resources too far. I couldn't hold it. The cabin rippled around us and began to fade.

Then Jaibriol moved. He melted off the bunk like paint dissolving in rain. The intravenous line slid out of his arm with a drawn-out sucking noise. He walked across the cabin in slow motion, his face a smeared patch above the darker smears of his clothes. His body blurred at the edges, then ran in dribbles onto the deck.

The cabin was twisting, the fore section going to starboard, the aft section going to port. As it contorted, O'Neill and I poured out of our seats, our bodies dripping over the softened exoskeletons. The front of Jaibriol's body ran to one side, the back to the other, spreading him out in the two different directions. The cabin continued to twist, until I realized it was trying to close back in on itself like a Mobius strip.

As Jaibriol came up next to me, the front half of his body dribbled across the black runnels that were my arms. His hand melted onto the flystick and the flystick spilled forward, splashing over the controls. I felt more than heard the thrusters fire. Acceleration pasted us into our seats, sloshing our bodies around. Jaibriol melted across my exoskeleton and dripped onto the deck like a surrealistic painter's nightmare.

I couldn't hold the psi-sim steady. I leaked out of the racer, passing through its hull as if it were a thin

film. Only part of me slipped, but it was enough to see the nightmare outside. The cordon grid had degenerated into a skyscape of oozing gold lines and red smears.

Ships fired at us, their missiles and beams pooling uselessly in space. Eerie vibrating noises echoed in my ears. The air slid past me like oil, smelling of exhaust.

We were moving, heading into the cordon. *Meedliinnne*, I thought. *Plooooot coooursssss* ... The words oozed away. I tried another tack, making an image in my mind of an open space in the deformed grid above us. Medline responded by heading for the opening. As we approached, the gold lines smeared out wider and wider, filling in the hole. By the time we reached it, the opening was gone. We dribbled through the gold smears like oil soaking through a sponge.

I scraped back along the ship and soaked through the hull, my identity re-collecting in the cabin. I could see Jaibriol lying in a pool on the deck, his body smeared across its surface. Its dark surface. Everything was dark. Dim. So. Dim. Fading out ...

... fading in. The data dripping into my mind said we had just come out of stasis. Medline had cleared the planet enough to fire the photon thrusters. The real part of our velocity was now at 60 percent of light speed ...

... 96 percent.

...99.999999 percent. Our liquefying mass had increased by a factor of 7000. The engine was sucking in fuel from a cosmic ray flux that extended through both real and imaginary space, its density far greater than the tiny fraction of it we saw in the subluminal universe. The racer ate fuel like an insatiable behemoth, hurtling us to Gods only knew where. For eighteen minutes, or maybe it was eighteen millennia, we poured through space, running around the rim of light speed, trying to invert, trying and failing.

Meeeeeeeddddliiii ... subliiiight ...

The dimming cabin went black—

And the twisting stopped.

I gasped, shocked by my sudden solidity. My eyes snapped open into bright light. I was whole again. We hadn't come out of stasis properly; we were still accelerating at over one g. But we were solid. *Normal*. No, not quite normal. Bits of my uniform were embedded in the seat where Jaibriol had fallen across my arm, and I could see pieces mixed in with my skin too.

"Jaibriol!" My voice rasped. I smacked my palm against a projection inside the exoskeleton. It unfolded, letting me twist over to look into the cabin.

He lay in a heap, sliding along the deck. His legs were flat on the ground as if he were lying on his back, but his torso was twisted so that from the waist up he was lying on his side. His arm lay behind him, pulling away from the rest of his body. It made him look distorted, broken in two.

I struggled out of the pilot's seat. As dizziness caught me, I slid down between the seat and a bulkhead. Then I pulled myself over to Jaibriol. Please don't let him be dead, I thought. Or horribly deformed, or with his insides mixed up like paint swirled together and left to solidify.

I lifted his arm, the one twisted behind him, and put it in front of his torso. He groaned and rolled onto his back, his body relaxing into a normal position. His eyes opened slowly. As we slid along the deck together, he looked at the bulkhead above him, his gaze unfocused. Then he started rubbing his arm, working the muscles.

I pulled myself around so that I was lying alongside of him. "Can you see me?"

His gaze shifted to my face. "Yes."

"Are you all right?"

"I think so."

"Primary Valdoria," Medline said. "If we continue to use fuel, we will significantly deplete our supply."

“Stop accelerating,” I said.

The hum of the engines changed pitch and Jaibriol and I stopped sliding. He moved his head and the motion caused him to drift up from the deck.

A groan came from the copilot’s seat. I nudged the deck, sending myself floating back toward Erin. When I reached my own seat, the exoskeleton caught my body and pulled me into its embrace, anchoring me there. O’Neill sat in her own exoskeleton, her face pale and her eyes open.

“We made it,” she said.

“I hope so.” The holomaps showed images of the region of space where we were traveling now, along with three-dimensional graphs charting fuel consumption, trajectory, location, date—

I whistled. “We’ve jumped almost three months into the future.”

Jaibriol floated over and grabbed the arm of my chair. “That can’t be. We’ve only been traveling for a few minutes.”

“We never inverted,” I said. “I had the racer drop back into normal space. So we never compensated for the time dilation.” I paused.

“They’ll be looking for us in the wrong place. Or I should say the wrong time. They’ll be looking for us three months ago.”

“That means I haven’t reported to President Calloway in three months.” O’Neill grimaced. “She must think we’re dead.”

“Let us hope they all think that,” Jaibriol said.

Three months lost out of our lives. Three months since my father gave his story: Jaibriol reached the palace and captured the flier; desperate, he tried to adapt its engines for inversion; I and “Lyra Merzon” went after him with the racer; the backlash of his improperly inverting engines caught us—and after that no one knew what had happened.

“Medline,” I said. “Release the flier.”

The grind of opening claws vibrated through the deck. My holomaps showed the flier still riding along under us, matching our velocity. I manipulated the claws so that they nudged the flier, adding enough of a component to its velocity to make it drift forward, out in front of the racer.

“Detonate,” I said.

The flier exploded. Pieces of it hurtled in all directions, some coming straight at us and then deflecting away when they hit the racer’s protected hull. By the time anyone discovered the wreckage it would be spread out over too big a region in space for anyone to determine that none of us had exploded with it.

And that was it.

I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes, overwhelmed by exhaustion as the rush of adrenaline eased in my body.

“I think I had better take over,” O’Neill said.

I managed to nod. While O’Neill took the controls, I floated over to the bunk with Jaibriol. As soon as we maneuvered ourselves into position on it, the medweb slid around us and held our bodies secure on the bunk.

Jaibriol and I both slept a bit, wrapped in each other’s arms, dozing and waking sporadically. O’Neill took us into inversion so smoothly I hardly noticed it. When we actually inverted my stomach rebelled, but this time the twisting lasted only an instant.

I came fully awake to see O’Neill floating next to the bunk. “How are you doing?” she asked.

“All right.” My voice still sounded raspy, but I felt steadier than before. “Who’s flying the racer?”

“I put it on autopilot. It will be a few hours, ship’s time, before we reach our destination.”

Jaibriol stirred. "Where are we going?"  
O'Neill grabbed the edge of the bunk and drew herself down so she was eye level with us. "A planet called Gamma IV."

"That's not a proper name," I said. "What star? What constellation?"  
O'Neill didn't answer. Instead she said, "No one knows about it except us, President Calloway, and the robot scout that found it four standard days ago—" She paused. "Four days and three months ago. President Calloway intercepted the robot's data before it reached its destination, so only she knows it found anything. By now, she will have erased that record."

So. She wasn't going to tell even us where it was. "Are there people on the planet?" All these precautions would do no good if anyone recognized us.

"The only intelligent species isn't human," O'Neill said. "They appear vaguely humanoid, nomads at a stone age level of development. They live several thousand kilometers south of where I'm taking you." She tilted her head. "There are some beautiful wild areas, like the mountains where we'll put down. But that's all we know. We have no surveys, no analysis, nothing else on this world." She motioned around at the cabin. "I brought as much survival gear as I could without drawing attention. I also got you a solar-powered computer with a library. But other than that, you'll be on your own."

That was an understatement. True, as a Jageronaut I had survival training. My enhanced speed and strength would also help, as would Jaibriol's youth and intelligence. But it wasn't going to be easy. There was a certain logic to that, I supposed, at least from the Allies' point of view. What better way to keep the Highton and Imperial Heirs out of trouble than to set us down in an uncharted wilderness where all of our energy would go into keeping ourselves alive?

O'Neill cleared her throat awkwardly. "If you wish—I can perform the ceremony now."

"Ceremony?" I asked.

"The marriage." She hesitated. "You asked about it ... ?"

I rolled over under the medweb to face Jaibriol. "Want to marry me?"

He smiled. "All right."

O'Neill didn't have much in her computer files on marriages besides the traditional Skolian and Highton ceremonies, neither of which we wanted. Then one caught my attention. It was an old ceremony from Earth, one derived from the Maya Indians. I noticed it because it came up with the image of a woman who reminded me of holos I had seen of my grandmother. She had that same dusky skin and large eyes, the same luxuriant braid of black hair that hung down her back.

The only words we could find for the ceremony were in Tzotzil. Since none of us spoke it, and since we didn't want a computer translating in the middle of our wedding, O'Neill made up words in Skolian, the one language we all had in common, trying to keep the spirit of the ceremony.

We needed three candles, a ribbon, thirteen coins, and two rings. For the candles, O'Neill dug out penlights from a locker in one of the bulkheads. She found a meter-long string we could use as a ribbon, and she had a handful of coins buttoned in her pocket. The rings gave us the most difficulty. We finally took two fittings off a brace on the bunk. We were supposed to kneel at an altar, but since we had neither altar nor gravity, we improvised by floating over the bunk.

O'Neill turned on the penlights and gave us each one, keeping the third for herself. She spoke gently. "May these lights keep your future well lit." Then she tied the ends of the string together and slipped the loop over our heads. "May this ribbon join your lives together as one." She counted out the coins. "May your souls remain safe within you." Handing them to Jaibriol, she said, "Tell her, 'I give these to you, wife.'"

Jaibriol pressed the coins into my hands. "I give these to you, wife." Softly, he added, "It's all I have and I'm afraid it's borrowed. But I give it with all my heart."

I lifted his hand and pressed his knuckles against my cheek, sending us floating into a strut of the bunk. "Then you've made me a rich woman."

O'Neill peered at her notes. "Actually, you say, 'I receive them, husband.' It's the first time you call each other husband and wife."

I kissed Jaibriol's hand. "I receive them, husband." I glanced at O'Neill. "Don't I give him anything?"

She looked over her notes again. "It doesn't look like it, at least not in this version of the ceremony. You give the coins to whoever is marrying you."

I offered her the coins. "Thank you."

She smiled. "Keep them. For a memory." She pulled the rings out of her pocket, the motion bumping her against a carton of supplies. Lifting Jaibriol's left hand, she slid one ring onto his fourth finger. Then she handed him the second ring. "You may give it to your bride now."

Jaibriol put the ring on my left index finger, where it fit best. It felt odd; I rarely wore jewelry. But that was all right. I would get used to it.

"If I were a priest," O'Neill said, "I would read Mass now. But since I'm not ..."

"We understand," I said.

"Well. I guess that's it, then." She unhooked a computer pad from her belt. "As Captain of this ship, I pronounce you married." She extended the pad toward me. "You both have to sign."

I tensed, grabbing hold of a brace on the bunk. "You want to make a record of this?"

"Of course. Otherwise, it's not legal."

"If a record exists," Jaibriol said, "someone might find it."

"I'll give it to President Calloway." O'Neill offered me the pad again. "There's not much point in getting married if it doesn't mean anything."

"It means something to us," Jaibriol said. "That's what matters."

"No. She's right." I smiled wanly. "That's how they used to end wars, right? Marry off the children of the opposing forces. And think of our children, if we have any. Illegitimacy will weaken their position. If something ever happens to us, that may mean a lot more to them than we can imagine now."

Jaibriol glanced at O'Neill. "Only President Calloway will see this document?"

She nodded. "Unless you ever have reason to ask her for it yourselves."

He considered her. "Very well."

So we both signed. And then we were married.

Jaibriol stood with me, both of us looking up at the evening sky. Long after O'Neill's ship had dwindled to a speck and disappeared we continued to stand there, as if by not moving we didn't have to acknowledge we were alone now, cut off from the rest of humanity.

Finally Jaibriol sighed. He took my hand and tilted his head toward the entrance of a cave in the hill next to us. "We ought to set up some sort of defense." He motioned at the heavy forest around us. "In case anything is out there."

I nodded. "Yes. Of course."

But after we walked inside the cave, we just looked around. The feeble light from our hand lamps lit up the rocky walls, showing us a cavity not much bigger than the cabin of the racer. Crates and barrels, boxes and bundles lay in piles, as well as the neutrino transmitter O'Neill had left us, our one link to the rest of the universe should we ever decide to use it.

Jaibriol walked over to a pile of blankets and took one. "Let's go outside, Sauscony. Just for a while."

The thought of escaping the dark cave appealed to me also. "All right." I slung the laser carbine over my shoulder.

Outside, we set up an electrified screen to guard the cave entrance. It was still light enough for us to see the area. A forest of soft-needled trees surrounded us, thinning out to the west into a scorched clearing where the racer had landed. To the north the trees also thinned out, opening into what from here looked like another clearing.

We went north, getting the feel of the land, scouting the area. Instead of a clearing, we came out onto the bare apex of a cliff. Peaks carpeted by forest spread out as far as we could see, towering slopes that plunged down into valleys and then sheered back into the sky. Vertical cliffs showed here and there, their nude faces making patches of white in the otherwise unbroken green of the forest. Above the mountains, the sunset burned as vividly as any I had seen anywhere, red fire lapping against clouds that hung low against the mountains. Straight above us the sky had darkened, letting stars wink here and there. In the east, the ragged wedge of a broken moon hung above the peaks.

“It’s beautiful,” Jaibriol said.

“Yes.” Beautiful. Wild. Unknown.

After making sure the area was secure, we sat on the edge of the cliff with the blanket wrapped around us and the carbine resting on our knees. The wind whispered across our faces while shadows darkened the mountains. More stars appeared, one by one, then tens of them, then hundreds and thousands.

Jaibriol spoke softly. “Home.”

I touched his cheek. We had lost so much; everything we knew, everyone we loved. And despite all that had happened, I knew Jaibriol loved his father, whom he would never see again, at least not alive. But in exchange for those losses, we had gained the hope that someday we, or perhaps our children after us, could make a difference in the war we had, for now, left behind. There were no guarantees, no promises, no certainties.

But the hope was there.

Jaibriol laid his head against mine and we sat together, warm under the blanket. Soon we would return to the cave to make love, and sleep, and gather our energy for tomorrow, and the tomorrows that came after that, as we learned to know this world and each other, preparing not only to survive, but to heal for the future, for that day when we might leave here and resume our heritages.

But right now we sat together in peace and watched night unfold.